

A Teacher's Journey

(Submitted by Jayne Van De Hey, CREATE Early Childhood Project director)

As Thanksgiving approaches, my thoughts turn to my journey as an educator from perpetuating stereotypes to countering stereotypes of Native Americans. Thirty years ago I chanted "Ten Little Indians" with preschoolers and thought I was ONLY teaching a counting rhythm. Today I know I was teaching impressionable young children a great deal more than counting. I was teaching and reinforcing stereotypes of American Indians and the "First Thanksgiving" based on superficial and distorted views and inaccurate information. Today I understand that I am professionally responsible to teach the most accurate facts available and morally obligated to prevent stereotypes from becoming established in the minds of students. In that effort, I ask you to take time to reflect upon your own beliefs and practices as you read the words of two educators, authors and wise women; Dorothy Davids (Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohicans) and Ruth A Gudinas (Gresham, Wisconsin). The original article was written many years ago but continues to be as relevant now as it was then. May your journey be well.

Thanksgiving: A New Perspective (and Its Implications for the Classroom)

Did the Indians really invite the Pilgrims to the First Thanksgiving? This was the question, asked by the staff of one of Madison's elementary schools that triggered our early research on the "First Thanksgiving" several years ago. As that research progressed (and it is not yet finished), other questions emerged:

- Was the "First Thanksgiving" a shared giving of thanks to the Creator or just a pot luck picnic?
- Did the "First Thanksgiving," as we imagine it today, ever really happen?
- Was the real "First Thanksgiving" actually proclaimed in Massachusetts to commemorate a brutal massacre of Indian people in 1636?

And perhaps the most significant question:

- What's wrong with celebrating the "First Thanksgiving" in our classrooms?

There appear to be several reasons to believe that there never was a so-called "First Thanksgiving" like the one that gets re-enacted in our classrooms and on our school stages with Pilgrims and Indians eating around a table with turkey and cranberry sauce and pumpkins. William Bradford, the second governor of the Plymouth Colony, whose journal is the most reliable primary source for the colony's history, never mentions it. A get-together of the Pilgrims and Massasoit and 90 Indian men *is* described in a book called *Mourt's Relation*. But the gathering seems to have been a big party, with no mention of God or giving thanks, and emphasizing the military might of the Pilgrims which they showed off for the Indians' benefit.

What is also interesting is that Mourt's Relation includes a collection of letters apparently sent

back to England to try to get colonists to come over to Plymouth because so many of the original settlers died during the first winter. In many places the image of the so-called "New World" is greatly exaggerated and made to look much better than it really was for the colonists. For example, while the letters make it look as if the Indians and the Pilgrims were the best of friends and got along just fine, Bradford's journal reveals over and over again the suspicion and hostile relations that actually existed between most Native people and the European settlers. Such discrepancies throw the whole story of the Pilgrims' friendly celebration with the Indians into question also.

The most startling piece of information we found, however, was first proposed by the late Professor William Newell of the University of Connecticut. Dr. Newell, a member of the Penobscot Nation, found that, in all likelihood, the "First Thanksgiving" in colonial America was proclaimed in 1637 to commemorate the murder of approximately 700 Pequot Indians at Mystic Fort, near what is now Groton, Connecticut. No wonder so many Indian people today, particularly those in the eastern part of the United States, call Thanksgiving a day of mourning.

We believe that the concept of giving thanks or gratitude should be impressed upon children and that the Thanksgiving season is a good time to do that in the schools. But we also believe that the stereotypes of "Indians" that we often see in classrooms around the time of Thanksgiving only reinforce the simplistic and misleading images of Native People that non-Native children may already have.

As for the last question, about the "First Thanksgiving":

We feel that the term "First Thanksgiving" is an extremely biased one. The "pot luck" meal that is remembered today, whether it was truly a "thanksgiving" or not, whether it really happened or not, may have been the first European "harvest home" or fall festival on this continent. But for centuries-for thousands of years in fact-Indigenous communities here had been celebrating thanks many time a year for what Mother Earth gave them. They still do today. Consider this directive from the ancient Great Law of Peace of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) People:

The recognized festivals a/Thanksgiving shall be the Midwinter Thanksgiving, the Maple or Sugar. Making Thanksgiving, the Raspberry Thanksgiving, the Strawberry Thanksgiving, the Cornplant-ing Thanksgiving, the Corn Hoeing Thanksgiving, the Little Festival O/ Green Corn, the Great Festival a/Ripe Corn, and the Complete Thanksgiving/or the Harvest.

Each time the term "First Thanksgiving" is used for something that may have happened in 1621, centuries of rich cultural expression that preceded it in this land are erased. We believe that our children deserve to learn truths such as these from our multicultural history, provided that these truths are appropriately taught.

We have put together a packet of materials for teachers with the hope that they will try to eliminate the Indian-Pilgrim stereotype from their classrooms at Thanksgiving time. The

information and activities here are offered as alternative ways to approach the Thanksgiving event. We hope that both students and teachers will share some new learnings. --Dorothy Davids & Ruth A. Gudinas

The “packet of materials for teachers which include student activities for Grades K-5 and Grades 6 – Adult can be downloaded from CREATE website at http://www.createwisconsin.net/classroompractices/early_childhood_programs.cfm. (Permission granted from the authors to copy and use the student activities and teacher resources.)