



Stop Romanticizing Thanksgiving

By Shawnta S. Barnes – November 22, 2018

Last Thursday, my sons' school cafeteria served a special Thanksgiving feast. I always send a lunch from home, but our boys really wanted to eat school lunch so they could eat what their friends were eating during the feast. My husband and I allowed them to buy school lunch this one time.

When I picked up my boys from school, I saw quite a few Pilgrim hats. Once we arrived home, I decided to find out what they learned about Thanksgiving at school. They shared everyone made a Pilgrim hat to wear to the cafeteria during lunch for the Thanksgiving feast. Of course, I inquired if anyone was wearing a headband with feathers, but they told me no one was. Although I was relieved to hear that, I was disappointed about what they learned about Thanksgiving and the fact they wore a Pilgrim hat.

They told me they learned the Pilgrims came over on the Mayflower, but some Pilgrims died on the trip. Once they arrived, they needed help and the Native Americans helped them and showed them how to survive in a new land. The Pilgrims had a Thanksgiving feast with the Native Americans.

Historians typically refer to the 1621 fall feast between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag as the first Thanksgiving. During the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln declared Thanksgiving as a national holiday that would take place on the fourth Thursday in November. The romanticized version of Thanksgiving taught in schools today offends Native people. For them, this 1621 feast marked the beginning of the end for many Native tribes. The simplistic story told in school makes children view Native Americans as one collective group; they don't understand there are many tribes. Many children don't even learn which tribe participated in the 1621 feast.

After hearing my children recount what they learned, I asked them a question. "Why did the Pilgrims come here?" One of my sons said, "They were looking for a new place to live." I later explained how the English colonists killed the Native Americans and took their land. I also told them how many Native Americans don't celebrate Thanksgiving on the fourth Thursday of November, but instead gather for a National Day of Mourning. Finally, I wanted them to know there are Native Americans alive today. I fear that some children believe Native Americans are people who existed in the past and I wanted my children to understand that even though English settlers committed genocide against Native Americans, there are still Native descendants alive today.

Change is hard. Some teachers want to do what they have experienced in school and view holidays as a way to have fun in the classroom. Fun should not involve misrepresenting history and not teaching children the perspective of all groups involved in historical events. If you were wondering, I do practice what I preach.

During my first year of teaching, I worked in the suburbs. I had one Hispanic student, one African American student and one student from Saudi Arabia; the rest of my students were Caucasian. I thought it would be a good idea to address Thanksgiving in the classroom on a more critical level.

I told my students about the National Day of Mourning and "[The Suppressed Speech of Wamsutta \(Frank B.\) James](#)." Wamsutta James was a Wampanoag elder and Native American activist. He was asked to give a speech in Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1970 to commemorate the 350th anniversary of the Pilgrims arrival. The organizers asked to view his speech before the event and since his speech didn't put the Pilgrims in a positive light, he wasn't allowed to read it at the event.

I had my students read the speech and we discussed it using [Socratic Seminar](#). The majority of my students enjoyed discussing it. They raised questions such as, "Should we celebrate Thanksgiving?" and "How can we learn more about the various Native American tribes and history from their perspective?" Unfortunately, a few of my Caucasian students' parents complained to the principal. My principal called me in for a meeting. She said some parents said I was trying to brainwash their children and I was pushing an anti-American agenda. I was told that in the future if I wanted to discuss controversial topics, I should get a second opinion from colleagues.

Being afraid of making some students and parents uncomfortable is the exact reason we keep passing down to each generation of school children a whitewashed, watered down history told from the perspective of the victors. This needs to change, not only in settings where classes are filled with a significant number of minority children, but also in places where there are only a few minorities.

The extra information I gave to my children is similar to the extra information my father gave to my sisters and I when we were in school. He told us that his grandmother was half Native American and how it is important when we are learning history in school to think about history from the viewpoint of all parties involved. That is something that has stuck with me throughout my life.

No, my family isn't anti-Thanksgiving; My parents have hosted our family's Thanksgiving dinner ever since I could remember. We use this as a time to share what we are thankful for and use it as a time to spend quality time with relatives we aren't able to see that often.

There isn't anything wrong with teaching children about the Pilgrims, but we need to bring in more context. November is not just the month when Thanksgiving happens; November is also [Native American Heritage Month](#). Throughout the month of November, schools can provide more context and more information about Native Americans rather than just telling students Native American helped the Pilgrims and had the first Thanksgiving with them. If you are an educator, who is looking to teach Thanksgiving in a socially responsible way, click [here](#) to view resources provided by Teaching Tolerance.

If my blog post hasn't convinced you, we need to do a better job teaching history in our schools, view MTV's Decoded video, "[Everything You Know about Thanksgiving is WRONG](#)" or read, "[Do American Indians Celebrate Thanksgiving?](#)" written by Dennis W. Zotigh, Writer and Cultural Specialist for Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian.

This piece originally appeared on [Educator Barnes](#) as a Monday Musings.