



RETHINKING THANKSGIVING

*And they shall look to the earth as their mother
And they shall say, "It is she who supports us."
You said that we should always be thankful
For our earth and for each other
So it is that we are gathered here...*

—Seneca Thanksgiving Prayer

THE DELIGHT SONG OF TSOAI-TALEE

BY N. SCOTT MOMADAY

I am a feather in the bright sky.

I am the blue horse that runs in the plain.

I am the fish that rolls, shining, in the water.

I am the shadow that follows a child.

I am the evening light, the lustre of meadows.

I am an eagle playing with the wind.

I am a cluster of bright beads.

I am the farthest star.

I am the cold of the dawn.

I am the roaring of the rain.

I am the glitter on the crust of the snow.

I am the long track of the moon in a lake.

I am a flame of the four colors.

I am a deer standing way in the dusk.

I am a field of sumac and the poome blanche.

I am an angle of geese upon the winter sky.

I am the hunger of a young wolf.

I am the whole dream of these things.

You see, I am alive, I am alive.

I stand in good relation to the earth.

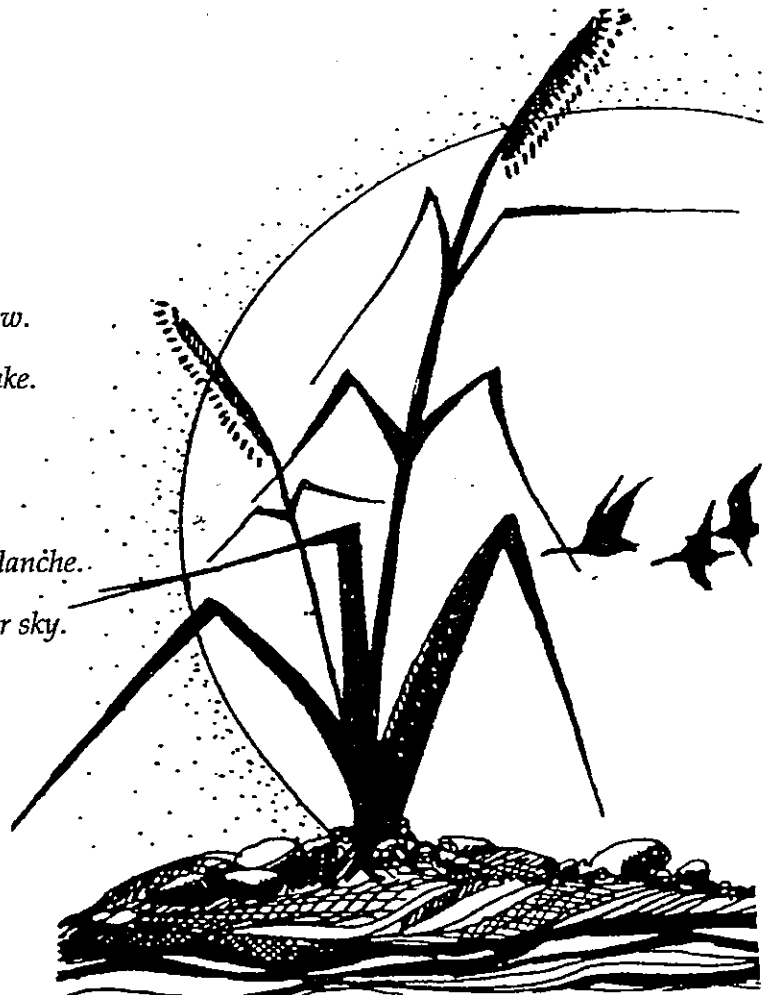
I stand in good relation to the gods.

I stand in good relation to all that is beautiful.

I stand in good relation to the daughter of Tsen-tainte.

You see, I am alive, I am alive.

— from *Angle of Geese and Other Poems*
(Boston: D.R. Godine, 1974).



Momaday is a Kiowa and winner of a Pulitzer Prize for his novel, A House Made of Dawn (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

GIVING THANKS

The Story of Indian Summer

BY JOSEPH BRUCHAC

There is a man who is a very great farmer. He always has great success. He always gives thanks to the Creator and to the plants.

And he always shares whatever he grows with everyone in the village and in his family. They really rely on him. Without the food he grows, they would not survive.

