

Enid Flaherty

A New Way to Thankfulness

November 1, 2009

One after another my three adult children telephoned me. "I'm going to my in-laws for Thanksgiving," each one said. "You are welcome to come."

I know I am welcome at any one of the in-laws' homes, but I hesitate to accept the invitation. I've done the long drive on I 95 recently, to a niece's shower on Long Island, then to her wedding, to visit grandchildren in New Jersey and to an aunt's funeral in New York. I think of the heavy traffic, the speeding trucks, the Cross Westchester Expressway west to the Tappan Zee Bridge clogged with construction delays.

I can't do it again, I think. It's too much.

But the alternative is bleak. Not being with family on Thanksgiving? That has never happened before. After the divorce, I made sure I was with some of the family on holidays. Who could bear it otherwise? And in the past, in my original family, we were six siblings, parents, five aunts and uncles; always a crowd around the table.

But there is a challenge here, and a part of me is a risk taker. So, I decline the invitations, with thanks.

This could be bad, I think. I might get depressed or angry, and not recover. My spirit could shrivel, my eyes ache with weeping. Nevertheless, I choose to stay home this year, alone.

I prepare myself. I begin to see and hear with heightened awareness and gratitude. My cottage is cozy. The low and constant rumble of the ocean over rocks reaches my front yard. I hear the thrum of wings, sounding like music, as geese fly over the house. Pale, dry miscanthus still wave in the garden. Cardinals feast on sunflower seed in the bird feeder in the crab apple tree. Wind chimes ring in the bare honeysuckle.

On Thanksgiving Day, I wake with energy and optimism. The children are probably praying for me. I find an unfamiliar trail through the woods at Trustom Wildlife Refuge. Insidious stones and gnarly roots could cause me to trip. But wet leaves from swamp maples carpet my path and soften sharp edges. Red winter berry wink in the brush.

Flaherty

A New Way to Thankfulness

I see no other person on the trail. Eight hundred acres of quiet woodland could be a lonely place. But deer, coyote, turtles and hawks inhabit these woods. The brown creeper flits and flirts. I am welcome in the home of these silent, unseen hosts.

Trustom Pond, silvery white, fuses with the sodden sky. Ocean washes in and out of this pond. Islands emerge from the mist, disappear then appear again. Geese, mallard ducks, heron, cormorant and scaup are here somewhere. They'll return to their nests, if not today, next spring. Among the brown and broken twigs a blanket of lacy bright green shines through the fallen leaves. Buttercups. Just you wait they seem to whisper. You won't believe your eyes.

An hour passes. Two hours. Muscles ache. Cheeks are cold. I'm hungry.

I drive to the firehouse at Cross' Mills. The large warm community room upstairs is set with long tables, white cloths and silverware. There is a tradition here of Thanksgiving dinner shared by anyone in the village and its surrounds who wants to come. Lynn, whose late husband did the cooking for years, is in the kitchen cooking with a gang of helpers. They have been roasting turkeys, some donated by the local food market, since 5 am.

Great mounds of food are brought in by any and all who want to contribute. The buffet table offers sweet potatoes, carrots (pulled from my friend Jackie's garden this morning!), turnip, corn, green beans, mashed potatoes, stuffing, creamed pearl onions, cauliflower. Cakes and pies – apple, cherry, pumpkin, mincemeat and cranberry – fill the dessert table. There isn't room for another dish, but still the food comes.

Before the feast is over, a couple hundred people will have shared the meal. All are welcome. Families, singles, doctors, shop owners and Indians come in from the woods and marshes all over Charlestown. Old timers and newcomers, fishermen, teachers, writers and stone workers eat together.

I see familiar faces, friends. They jostle together, making room for me. We laugh, eat, talk about books we're reading and each other's dogs.

I think of words to a hymn we sing in church: "All I have needed, Thy hand hath provided..."

I have all that I need and give thanks.