

**Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting
November 23, 2008**

**A Mindful Thanksgiving
by Donne Hayden**

When I was a child, I sometimes got what we called in our family “sick-hungry.” This happened as a result of the kind of casual parenting unheard-of today—my mother, aunt and grandmother operated on the premise that children would not let themselves starve to death. If we were outside playing and forgot to come in to lunch, no one was concerned. Occasionally, I would play all day with Wayne and Ray, my cousins, and late in the afternoon, start to feel sick—nauseous and clammy; a few times I even threw up. When I went in the house to tell Mom or Grandma, one of them would inquire, “When’s the last time you ate, Honey?” If it was breakfast, the diagnosis would be, “Oh, well you’re probably just sick hungry” and the prescription would be peanut butter and crackers or some of Grandma’s canned peaches.

As a child, I never went hungry from lack of food, though sometimes we didn’t have enough money for snacks. I remember during one skimpy season, my mother and I experimenting with eating peanut shells, orange rinds, and even munching on coffee grounds to satisfy our snacking impulse. But we did always have enough to eat, so I don’t have a good understanding of what it is like to starve. In the past ten or fifteen years, however, as a person of conscience, I have become increasingly uncomfortable with our abundance of food, and on Thanksgiving especially, I have become more mindful of those who do go hungry.

To Buddhists, mindfulness means paying attention, becoming aware, focusing the mind; to Quakers, being mindful means paying attention to and being guided by that of God in each of us, the still, small voice within. Today I am going to ask you to be mindful of what occurs each year in this country on Thanksgiving Day.

Though we acknowledge we have many things to be thankful for, in fact, our actions on Thanksgiving celebrate our abundance of food, an abundance we take for granted. We are rarely mindful of food—we tend to eat automatically most of the time, and we continue to think of

Thanksgiving in the same way as earlier generations did, even though abundant food now is the norm rather than the exception. The following anonymous poem from an 1894 *American Almanac* preserves the sentimental image of Thanksgiving we all love, an image based on the agrarian lifestyle of most Americans through more than two centuries.

A Thanksgiving Hymn

*"Have you cut the wheat in the blowing fields,
The barley, the oats and rye,
The golden corn and the pearly rice?
For the winter days are nigh."
"We have reaped them all from shore to shore,
And the grain is safe on the threshing floor."
"Have you gathered the berries from the vine
And the fruits from the orchard trees,
The dew and the scent from the roses and thyme
In the hive of the honey-bees?"
"The peach and the plum and the apple are ours,
And the honey-comb from the scented flowers."
"The wealth of the snowy cotton-field
And the gift of the sugar-cane,
The savory herb and nourishing root -
There has nothing been given in vain,
We have gathered the harvest from shore to shore,
And the measure is full and running o'er."
Then lift up the head with a song!
And lift up the hands with a gift!
To the ancient giver of all
The spirit of gratitude lift!
For the joy and promise of Spring,
For the hay and clover sweet,
The barley, the rye, and the oats,
The rice and the corn and the wheat,
The cotton and sugar and fruit,
The flowers and the fine honeycomb,
The country, so fair and so free,
The blessing and the glory of home,
"Thanksgiving! Thanksgiving! Thanksgiving!"
Joyfully, gratefully call,
"To God, . . .
The bountiful Father of all."*

This is beautiful and nostalgic, but such an image no longer fits the way we live. In earlier generations when most Americans lived on family farms the image was relevant, and the poem makes clear how different their relationship with food was from ours today. Consider, for instance, the colonists at the first Thanksgiving and how intimately each person was involved

with obtaining what they ate. They knew personally the source of every kind of food. In the woods men hunted deer, turkeys, geese, ducks, swans and other wild game, which they killed, gutted, skinned and butchered themselves. They fished in the ocean and nearby ponds and streams, gutting and cleaning the fish they caught. Women and children dug clams and oysters out of the sand, found and picked wild plums, grapes, and currants. All were involved in planting beans, pumpkins, wheat and corn, nursing them through the spring and summer until time to harvest them in the fall. And after acquiring the various foods, the colonists preserved them so that in the winter to come, they would not starve. They salted and dried cod and venison; they shucked ears of Indian corn, grinding some of it and preserving some for planting the next year; they dried fruits and berries and gathered nuts. Through the winter, mindful of the portions served, they ate what they had preserved and stored, knowing it had to last until spring.