But what happens is that one year, everything goes wrong. He plants his crops and a freeze comes and kills them. But he has kept more seeds, so he plants a second time. This time, hard rains wash away the seeds. A third time, the insects and birds come and eat all the plants. Then he plants a fourth time and now the sun is so hot and the rain does not fall, so the plants dry out and die.

Now it is too late to plant and he has used up all his seeds. The leaves are falling from the trees and the weather is real cold. He is afraid that he and his people will starve.

But instead of complaining, he again gives thanks to the Creator.

That night when he goes to bed, he has a dream in which he hears a beautiful voice saying to him, "You have always been thankful and so I will reward you by giving you special seeds and a special time to plant them."

When he wakes the next morning, there is a basketful of seeds by his bed. Giant seeds.

He goes outside and the sun is shining and it is as warm as summer.

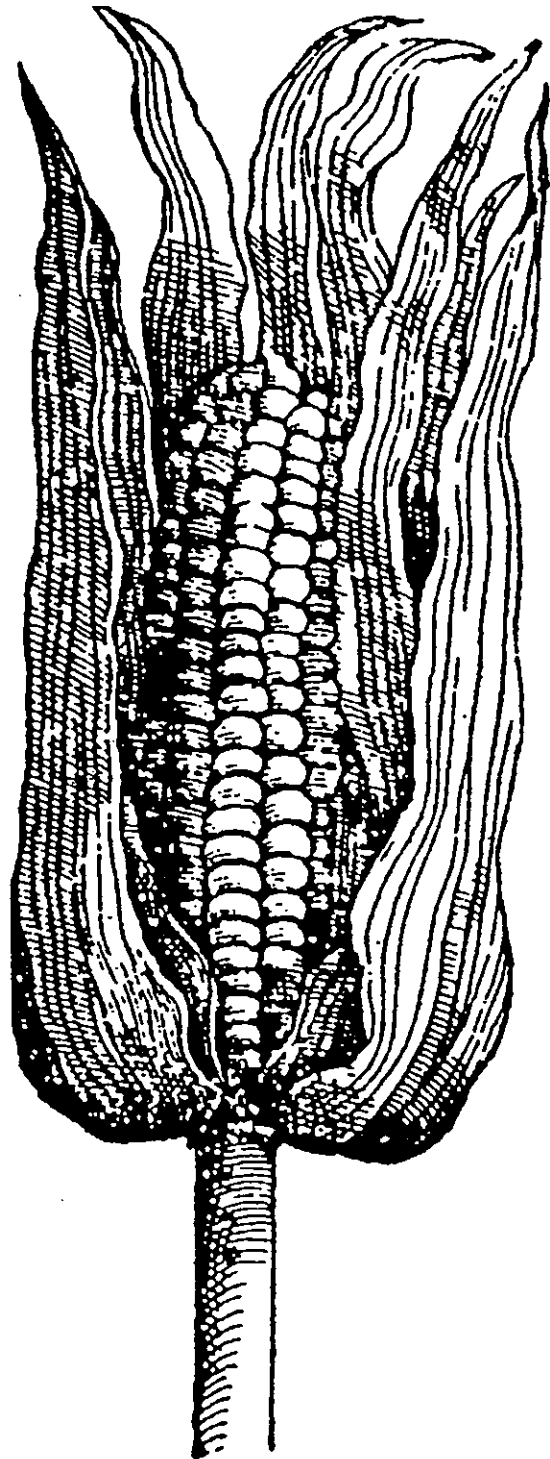
When he plants those seeds, they grow up and produce a harvest within the space of a few days so that he and his people do not starve. As soon as they've harvested the crops, the cold weather comes back and again the snow begins to come. The summer is gone.

We no longer have those special seeds, but as long as we are thankful each year, the Creator will give us that special time.

In Abenaki, we have a name for that time of year, that time of warmth that comes in the fall. We call it *nibun alnoba*, which means a person's summer.

But you know it as Indian summer.

That is a thanksgiving story that explains why we have Indian summer every year.



Joseph Bruchac is an Abenaki poet, storyteller, and author of more than sixty books for adults and children.

THANKING THE BIRDS

BY JOSEPH BRUCHAC

One day 30 years ago, Swift Eagle, an Apache man, visited some friends on the Onondaga Indian Reservation in central New York. While he was out walking, he heard sounds of boys playing in the bushes.

"There's another one. Shoot it!" said one of the boys.

