

when the roots are bad a holiday reflection

jisquoquo ᎠᎵᎵᎵᎵᎵ Robert Francis
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Water Cannibals

Perhaps you have heard of the nvnehi (nuh-nay-hee), also known as “eternals,” people who dwell beneath or inside the mountains. Or, perhaps it is better stated that the nvnehi live in another world, accessed through secret doors or portals in the stony sides of mountains and hills.

There are many references to and stories of the nvnehi passed down through our Chickamauga Cherokee oral tradition. When ajila galvquodiyu, the Sacred Fire or Fire From Heaven came down in the midst of a cold, midwinter thunderstorm to the top of Rattlesnake Mountain, the man tlvdaji uweji entrusted the coals of the Fire to the keeping of the nvnehi as the aniyvwiya or Real People prepared a house and a fire bed where the Sacred Fire could be maintained. There is a story about a Cherokee trader named yahuli who, sometime before the Revolutionary War, went missing along the road one day near a stream later called Yahula Creek. A few days later, yahuli came back to his family, explaining that he had been in the land of the nvnehi. “I can no longer remain with my own people,” he said. “Since I have eaten the food of the eternals, I must return and live with them. That being said, yahuli walked out the door and disappeared. There are also stories about whole towns of Cherokee people going to live with the nvnehi in the late 1830s, just prior to the forced removal, with always one or more left behind to say where the others had gone – human beings hidden away like precious seeds of corn awaiting a more auspicious season. It is said that the nvnehi look much as we do, and by every indication, they are benevolent in their attitudes and actions toward us. There are others however, who, although bearing some resemblance to the nvnehi, are anything but benevolent.

According to the old ones, long ago, it became known that people described as “water cannibals” live beneath the rivers or maintain portals in the surfaces of rivers through which they may pass from their world to ours and back again. These water cannibals most usually attack at dawn. Coming into a town unseen, they enter houses to shoot their sleeping victims with arrows. A changeling is left in place of the one they have killed, something resembling the one taken. Having no real life within it, the changeling soon sickens and dies. In this way, for no telling how long, the water cannibals conducted their depredations secretly, with human people not knowing of their existence, until one morning when a certain young man awoke to find a strange woman in his house.

This young man had been sick for a long time. His family had given up on him, thinking he would surely die, so on this particular morning, he was alone in the house. The strange woman approached his bed, saying, “You are very sick, and your people have abandoned you to die. If you want to be well, get up and come with me.” Now, this young man had been unable to rise from bed for many days, so he was surprised that he was, indeed, able to get up and follow the woman. She led him out of the town and down to the river. As she approached the water, the woman didn’t slow down. She just walked right in with the young man following, but he didn’t even get his feet wet! As soon as he stepped into the river, it was as if he was in another world very like the one he had just left. Walking down a road, they soon came to a town with many nice houses and people walking here and there, going and coming. He saw two hunters walking down the main street of the town carrying a long pole across their shoulders. The young man was disturbed to see that instead of the carcass of a deer or bear, there was the body of a man suspended from the pole between the two hunters. Nervously looking around, he saw other hunters walking into town with similar burdens as children shouted

excitedly and ran alongside and women waved from the doors of some of the houses. Finally the woman said, "Here, this is where I live," and the young man followed her into a house. "Lie there on the bed and take it easy," the woman said. "I'll get you something to eat." Going to the door, the woman called to some hunters who soon entered the house bearing the leg of a human body. The woman sliced off some steaks, then turning, she saw the look of horror on the young man's face. "Oh, I see you can't eat our food," the woman said. After laying aside the human steaks and wiping the blood from her hands, the woman stood up straight and rubbed her belly. Suddenly, there appeared in her hands a bowl of beans and squash with some corn bread. This the young man ate, and this is what the woman continued to feed him during the several days it took for the young man to recover from his illness.

Once the young man was well and strong, the woman led him back to the river and through to his own world. She told the young man that he could return to his home, but warned him not to speak for seven days. His family and friends were happy to see him. They had been searching all around, thinking he had wandered off into the woods to die. When they asked where he had been, the young man made gestures indicating his throat was sore. Seven days later, he told the whole story, and that's how we came to know about the water cannibals and how it was that Cherokee mothers, at least in the old days, would awaken their late-sleeping offspring with the cry, "Up! Up! The hunters are among you!"

Another Story of Water Cannibals

In a town called Patuxet, on a bay on the East coast of this Turtle Island, in the Land of First Light, there lived a little boy called Tisquantum.

