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Thanksgiving requires a (turkey) wing and a prayer

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I didn't like the idea when I first heard about it. I didn't like it as it drew closer. And I didn't like it when it happened.

Our daughter, Molly, is not with us for Thanksgiving—the first of 25 that we have not spent together.

Work required her to stay in New York on Friday, which made a trip home impossible. We seem to get along best with each other at the farm, within familiar circumstances.

As Molly is our only child, our family unit is a three-legged stool. Take one leg away, and we become unbalanced.

I've been a-grumble about this for weeks.

Thanksgiving -- a holiday with no embedded canon of music or words -- exerts a unifying power over Americans whatever our differences. I've never met a Thanksgiving-hater.

What is there about the simple act of sharing a big, fussy meal with family that has made it into an American instinct?

I think part of it has to do with how each family creates its own Thanksgiving rituals. We gather in a particular place. The morning is spent cooking and baking the familiar foods. The table is set a certain way, with certain dishes. The efforts of many are rewarded.

Families change over time as individuals are added and subtracted. And today's acorns, become, in time, oaks of their own.

Even as each family changes, a few threads continue to tie everybody together—the turkey, its familiar supporting cast, the kitchen smells, the Detroit Lions, the cleanup, the inability to rise from the table.

Each family does Thanksgiving a little differently just as everyone has a distinctive style of handwriting. Once established, a family's interpretation of the day doesn't vary much. No one wants it to change.

Family Thanksgivings are like building a layer cake year after year. Each layer is the same, even though the stuff between them is different.

Some families bless this meal with a religious prayer; some don't.

The *Mayflower* landed on Cape Cod in November, 1620. A year later 53 survivors of the 102 original colonists celebrated the fact that they were still alive.

With Native Americans and several dozen new arrivals, they held a harvest festival of eating, drinking and revelry that we now refer to as the First Thanksgiving.

In the fall of 1623, those we now call Pilgrims -- who called themselves, "Saints" -- conducted a somber day of continuous worship and prayer. They also expressed appreciation for the recent arrival of more colonists and supplies. The 1623 Thanksgiving is largely forgotten.

The Pilgrims' Plymouth Colony was a semi-theocracy founded by dissenters from the English Anglican Church. The Saints wanted to build a "heavenly city" in the New

World. But they believed in keeping church and state separate even while they insisted on morality and laws that expressed their religious views.

The Saints had no tolerance for Roman Catholics and little for most Protestant churches. They were stiffly civil with the Puritans who arrived in Massachusetts a few years later. The Puritans wanted to reform Anglicanism from within; the Saints considered the Church of England unreformable.

Of the two, the Puritans were more dedicated to enforcing religious uniformity within their settlements.

At the start, the Plymouth Colony organized itself around the communal use of their land and an equal division of the harvest. This lasted only a few years, because the Saints found that some worked harder pushing the commonweal than others. The land was soon divided and assigned to families who retained their harvests. Production increased. More corn was available for trading for furs. The Colony stabilized.

Plymouth Colony was an often discordant marriage of religion and money. It was financed by the Company of Merchant Adventurers of London, a group of business boys, who were not Saints. The Adventurers expected to be paid back for fronting the colony's start-up costs and then profit from what the colony produced.

The Saints weren't able to make their lifestyle into a going business. Something on the order of 1,800 pounds was repaid on an investment of perhaps 7,000.

The Saints' theology spent itself over time. Most of its members, like the Puritans, recast themselves into New England's Congregational churches.

Our modern Thanksgiving is more like the three-day, blow-out party of 1621 than the worship-and-prayer marathon of 1623, although I am always the first to clap for supplies arriving in my front yard by sailboat.

In the interest of recapturing a smidgeon of that old-time religion, I offer this Thanksgiving prayer.

*We are thankful today for those who are with us,
and for those with whom we once shared this meal.
We are thankful today for what's good in the world,
and for when we've done the right thing in the right way.
We are thankful today for what we have, and for what
we don't need.
We are thankful today for any help we've received, and
for any we were able to give.
We are thankful today for the freedom we have, and
for the times we've used it.
We are thankful today for those who love us, and
for those we have loved.
We are thankful today for today, and for the possibility of
tomorrow.*

All of which is one more pious lecture from Daddy that Molly will miss. I think, maybe, I might have some Pilgrim in me.

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