When he pushed through the brush to see what was happening, he found that they had been shooting small birds with a BB gun. They had already killed a chickadee, a robin, and several blackbirds. The boys looked up at him, uncertain what he was going to do or say.

There are several things that a non-Indian bird lover might have done: given a stern lecture on the evil of killing birds; threatened to tell the boys' parents on them for doing something they had been told not to do; or even spanked them. Swift Eagle, however, did something else.

"Ah," he said, "I see you have been hunting. Pick up your game and come with me."

He led the boys to a place where they could make a fire and cook the birds. He made sure they said a 'thank you' to the spirits of the birds before eating them, and as they ate he told stories. It was important, he said, to be thankful to the birds for the gifts of their songs, their feathers, and their bodies as food. The last thing he said to them they never forgot — for it was one of those boys who told me this story many years later: "You know, our Creator gave the gift of life to everything that is alive. Life is a very sacred thing. But our Creator knows that we have to eat to stay alive. That is why it is permitted to hunt to feed ourselves and our people. So I understand that you boys must have been very, very hungry to kill

those little birds."

Similarities Among Native People

I have always liked that story, for it illustrates several things. Although there was a wide range of customs, lifeways and languages — in pre-Columbian times more than 400 different languages were spoken on the North American continent — many close similarities existed between virtually all of the Native American peoples. Thus ideas held by an Apache from the Southwest fitted into the lives and traditions of Onondagas in the Northeast.

One of these ideas, expressed in Swift Eagle's words to the boys, was the continent-wide belief that mankind depended on the natural world for survival, on the one hand, and had to respect it and remain in right relationship with it, on the other.

As the anecdote about Swift Eagle also shows, the children were taught the values of their cultures through example and stories. Instead of scolding or lecturing them, Swift Eagle showed the boys how to build a fire and cook the game they had shot, giving the songbirds the same respect he would have given a rabbit or deer. He told stories that pointed out the value of those birds as living beings. The ritual activity of making the fire, thanking the spirits of the birds, hearing the stories, and then eating the game they had killed taught the boys more than a hundred stern lectures would have done, and the lesson stayed with them all their lives.

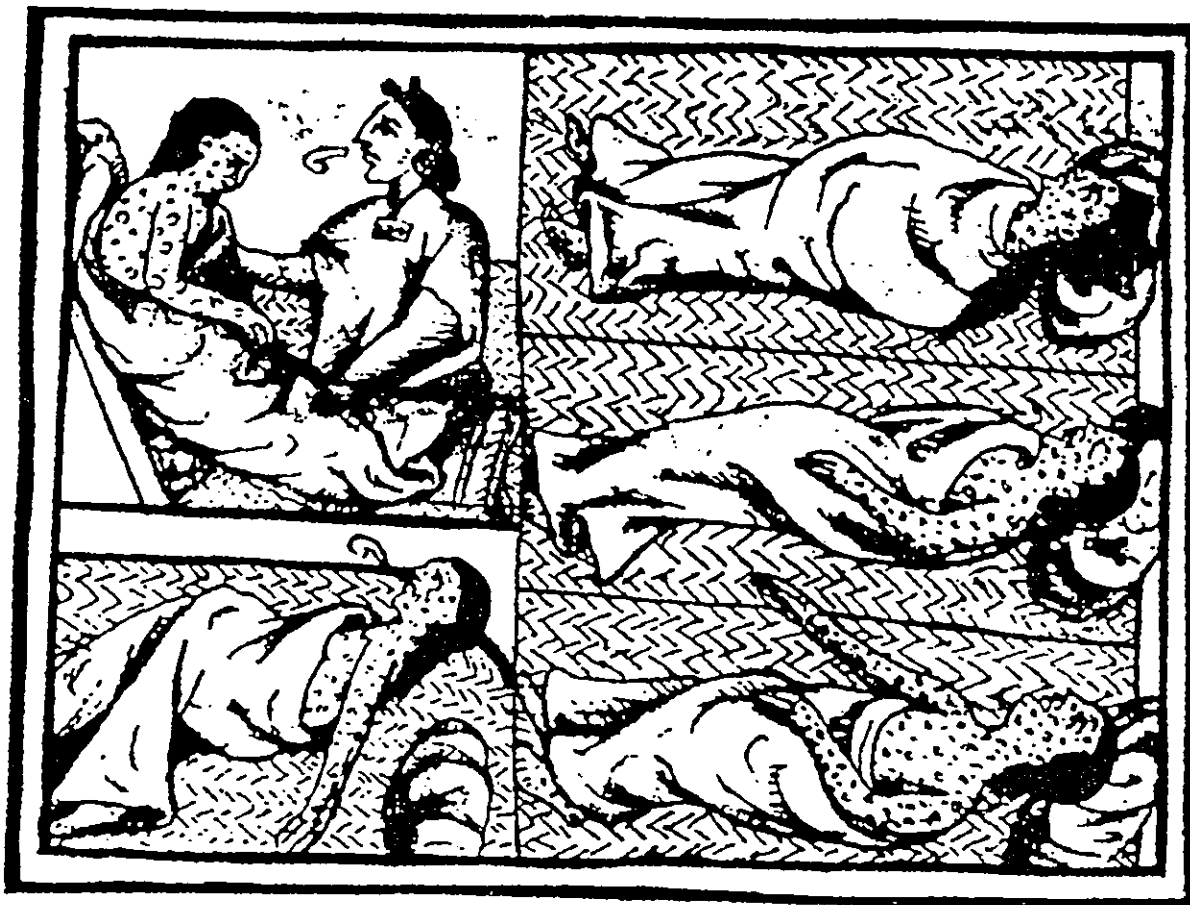
Excerpted from the afterword to Keepers of the Earth, Native American Stories and Environmental Activities for Children, by Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 1988).



