

# Something Old, Something New: How a Non-Theist Celebrates “The Holidays”

The Thanksgiving holiday in America is a national observance that has been traditionally framed in a religious context. Whether you like roast turkey or not, one is expected to be thankful for it, and express one’s gratitude to the “Giver” of all good gifts.

For those of us who have enough, or more than enough, it’s all sufficiently palatable; if not theologically problematic to sing the old standard hymn in the face of arms-length hunger and poverty.

*God, our Maker, doth provide, For our wants to be supplied.  
Come to God’s own temple come, Raise the song of harvest home.*

The Christmas holidays are even trickier for those who give even a token nod to “the reason for the season;” with a doctrinal claim that a theistic god-being somehow enters into the human story; rather than being an anthropomorphic creation emerging out of our own human imagination. But that’ll be Part II.

Because it was the prescribed scripture reading for the Thanksgiving Day observance in a liturgical tradition I led for many years of ministry, the passage in Matthew’s gospel about not fretting about the basic necessities of life itself was always reassuring to those who were already among the favored, blessed ones.

Don’t fret about your life – what you’re going to eat and drink – or about your body – what you’re going to wear. There is more to living than food and clothing, isn’t there? Take a look at the birds of the sky: they don’t plant or harvest, or gather into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. You’re worth more than they, aren’t you? So don’t fret. Don’t say, ‘What am I going to eat?’ or ‘What am I going to drink?’ or ‘What am I going to wear?’ These are all things pagans seek. [Matthew 6:25-34]

In addition to the gospel writer’s agenda to usurp the original voice print of Jesus and demarcate the believers and non-believers, those earlier words in this passage that are more or less attributed to Jesus – or at least are Jesus-like – certainly employ that intimate, familial language of a father / child relationship in such pictorial terms that it may be difficult for a lot of folks to steer clear of the literal, in favor of the literary form of metaphorical expression being used.

Thinking about what I might share, and we might best explore in this Pathway’s gathering, I realized there’s something old, and something new. Earlier this week I remembered something I’d forgotten! It was that realization I’d had after about a dozen years in parish ministry that -- after observing the same holiday, year after year, with the same texts, the same ‘traditional’ hymns, etc – there didn’t seem to be anything new or more to say. Except, of course, for the little hiccup that a traditionally theistic notion of an all-sufficient giver of all good gifts does not square with reality.

So what else is new? And, what’s part of the original past that could be new again?

Pathways Faith Community is a band of so-called “progressive thinkers” in the Christian faith tradition. After a decade with this little “experiment,” we’ve come ‘round to this observance for a sufficient number of years now that we’ve ended up with some rather established routines and repeated traditions of our own: a loosely-repeated liturgical framework, followed by a shared meal, an annual “gift” exchange where we simply give all our gifts away again, etc. There’s no organizational, ecclesiastical, hierarchical infrastructure, with buildings or budgets. We’re not disorganized, just un-organized.

Come to think of it, it sounds a little like what little we know of that early pre-Christian community of followers of a dead-and-gone Galilean sage known only as people of the Way ...

The other thing those earlier followers did was to tell and retell the best stories they could remember; and leave to us post-modern followers centuries later those words scholars today embrace as being the most authentic likely ever uttered by the historical Jesus. Most notably are the parables and similitudes Jesus told that – more often than not – had no religious jingoism whatsoever attached to them.

This is all by way of saying I'm reiterating a story I've told before; and retelling it for a couple reasons. First – and in my honest opinion -- it's not only the best thing I ever wrote (or preached) about a Thanksgiving observance. It's also because there's nothing explicitly 'religious' about it at all.

Second, I have an update and post-script to the old story, based on something new that happened a few weeks ago. Return for the Postscript after enjoying the story [here](#).

## Postscript

The original story was published over six years ago, but a few weeks ago I received an unexpected email from someone unknown to me named Stephen. Apparently, Stephen is a kind of internet sleuth and genealogist and passed along an update he thought I'd appreciate:

*I read your note regarding your early days at Cranbrook, mid term and final history exams, with William Robert U'sellis and your further query as to his location. To answer your question, Robert U'sellis passed away on August 15, 2011 in Huntington Beach, California. However, his widow Elisabeth Maleen U'sellis (88 yrs) is still on the "grass" and resides in Orange County.*

*My research confirms your thoughts, he left Cranbrook to help establish the Athenian School. Thereafter, in 1971, founded the American Community School of Beirut and was Headmaster.*

*I hope you find these tidbits a reply to your letter of gratitude sent to Robert and your Thanksgiving tradition to mention one thing for which you are grateful. I never had the opportunity to meet Mr. U'sellis. My research stems from the creation of a new branch on the family tree due to my nephew's marriage to Robert's grand daughter last year. Elisabeth Maleen U'sellis now resides with her daughter son-in-law and grandchildren at ... Huntington Beach. You were only a stones through away when he lived in Berkeley and Sausalito.*

*I hope the information contained below will assist in your endeavor and best wishes for a pleasant holiday season.*

*Stephen M.*

So I've continued the best Thanksgiving tradition I can imagine this year, and sent Maleen a Thanksgiving greeting this year:

*Dear Mrs. Usellis,*

*I was a former student of your late husband, many, many years ago at Cranbrook School for Boys. Only recently did I learn of Robert's death in 2011, and I simply wanted to share with you and the rest of Robert's family an expression of appreciation that I regret I was unable to do earlier.*

*While I regret not locating Robert before his death to share this little remembrance from so long ago with him, I'm genuinely grateful in this holiday season to be able to convey some measure of my appreciation with his family.*

*With my sincere best regards, etc.*

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