

# “Soul Food: The Healing Power of Gathering”

Sermon delivered by Verdis L. Robinson

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

November 29, 2020

## Readings

“The Health-Food Diner” by Maya Angelou<sup>1</sup>

“Soul Food” by Kamari Bright<sup>2</sup>

## Sermon

In his book published last year, David Silverman, argued that the telling and retelling of the myth of the First Thanksgiving, pulls on a history passed down through the generations of what happened in Plymouth: that local Native Americans welcomed the courageous, pioneering pilgrims to a celebratory feast.

In his book, *This Land Is Their Land*, he argued that these falsehoods are deeply harmful to the Wampanoags whose lives and society were forever damaged after the English arrived in what the colonizers called Plymouth.

Silverman says that “focusing on the Pilgrims’ noble religious and democratic principles, instead of on the shameful Indian wars and systems of slavery more typical in the colonies, enabled whites to think of the so-called black and Indian problems as southern and western exceptions to an otherwise inspiring national heritage.”

Silverman goes on to argue that, “Though Americans eventually assumed that the Thanksgiving holiday and myth had marched together in an unbroken succession since 1621, those traditions were very much products of white protestants, particularly northerners, asserting their cultural authority over European immigrants and Americans of color in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.”<sup>3</sup>

Wampanoags today remember the Puritan Separatists’ entry to their homeland as a day of deep mourning, rather than a moment of giving thanks as we have ritualized it in a national holiday as though we started it.

In fact, indigenous groups have always gathered in thanks and not just one time or season in a year as Bryan our guest musician stated. They had long recognized the healing and restorative power of gratitude and gathering- especially to give thanks to the earth and creator for sustaining

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<sup>1</sup> <https://allpoetry.com/The-Health-Food-Diner>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.kamaribright.com/writing?lightbox=dataItem-it93r36h>

<sup>3</sup> David J. Silverman, *This Land Is Their Land: The Wampanoag Indians, Plymouth Colony, and the Troubled History of Thanksgiving* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019).

life and the reciprocal relationship of receiving from the earth and giving thanks for its sustaining bounty.

Our religious ancestors, especially those UU churches that can trace their lineage to the 1600s, were on the receiving end and took land, took lives, and dominated with white supremacy.

This tradition that was here before the pilgrims landed, fact. And it was adapted after Africans were forcefully enslaved here. The healing power of gathering took place in the slave quarters. It was continued by southern emancipated black families in freedom. And transported north as southern families migrated fleeing Jim Crow discrimination and racial violence to find that the grass wasn't greener on the other side of the Mason-Dixon line.

The movie *Soul Food* exemplifies this.

*Soul Food* was a 1997 film featuring an ensemble of black actors and actresses like Vanessa Williams, Vivica A. Fox, Nia Long, and Mekhi Phifer. It was written and directed by George Tillman, Jr., based on his own family and the contemporary black experience.

The film centers on the trials of a family, held together by a longstanding family tradition of preparing Sunday dinner and gathering together in thanks and in love. It was widely acclaimed for presenting a more positive image of African Americans than is typically seen in Hollywood films.

Big Mama was the rock of the family, the one who held and kept the family together. Her Southern traditions moved up when her family migrated to Detroit as Southern cooking in northern kitchens kept families together and tight and not just on Thanksgiving as witness in the film.

For many families, Sunday dinners were like Thanksgiving where extended families would get together and break bread together, eating soul food.

Big Mama said- "Soul Food cooking is about cooking from the heart." "The family is much stronger together." She would say. Harvesting the food from the earth, Preparing the food with care and love, fellowshiping together, tasting food cooked from the heart...healing food. Soul food.

Big Mama fell into a coma for over a month and eventually passed away. The family fell apart for a time as they ceased gathering. Big Mama's grandson, Ahmad, the narrative of the film, plotted and tricked the family to resume the tradition. And it worked.

It didn't make their relationships perfect or fix every issue, but they were not perfect or fixed before. But at least they were able to fellowship and heal together again tasting and eating food, gathered from the earth, cooked from the heart, food for the soul.

One of the biggest takeaways for me is the one thing that Ahmad realized, and I quote: “So now I know what Soul Food was all about. You see, during slavery, us black folk didn’t have much to celebrate. So cooking became how we expressed our love for each other. And that’s what those Sunday dinners meant to us. It was more than just about eating. It was time to share our joys and sorrows, something the old folks say is missing in today’s families.

Again, The Healing power of gathering. The reciprocity of giving thanks for what is received in fellowship. Connection like indigenous peoples connected with each other and the earth.

You, know, my family had a soul food experience. No, we didn’t have big Sunday dinners, but we did have a special dinner on Thanksgiving like most of you. My mother’s staple dish, with her southern roots, the dish that she put the most love into was her corn casserole.

A dish that this non-cook wanted to know how to make because it was so good.

You see, it was really the love that warmed my heart and she taught me how to make it before she died three years ago.

When she passed away peacefully due to Alzheimer’s and dementia. We stopped gathering for a time, like Big mama’s family did in Soul Food, because my mother was the glue that kept our family together.

We recently restored our family tradition after two years of grieving and now the pandemic has halted our progress and our healing.

I know that I am not alone in this loss. The sacrifices that we are making for the greater good and health of ourselves and others, especially our loved ones are so appreciated and necessary.

With an 87-year-old father and COVID on the rise, we are not gathering together this year. But how do we make sure that we don’t miss out on our lives, the lives of our family and friends, our chosen families, our traditions, our gathering, the warm, the love, and healing that comes with all of that.

How do we show our gratitude for the earth that is sustaining our lives even through this pandemic?

How do we make sure that seclusion, isolation, and loneliness does not take over our spirits? Especially after being out of our normal lives for such a long time,

It is so important that we make the effort this year to find adaptive ways of gathering responsibly and food can help warm our hearts and heal our souls this year.

What I am doing? Well, I’ve been in a bubble with a northern Vermont family and we are having a masked when not eating socially distant brief Thanksgiving dinner, eating across multiple

rooms. With verified COVID results as entry. They are my adopted Vermont family. And I am thankful. It's not the same, but it's something and it's one way.

However, my biological family who are in DC, NJ, GA, MA, & NY are not gathering, but we are going to get together over zoom in the evening, to stay connected- it's not the same, but so important right now to stay connected while sacrificing, and even get my father to make an appearance. And he's the type of elder that powers off his cell when he is not using it. Ugh! But that's a second way,

One thing I am requesting of my siblings is that we each make a dish of mama's corn casserole. To mix the ingredients with compassion, to heat the casserole in the oven with care, to let it rest with reflection, and to eat it at the same time, together though separate with love, remembrance, and healing. Not on zoom, but in our hearts and minds.

How are you gathering without gathering? What adaptive, creative, and responsible ways are you not missing out on the healing power of gathering and not neglecting to give thanks to the earth, to the spirit of life, to the creator? What food warms your heart and heals your soul? The food that you can savor, remember, and be comforted by. What's your soul food?

Let us be remained of the healing power of gratitude and be remained often and not just once a year.

Let the healing power of responsible and creative gatherings give you comfort and keep you in health and peace,

Let the healing power of soul food restore you and relieve grief, pain, loss, and loneliness. Let our sacrifices not be in vain...let them not be in vain.

I cannot wait to taste my mother's corn casserole again. To smell its wholeness, to feel its warmth, and the savor it flavors. And to feel loved. And to give love and thanks to the earth, to life.

To know that we have a community here, that we have a family here, a chosen family and That we can ALL be thankful for.

And that is truly food for the soul.

May it be so and blessed be.