

Over the River and Through My Life

Charting time and family through the ever-evolving Thanksgiving ritual

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Thanksgiving is glued to America as surely as baseball and apple pie. Even if you feel uncomfortable about celebrating a mythical meal that represents the appropriation of the better part of a continent, you'll likely gather with your family around a bird in a couple of weeks.

Tradition is a bright light that draws us, mothlike, to its glow. As the days shrink down to nubs of wakefulness and the end of a calendar year approaches, we want to gather together with loved ones and share a significant meal. The meal is large in all senses of the term: the time it will take to gather and prep ingredients; the space it will take on our plates and in our bellies; and the room it has in our minds, looming as a central family moment that tests the mettle—and emotional investment—of all involved.

Thinking back over my own Thanksgivings, I see a history of tradition easing over new circumstances. We used to have Thanksgiving with my maternal grandparents, in a tiny ranch house off Western Avenue by the UAlbany campus. Elbow-to-elbow, we ate my grandmother's cranberry-orange relish and "homemade" crescent rolls, a la Pillsbury. My sisters and I fought over the right to whack the tube on the counter. Those meals were crowded with joy, as the local family reveled in the beloved uncles drawn home.

In 1976, however, when I was 9, my grandparents died, and we relocated our holidays to get away from the pain. Thanksgiving moved to Rochester, where one of my mother's brothers lived. Traveling to that city became for me the meaning of Thanksgiving. My mother kept making her mother's relish, and my sisters and I begged to whack the crescents on the counter, and there were sweet little gherkins in a crystal dish.

During my freshman year in college, I had to wash the turkey and my baby cousin in the same sink. Vegetarianism was already on my mind, and I didn't eat any of the bird. I stuck with the holiday, though, happy to make my way to Rochester each November to be with my family until I moved to the Northwest.

The price of cross-country plane tickets made Christmas the compass I came home for, so I needed to ease the Thanksgiving tradition into my Seattle life. A bunch of people from Delmar were scattered in Washington and Oregon, and we made Thanksgiving a Delmar Northwest event. (FYI, I'm from Lansingburgh and Melrose but I had a permanent boyfriend ticket to a certain strain of Delmartians.)

I loved reading up on Thanksgiving dishes in cookbooks I got at thrift stores. I tried to imagine the way things would taste. Would this be the pumpkin pie? Is this how to cook the bird? (I had abandoned my meatless days.) How should I accommodate someone's love for oyster stuffing and my bivalve phobia? Two stuffings answered that riddle.

The meal was self-consciously goofy. We were too cynical to admit that we wanted to attach ourselves to something we missed, so we wore aprons and drank cocktails, feigning disdain for a 1950s-style human patterning even though we were, for the most part, repeating those habits, paired off as couples and keeping house.

We were playing at being grownups, but really, I think we liked the way the dinner seemed like something we'd all done, albeit under far different circumstances. Sure, we were breaking away, immersing ourselves in grungeland not because of the music but because the Northwest was the farthest we could get from home without a passport. There was comfort in the continuity of a meal, especially one bogged-down with so much cultural baggage. This made it easy, for me anyway, to find some true sentiment nestled within our sarcasm.

After a few years, the Delmar Northwest circle stretched to include Seattle friends. Another self-exiled East Coaster and I decided to make a centerpiece. We stuffed arm-length gloves with newspaper and attached them to a square of plywood. We draped them with plastic grapes and miniature pumpkins. In the end, the

thing was too huge to sit on the table, but the hands waved from a corner of the room, aimed heavenward at the ceiling's flecked surface.

Once I moved back to upstate New York, my siblings had fallen out of the habit of Rochester Thanksgivings. My husband and I alternated holidays with his Western New York parents and my family. I felt a little odd, falling into another family's patterns, but so it goes.

Eventually, we established Thanksgiving here. The change was inspired by another death. Frank Broderick, my brother's friend and a great painter, died, and I made a big family dinner in our newish-to-us house. The meal was somber, but the habit of it—crescent rolls, Grandma's cranberry-orange relish, baby gherkins in a crystal dish, all of us at the table—was a relief.

This year I happily anticipate the repetition of Thanksgiving. I've ordered my turkey from the Farm at Kristy's Barn, and my mom will make Grandma's relish. I haven't allowed my kids to learn to love whack-on-the-counter rolls, but a part of me wants to have them. My older sister and I will run the Turkey Trot—a habit we added a few years ago to make the day about more than food—and my son will Parkour his way along the route.

If I'm lucky I will see another trio of wild turkeys in front of my house.

A few years ago, I saw them: three birds on Tenth Street in Troy, daring me to blink and catch them in the sliver of my just-awakening mind. I puzzled over those animals for months. What were the chances a little parade of wild turkeys would greet me on Thanksgiving morning? What did it mean? Should I become a vegetarian again? Should I make a toast to colonialism at the dinner table?

I did neither of those. Still, I think of those birds, walking on the asphalt, and I hope they come to me again so I can follow them and lose sight of them in one of the vacant lots around my house, as they vanish into the trees. They are the ghosts of Thanksgivings past and I want to chase them into the woods, shake my head at how time flies and people fly and here we stand, ready to make dinner and set beautiful tables and eat echoes. Amen.