In contrast, for all the abundance of our food, we are only remotely connected to its source. Farmers and ranchers are an increasing minority in the American population, and though some people plant gardens, most of us do not have *any* first-hand contact with a food source. Our vegetables come to us, canned or frozen, or pre-washed, waxed and wrapped in plastic. Beef appears as red chunks on white Styrofoam plates, pork as pink chunks, and poultry as pinkish or whitish clumps—all also wrapped in plastic; nothing bleeds. Our relationship with the sources of our food is distant and impersonal, and we have no idea where most of it comes from.

In 1970, American farmers produced an average of 4 billion bushels of corn per year; now they produce 10 billion bushels annually. Subsidized by the government, our farms produce so much corn that we can't use up the excess even with all the ingenious ways corn is incorporated into our foods. (Approximately 40% of food products in our grocery stores contain

some corn byproduct¹). We are becoming more aware that such a diet contributes to the American epidemic of obesity; just as we have “corn-fattened” beef, we have “corn-fattened” people. Perhaps it is poetic justice. We who have superabundant food, we who consume nine times more than our share of the earth’s resources, we are in danger of gorging ourselves to death.

It didn’t start out that way, of course. The first Thanksgiving occurred *after* the colonists endured months of skimpy provisions and near starvation. It began as a celebration of abundance *after scarcity*, a state that has all but disappeared from our current reality. Most of us cannot remember the last time we were really hungry, or any time when we couldn’t get food. Let’s face it—we could, if we wanted to, have turkey, dressing, gravy, pumpkin pie, cranberry sauce and all the trimmings—ANY DAY OF THE YEAR if we WANT IT.

Perhaps it’s time to reconsider our celebration on Thanksgiving Day, time to change our attitude so that we acknowledge not only the long-term consequences of over-consumption, but also the current economic reality. Right now in Cincinnati, for instance, local food pantries are struggling to feed all those coming to them for help. Friends, let us each bring food each week, not just now at Thanksgiving and at Christmas, but let us bring food to share *for the duration of these hard times* when people in our own city are short of food.

On Thanksgiving, most Americans feast. Perhaps we could acknowledge the wisdom in the Islamic tradition of fasting, which holds that:

The fasting person is naturally among the most merciful people. That is because he has tasted hunger, experienced thirst and endured hardship. His soul is, therefore, enveloped with mercy, care and gentleness. . . .

In addition to our day of feasting, we could add the tradition of fasting for a day, or following a suggestion from Oxfam, an international charity organization dedicated to feeding the hungry, which has for more than 30 years, “made the Fast for a World Harvest part of their

¹ See *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* by Michael Pollan.

Thanksgiving tradition, celebrating our season of plenty by remembering the more than 850 million people who go to sleep hungry.” Oxfam invites everyone to join them in this: “On the Thursday before Thanksgiving, skip a meal to honor those in need.” Contribute the money you would have spent on food that day to Oxfam or another organization that helps to feed folks in need. Just skip one meal on any day (it doesn’t have to be the Thursday before Thanksgiving) and donate the money you would have spent on food to Oxfam; or, skip a meal and on Sundays, bring the food you would have eaten to put in the Cincinnati Friends food pantry box.

On Thanksgiving day this year, let us be mindful of two things: first, how our abundant food affects us, and second, how we are called to share that abundance with those less fortunate. Let us be mindful of the *burden* of our abundance as well as its blessings. Let us re-conceive Thanksgiving to focus on those who do not share in our abundance and to be mindful of our responsibility to the world for the huge amount of its resources we consume. Let us be mindful that, as the Gospel of Luke tells us, “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required” (Luke 12: 48).

I leave you with this Thanksgiving prayer in the form of a poem by Max Coots, which acknowledges our interconnectedness with the rest of the world and does **not** focus on food:

Let us pray to the God who holds us in the hollow of his hands,
 to the God who holds us in the curve of her arms,
 to the God whose flesh is the flesh of hills and hummingbirds and angleworms,
 whose skin is the color of an old black woman and a young white man,
 and the color of the leopard and the grizzly bear and the green grass snake,
 whose hair is like the aurora borealis, rainbows, nebulae, waterfalls, and a
 spider’s web,
 whose eyes sometimes shine like the evening star,
 and then like fireflies, and then again like an open wound,

whose touch is both the touch of life and the touch of death,
and whose name is everyone's but mostly mine.

And what shall we pray?

Let us say, "Thank you."

Amen.