PLAGUES & PILGRIMS

The Truth about the First Thanksgiving

BY JAMES W. LOEWEN



Fray Bernardino Sahagun

Native peoples had no immunity to smallpox.

Textbooks spin happy yarns about the Pilgrims and the "First Thanksgiving." Here is the version in one high-school history, *The American Tradition*:

After some exploring, the Pilgrims chose the land around Plymouth Harbor for their settlement. Unfortunately, they had arrived in December and were not prepared for the New England winter. However, they were aided by some friendly Indians, who gave them food and showed them how to grow corn. When warm weather came, the colonists planted, fished, hunted, and prepared themselves for the next winter. After harvesting their first crop, they and their Indian friends celebrated the first Thanksgiving.

I teach first-year college students, the products of American high schools. And when I ask my students about the plague, they stare back at me. "What plague?"

For a variety of reasons, Native Americans were "a remarkably healthy race" before Columbus. Ironically, their very health now proved their undoing, for they had built up no resistance, genetically or through childhood diseases, to the microbes Europeans and Africans now brought with them. In 1617, just before the Pilgrims landed, the process started in southern New England. Today we think it was the bubonic plague, although pox and influenza are also candidates.

British fishermen had been fishing off Massachusetts for decades before the Pilgrims landed. After filling their hulls with cod, they would set forth on land to get firewood and fresh water and perhaps capture a few Indians to sell into slavery in Europe. On one of these expeditions they probably transmitted the illness to the people they met.

Whatever it was, within three years this plague wiped out between 90 percent and 96 percent of the inhabitants of southern New England. The Indian societies lay devastated. Only "the twentieth person is scarce left alive," wrote British eyewitness Robert Cushman, describing a death rate unknown in all previous human experience. Unable to cope with so many corpses, survivors fled to the next tribe, carrying the infestation with them, so that Indians died who had never seen a white person.

During the next fifteen years, additional epidemics, most of which we know to have been smallpox, struck repeatedly.

The English Separatists, already seeing their lives as part of a divinely inspired morality play, inferred that they had God on their side. John Winthrop, Governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, called the plague "miraculous." To a friend in England in 1634, he wrote:

But for the natives in these parts, God hath so pursued them, as for 300 miles space the greatest part of them are swept away by the smallpox which still continues among them. So as God hath thereby cleared our title to this place, those who remain in these parts, being in all not fifty, have put themselves under our protection....

God, the original real estate agent!

Many Indians likewise inferred that their God had abandoned them. Cushman reported that "those that are left, have their courage much abated, and their countenance is dejected, and they seem as a people affrighted." After all, neither they nor the Pilgrims had access to the germ theory of disease. Indian healers offered no cure, their religion no explanation. That of the whites did. Many Indians surrendered to alcohol or began to listen to Christianity.