Patuxet had a population of around 10,000 Wampanoag people. There were comfortable houses, an ample water supply and large fields for growing corn, beans, squash and other vegetables. The ocean was nearby, with its bounty of fish and shellfish, and hunters did not have to range far to find deer and other animals. For as long as Tisquantum could remember and even before, large boats, equipped with winglike sails had been seen from time to time out on the ocean. These were fishing vessels from the British Isles. Occasionally, a fishing vessel would come close to Patuxet, sending a rowboat to shore in order to trade for provisions. Often, in conjunction with such vessels being in the vicinity, a few children or young people would disappear, never to be seen or heard from again. Can you imagine how it would feel to have a child or other loved-one just disappear? Maybe you do not have to imagine; maybe the disappearance of a loved-one is something you have experienced. It still happens nowadays, especially to indigenous people.

A day came when Tisquantum was among those who disappeared. He was kidnapped and taken away in a fishing boat all the way to England where he was sold as a slave. In 1614, nine years after Tisquantum was sold into slavery, he accompanied John Smith on an expedition back to his own town of Patuxet, no doubt as an interpreter. John Smith reported back to England that the town of Patuxet would be an excellent place to colonize if not for the large Native population living there. Slaving was recommended as a means of reducing the population. Although Tisquantum remained in Patuxet when John Smith returned to England, later that same year, he was kidnapped once again by slavers and taken to Spain. Escaping from slavery in Spain, Tisquantum fled to British-held Gibraltar, and from there, sailed back to England in 1616. In 1617, Tisquantum accompanied Thomas Dermer on a voyage to Newfoundland. That same year, a crew member of a slaving ship became very ill with a communicable disease and was left behind to die in Patuxet. This was the start of an epidemic that devastated the town. I want to stress that this epidemic was the direct result of English slaving and also that the horrible distress inflicted by English slaving activity on the people of Patuxet made the epidemic far worse, far more devastating, than it would have been otherwise. In 1619, Tisquantum once again accompanied Thomas Dermer across the Atlantic Ocean. Returning a second time to his home town of Patuxet, Tisquantum found the town abandoned. The survivors of the epidemic had moved farther inland, taking refuge in other Wampanoag towns. Tisquantum had been brought back to serve a purpose. He was to await the arrival of a shipload of English people who would cross the ocean the following year to start a colony. This

is what some historians believe. I think the evidence points to this as well as to the idea that the religious separatists who constituted a little more than one third of the passengers on the Mayflower which set sail from England to Virginia in 1620, purposely enacted a pre-agreed upon plot to hijack that ship to sail instead to the abandoned town of Patuxet which was renamed Plymouth.

I call them religious separatists, because that is what they were called at the time. The word "pilgrim" was not used to describe them until after the American Civil War. English religious dissenters of the time were generally described as being either separatists or puritans. Both believed the Church of England to be an "unworthy" and "worldly" institution. The puritans thought the Church of England should be purified through violent overthrow. The separatists, seeing violent overthrow of England as unrealistic, at least for the time-being, sought to separate themselves. In reality, there was not a lot of difference between puritans and separatists. Those first founders of Plymouth Plantation may have called themselves separatists, but they quickly joined with later immigrants calling themselves puritans to found Massachusetts Colony. They were Christian Fundamentalists of a most violent bent. As the Taliban, Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are to Islam in the 21st Century CE, so the separatists and puritans of the 17th Century CE were to Christianity. Their idea of "religious freedom" had to do only with securing a dominion in which their own religious dogmas and economic system could be imposed on all.

They were, first and last, colonizers. The word "colonize" is from the root word "colon" having to do with the gut. To colonize is to consume and digest. These new water cannibals came to eat up everything. They and their spiritual descendants have eaten the land, the peoples of the land, the plants and animals, everything. Everything is changed. All that is left are fragments. Look how the land is fragmented or broken up. It is the same with the people. Our peoples are broken and scattered with many not knowing who they are, having broken and fragmented identities.

Putting themselves into the Biblical stories they cherished, especially the Book of Joshua, the colonizers fancied themselves as Israelites and the indigenous peoples of the land as Canaanites to be either exploited or exterminated. The only good Indian was the one who would help them gain a foothold and then promptly die. And so, the colonizers thanked their god for the epidemic that left Patuxet deserted, and they thanked their god for Squanto. That is what they called Tisquantum. A name change was probably warranted, for Tisquantum himself had changed. Certainly he helped these new people, these water cannibals, these colonizers to get started. They would have all died had it not been for the food he procured from the Wampanoag people to get them through that first harsh winter. And, he certainly taught them how to plant the following spring, although I have serious doubts about the story of putting a fish below each corn hill. I think that story originates with someone who never planted corn. The fish would need to be composted before serving as fertilizer. If the story said he taught them to plant corn, beans and squash, the Three Sisters, together, that I would believe. I am quite sure that is what he did. He also acted as interpreter between the colonizers and the Wampanoag people, so that the colonizers might secure more and more land to feed their insatiable appetite as well as hides and furs to ship back for sale in England. Before long, Squanto was stirring up trouble between the colonizers and the Wampanoag people, playing both sides against the other, to serve his own selfish ends. He was, indeed, no longer Tisquantum. He was Squanto. A change of name was warranted for he was, indeed, a changeling. He had gone from being Tisquantum, one of the people, to Squanto, an opportunistic individualist. And, as with the changelings mentioned in the earlier "Water Cannibals" story, Squanto soon sickened and died, probably at less than 30 years of age. Perhaps we all, to one extent or another, are changelings, consumed and digested by the colonizers, made into something else, far from what we were meant to be.