These epidemics constituted perhaps the most important single geopolitical event of the first third of the 1600s, anywhere on the planet. They meant that the British would face no real Indian challenge

for their first fifty years in America. Indeed, the plague helped cause the legendary warm reception Plymouth [the Pilgrims] enjoyed in its first formative years from the Wampanoags. Massasoit, the Wampanoag leader, needed to ally with the Pilgrims because the plague had so weakened his villages that he feared the Narragansetts to the west.

Moreover, the New England plagues exemplify a process which antedated the Pilgrims and endures to this day. The pestilence continues, now killing Indians in the interior of the Amazon Basin in northern Brazil and southern Venezuela.

Europeans were never able to "settle" China, India, Indonesia, Japan, or most of Africa because too many people already lived there. Advantages in military and social technology would have enabled Europeans to dominate the Americas — as they eventually dominated China and Africa — but not to "settle" the New World. For that, the plague was required.

Thus, except for the European invasion itself, the pestilence was surely the most important event in the history of America. Nonetheless, most high-school textbooks leave it out.

It was a Lovely Site

The Pilgrims chose Plymouth because of its cleared fields, recently planted in corn, "and a brook of fresh water [that] flowed into the harbor." It was a lovely site for a town. Indeed, until the plague, it had been a town. Everywhere in the hemisphere, Europeans pitched camp right in the middle of native populations — Cuzco, Mexico City, Natchez, Chicago. Throughout New England, colonists appropriated Indian cornfields, which explains why so many town names — Marshfield, Springfield, Deerfield — end in "field."

Inadvertent Indian assistance started on the Pilgrims' second full day in Massachusetts. A colonist's journal tells us:

We marched to the place we called Cornhill, where we had found the corn before. At another place we had seen before, we dug and found some more corn, two or three baskets full, and a bag of beans In all we had about ten bushels, which will be enough for seed. It was with God's help that we found this corn, for how else could we have done it, without meeting some Indians who might trouble us.... The next morning, we found a place like a grave. We decided to dig it up. We found first a mat, and under that a fine bow.... We also found bowls, trays, dishes, and things like that. We took several of the prettiest things to

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feel-good history is not
feel-bad history, but
honest and inclusive
history.*

carry away with us, and covered the body up again.

A place "like a grave"!

Squanto

More help came from a live Indian, Squanto. What do the textbooks leave out about Squanto? First, how he learned English. As a boy, along with four Penobscots, he was probably stolen by a British captain in about 1605 and taken to England. There he probably spent nine years, two in the employ of a Plymouth merchant who later helped finance the Mayflower. At length, the merchant helped him arrange a passage back to Massachusetts.

He was to enjoy home life for less than a year, however. In 1614, a British slave raider seized him and two dozen fellow Indians and sold them into slavery in Malaga, Spain. Squanto escaped from slavery, made his way back to England, and in 1619 talked a ship captain into taking him along on his next trip to Cape Cod.

It happens that Squanto's fabulous odyssey provides a "hook" into the plague story. For now Squanto

walked to his home village, only to make the horrifying discovery that "he was the sole member of his village still alive. All the others had perished in the epidemic two years before." No wonder he throws his lot in with the Pilgrims, who rename the site of his original village, "Plymouth." Now that is a story worth telling!

Compare the pallid account in a high-school textbook, *Land of Promise*. "He had learned their language from English fishermen." What do we make of books that give us the unimportant details — Squanto's name, the occupation of his enslavers — while omitting not only his enslavement, but also the crucial fact of the plague? This is distortion on a grand scale.

Embarrassing Facts

Should we teach the truths about Thanksgiving? Or, like our textbooks, should we look the other way? Thanksgiving is full of embarrassing facts. The Pilgrims did not introduce the Native Americans to the tradition; Eastern Indians had observed autumnal harvest celebrations for centuries. Our modern



"The Pilgrim army drilled," a curious thing to do for Native guests at the 1621 Thanksgiving feast — unless the goal was to impress the visiting Wampanoag leader, Massasoit, with the Pilgrims' military power. Illustration from the book, *The Pilgrims' Party, A Really True Story*, by Sadyebeth and Anson Lowitz.

celebrations date back only to Abraham Lincoln in 1863; not until the 1890s did the Pilgrims get included in the tradition.