History of the American Thanksgiving Civil Religious Holiday

The harvest meal at which the colonizers and the Wampanoag people ate together did

actually happen, sort of, just not as usually related.

In October of 1621, following their first harvest, the leaders of the colonizers called for a special day of thanksgiving. They invited only a very few of what they perceived as Wampanoag head men, indicating that they should also bring food. The purpose of the invitation was not socialization between the colonizers and Native people, and on the day of the event, when the colonizers saw that those invited had, in turn, invited others, many others, men, women and children, to the extent that there were nearly twice as many Wampanoag people as English people at the feast, the colonizers were more than a bit perturbed. After the feast, the English men took up firearms to demonstrate their marksmanship, shooting at targets. Hoping the noisy display might help with negotiations, the colonizers then got down to business, demanding of the Wampanoag people, those who had nursed them through their first year, a grant of more land. This was the sole reason the Wampanoag people had been summoned.

This day of thanksgiving, following their first hard year at Plymouth, did not give rise to an annual thanksgiving celebration. That came later, instituted by the Massachusetts Colony following their war of extermination against the Pequot people in 1636-37. In that war, a particularly brutal massacre was perpetrated against a Pequot town along the Mystic River in what is now Connecticut. The English colonizers had persuaded the Narragansett people to ally with them in this war. Surrounding the town, the English shot the defenders then set the town on fire, shooting any who tried to escape the holocaust: men, women and children. The Narragansett warriors shook their heads and walked away. They had never seen such savagery and would never ally themselves with the English again. William Bradford declared, "It was a fearful sight to see them thus frying in the fire and the streams of blood quenching the same, and horrible was the stink and scent thereof; but the victory seemed a sweet sacrifice, and they gave praise thereof to God, who had wrought so wonderfully for them." It was in commemoration of this "Mystic Massacre" that an annual Thanksgiving celebration of the Massachusetts Colony was instituted.

The English colonizers of Massachusetts Colony later fought an even bloodier and more extensive war against their original Wampanoag hosts. This war, called "King Phillip's War" by the colonizers had more human casualties than any war fought in North America up until the Civil War yet scarcely is mentioned in most American History textbooks. Severed heads of prominent Wampanoag warriors were brought back from battle for display in town squares. War captives not killed were sold into slavery.

In time, nearly all of the 13 English colonies that became the original United States of America had their own and separate annual Thanksgiving celebrations, each one to commemorate a massacre or slaughter of indigenous people. Following the Revolution, President George Washington sought to consolidate all these various Thanksgiving celebrations by instituting a national day of Thanksgiving. This idea was not popular, and Thomas Jefferson discontinued it in his Presidency. In following administrations, some Presidents declared national Thanksgiving celebrations while others did not. During the Civil War, in 1863, Abraham Lincoln declared the fourth Thursday in November as the national Thanksgiving holiday. However, what is known today as the traditional Thanksgiving menu along with the "Pilgrims" origin myth did not become part of the celebration until the 1890s, as white supremacy and white nationalism were reasserting themselves following Reconstruction. The concocted story, taught in turn to each generation of American school children, turns the "Pilgrim Fathers," colonizing water cannibals that they were, into virtual white demigods, bringing civilization and democracy to a benighted wilderness and benevolently sharing their wealth with the Native people, when in truth they violently attacked the Native people after receiving help from them in their time of need and went on to devour land and people and all that is.

Why do white supremacy and white nationalism continue, time and again, to rise up and reassert themselves in the United States, even to the present day? Why can't Americans agree and take necessary action on essential environmental concerns and issues rather than continuing extractive and exploitative economic expansion – consuming and digesting the land, the people, everything, as if there is no tomorrow? It is foolish to expect a tree to yield good fruit when the roots are bad.

What Are We to Do?