Plymouth Rock itself achieved legendary status only in the 19th century, when some enterprising residents of the town moved it down to the water so its significance as the "holy soil" the Pilgrims first touched might seem more plausible.

Indians are marginalized in this civic ritual. Our archetypal image of the first Thanksgiving portrays



The Wampanoag leader, Massasoit, had a son known as King Philip, who became the leader of an alliance of several tribes worried about the spread of European settlements deeper into their lands. In 1675, war broke out between the Native peoples and the Pilgrim colonists. Within a year, the European immigrants crushed the resistance; Massasoit's heir, Philip, was killed in battle and his wife and child captured and sold into slavery. Philip's head was cut off and displayed on a pole in the town of Plymouth for the next 25 years.

the groaning boards in the woods, with the Pilgrims in their starched Sunday best and the almost naked Indian guests. This exemplifies what art historians call "hieratic scale," as in "hierarchy." It is silly once thought about, for depending on the weather, either the Indians were very cold or the Pilgrims were very hot. But we aren't supposed to think about it.

Thanksgiving silliness reaches some sort of zenith in the handouts that school children have carried home for decades, with captions like, "They served pumpkin and turkeys and corn and squash.

The Indians had never seen such a feast!"

When his son brought home this "information" from his New Hampshire elementary school, Native American novelist Michael Dorris pointed out "the *Pilgrims* had literally never seen 'such a feast' since all foods mentioned are exclusively indigenous to the Americas and had been provided by [or with the aid of] the local tribe."

I do not suggest a "bash the Pilgrims" interpretation, emphasizing only the bad parts. I have emphasized untoward details only because our histories have suppressed everything awkward for so long. The Pilgrims' courage in setting forth in the late fall to make their way on a continent new to them remains unsurpassed. In their first year, like the Indians, they suffered from diseases. Half of them died. The Pilgrims did not cause the plague and were as baffled as to its true origin as the stricken Indian villagers.

The antidote to feel-good history is not feel-bad history, but honest and inclusive history.

Because our Thanksgiving holiday has roots in both Anglo and Native cultures, and because of the interracial cooperation the first celebration enshrines, it might yet develop into a holiday that promotes tolerance and understanding.

But to glorify the Pilgrims is dangerous. The genial omissions and false details our texts use to retail the Pilgrim legend promote Anglocentrism, which only handicaps us when dealing with all those whose culture is not Anglo.

James Loewen is the author of Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong (New Press, 1995), from which this excerpt is modified. He is now writing Lies Across America: What Our Historic Markers and Monuments Get Wrong.

RETHINKING THANKSGIVING



Thanksgiving is a simple holiday: a time for joining hands and giving thanks. It is also a complicated U.S. national holiday, filled with murky myths, stereotypes, historical propaganda, and inane pageantry.

Below are some suggestions for how it could be approached in American schools. Following each general idea, specific teaching ideas are given for articles in this section on "Rethinking Thanksgiving."

Suggested Activities

A Day of Mourning

Many native peoples object to this holiday because it falsely represents American history, perpetuates stereotypes, and brings to mind, for them, the theft of land, religious oppression, grave robbing, and cultural suppression by European settlers. Some native peoples have called for this day to be renamed "Native American Day," to be used as a way to educate the public about their history.

Classroom ideas: Share with students information in this chapter and explain how some Native Americans are offended by Thanksgiving celebrations. Brainstorm with your class how they could teach others in your school the truth about Thanksgiving.

A Day of Giving Thanks

Thanksgiving can be defined broadly. In most societies for thousands of years, there have been harvest festivals in celebration. These celebrations are often intended to thank the deities that the people believed to have been responsible for their harvest — and wish to honor through activities such as speeches, ceremonies, preparation of special foods, etc.

Classroom ideas: Have students research harvest festivals in different countries and share what they find. Ask them to consider questions like: How are we related to the natural world? Where does our food come from? What family, friends, and neighbors do we have, and how can we get along better — given differences, and given similarities? Use the

ideas given below for Bruchac's stories ("Indian Summer" and "Thanking the Birds").

A Day of Examination

The day could be used to critically examine Native American issues and how they are portrayed during this holiday.

Classroom ideas: Bring in Thanksgiving greeting cards and advertisements and have students look at them for stereotypes (see checklist on p. 36.) Have students look at their school bulletin boards to find stereotypes.

For older students pose these questions:

Why did Pilgrims and natives really gather in 1621? Why did they engage in warfare some years later in King Philip's War? What were the effects of the plague on Indian populations? What were native/white relations like then? Now? Why had Squanto been enslaved?

A Day of Communication

The day could be used to encourage students to listen to native voices.

Classroom ideas: Read to your class articles, stories, or poetry by native authors and activists. Bring into the classroom a Native American newspaper (see Resources, p. 182) and share it with students. Invite a local Native American in to speak about a concern that they have. Challenge students to find out what native people who live in your area are saying.

A Day Not to Do a Pageant About the "First" Thanksgiving

None of these suggestions involve putting on a pageant with Pilgrims and Indians. If you feel compelled to do a play, why not do one that shows the Pilgrims engaging in grave robbing, or the hostilities of King Philip's war, or Squanto's life in slavery? Unless a teacher is prepared to take students in depth into the real issues, it's probably better to do something else.

(continued on next page)

Additional Teaching Ideas

The Delight Song of Tsoai-Talee

Poem by N. Scott Momaday (p. 72)

Ask students to write a poem about themselves, modeled after Momaday's. Begin with "I'm..." and complete the sentence. You might give them a specified number of descriptions — such as ten — that they need to list in their poem.

Giving Thanks

A Story by Joseph Bruchac (p. 73)

Read the story about the origin of the term "Indian summer." Young students could re-enact the story. Older students could write their own thanksgiving story that emphasizes respect for the earth and all living things.

Thanking the Birds

Story by Joseph Bruchac (p. 74)

Ask students to describe other positive attributes of animals and nature. Why might native people try to learn from animals? What do you do when you see animals or insects outdoors? What can we learn from them? Native leader, Chief Luther Standing Bear (p. 166) said that in Lakota, they have no word for "pest." What do you think of as "pests?" Why do you think the Lakota language has no word for "pest?"

Take your class on a walk around your school or to a nearby park. Ask children to notice all the living things they can. Talk about how we act when we see different living things.

When you read "Thanking the Birds" with your students, ask if they agree with how Swift Eagle dealt with the boys. If they had been the children in the story, how would they have responded to Swift Eagle?

Alphabet of the Americas

List of Native Contributions (p. 75)

Before passing out the list, do a mime of some of the items on the list and see if students can guess the item. Pass out the list, and read it with the students. Have students look up words that they don't know. Have students volunteer to mime other items on the list.

For homework, have students list at least ten items at home that have their origins in the Americas.

Ask questions such as: What ways did Native Americans affect European culture? How would students' lives be different without these things? Older students could be encouraged to write skits about native contributions and perform them for

younger students.

Note: Charts of native contributions to the world often acknowledge foods like potatoes and chilis without emphasizing that these plants were not simply found in the Americas but that many varieties were developed by Native agriculturists. Also, in recognizing native contributions, we should not become complacent about the human costs of the exchange: "The 'exchange' is okay because 'they' gave 'us' something useful. We are okay because we are crediting them for this."

Plagues and Pilgrims: The Truth About the First Thanksgiving

by James W. Loewen (p. 79)

Have students find references to the Pilgrims and the "first" Thanksgiving in your school district textbooks or in library books at your school. After summarizing that point of view, read selections of "Plagues and Pilgrims" to your students. Ask: What are the differences in the versions of the events? In whose interest are each of the versions? What makes one version more believable than the other?

Older students can do additional research on Thanksgiving and write a more accurate Thanksgiving story to share with younger students.

Additional Resources

Highly recommended is a curriculum packet, "Teaching About Thanksgiving," developed for the Tacoma Public Schools, available on the website of the Fourth World Documentation Project (www.halcyon.com/FWDP).

With an introduction by Chuck Larsen (Seneca, Ojibwa, Métis), the packet carefully examines the interaction of the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag Indians who shared the famous thanksgiving feast of 1621. The packet includes study questions, recipes for native foods, and much more.

Also Recommended:

Keepers of Life: Discovering Plants Through Native American Stories and Earth Activities for Children, by Joseph Bruchac (Abenaki) and Michael K. Caduto. (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1994). Especially Chapter 4. An insightful, multi-layered look at giving thanks, rooted in traditional Seneca Thanksgiving customs. The chapter includes valuable questions and explorations for students — about giving thanks, celebrating, and living in balance with nature. Includes a round dance and other activities.