The Thanksgiving holiday of the American civil religion is rooted in the extreme pretension of white supremacy and white nationalism. It is a morality play in which the worst of the worst colonizing cannibals are elevated and deified as supreme examples for emulation, and it serves as the kick-off of an annual American "Holiday Season." And, what is the reason for that season? In spite of yard signs and greeting cards to the contrary, it would seem the real reason for the season is a month-long frenzy of unbridled consumer spending. As credit cards are maxed out, economic slavery is renewed for another year. During the Great Depression, in the administration of Franklin Roosevelt, Thanksgiving was moved to the third Thursday of November in order to extend the season of holiday buying. The change proved unpopular and Thanksgiving was moved back to the fourth Thursday. If Thanksgiving was moved to the third Thursday or even to the first Thursday of November today, few would likely complain.

Those of us endeavoring to decolonize and live as real people, indigenous and connected with the Earth – What are we to do with such a holiday?

The Wampanoag people of Massachusetts, and yes, there are still Wampanoag people in Massachusetts in spite of all the colonizing water cannibals have done and continue to do. They are working very hard to revitalize their language and other aspects of their indigenous culture. But as I was saying, the Wampanoag people of Massachusetts keep the fourth Thursday of November as a solemn day of mourning, a day to fast and pray.

During these past few weeks, I have been listening to some of our own *aniyvwiiya* or Chickamauga Cherokee people sharing their own ideas on what to do with Thanksgiving.

"Let the pretentious people keep their pretentious holiday," one person said. "We have our own days of thanksgiving." Those of us who are traditional gather at the Gatiyo, the grounds where the Sacred Fire of our people is kept, for six annual ceremonies. Two of those ceremonies: the Green Corn and the Flint Corn are specifically harvest celebrations of thanksgiving, while each of the other ceremonies also contain thanksgiving aspects. These ceremonies are thousands of years old. I have noticed with myself and from observing others that as our people place due focus on and faithfully participate in our own ancient ceremonies, the indigenous holidays of our own people, these indigenous holidays once again become normative for us, while the holidays of the American civil religion seem less and less normative as they gradually lose their importance.

"And yet," another person shared, "everyone has a day off. The family wants to get together, but I just can't use the word "Thanksgiving" in reference to that day. We need to call it something else."

So, what to call it... One person suggested "Kanati and Selu Day." To explain, Kanati and Selu are the First Man and First Woman of the Cherokees, with Kanati being the Great Hunter and Selu the Corn Mother. This suggestion goes along with the idea that for indigenous people, a good way to spend the fourth Thursday in November is in focusing on indigenous foods, especially foods ones family has either raised, gathered or hunted and then prepared in healthful, indigenous ways. It's not a bad idea. A focus on indigenous foods and family is always a good thing, something done at all our annual indigenous ceremonies or holidays, all of which include both fasting and feasting.

Another person made reference to a comment comedian Jon Stewart made once on the Daily Show, that, since the meal commemorated in the holiday ended with a demand for more land, it should properly be called "Thankstaking" rather than "Thanksgiving." Point well made.

Other suggestions for a Thanksgiving name change were "Indigenous Survival Day" or "Indigenous Perseverance Day," the more lengthy yet to the point "We Are Still Here In Spite of Your God and Your Guns Day" and the even more to the point, "F*** You; We Are Still Here Day." It is good to reflect on the fact that we *are* still here and to ponder what that means. As indigenous people, we have a responsibility to ourselves, to our people, to our children and to our children's children to the seventh generation, a responsibility not just to survive physically but to remain the real people or unpretentious peoples of this land, connected to this land, being who we were meant to be, as best we still can given the circumstances of having lived through

centuries of colonization, centuries of watching our land and our peoples devoured, digested and left in fragments. We have a responsibility to learn our culture, to know our history and to teach these to the next generation, to work toward the healing of our land and people, singing ourselves together, as it were.

Our Chickamauga Cherokee Prophet isga gua or Clear Sky said, "Most of human ills result from a mind or heart which has allowed its shields to be lowered." For the sake of my own health and the health of the people, I keep my shields up. At no time am I more diligent in maintaining these shields than on the fourth Thursday of November. I am most careful that day and even the several days before and after. For my own health and well-being, I withdraw, pass the time with close and trusted family, limit my associations and take especial care not to eat the food of the water cannibals.

For those who would learn more, here are a few recommended books with which to begin.

American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World by David E. Stannard, New York: Oxford University Press 1992. The greatest systematic genocide of human beings ever perpetrated on Earth began in October 1492 and has yet to end. Every member of the human race should read this book, but take it in small doses. It will leave you numb.

An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Boston: Beacon Press 2014. My only criticism of this book is it is too short, too concise. Every resident of what is now commonly called the United States of America should read this book.

Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong by James W. Loewen, The New Press 1995. This book provides a critique of the most popular U.S. history textbooks used in American schools and provides a well-researched and documented outline of U.S. history. ***Lies Across America*** is another good book by Loewen.