

The Unwritten History of Thanksgiving

by Suzanne M Walsh

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PHOTO COURTESY OF THE IROQUOIS MUSEUM

The Iroquois Museum in Howes Cave NY is built to resemble the longhouse of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy. In English, "Haudenosaunee" translates to "the People of the Longhouse."

The upcoming 400th anniversary of what our nation calls "the first Thanksgiving" is providing a cornucopia of such a lot of good things to think about in such a lot of good ways. Having the opportunity to be united in expressing gratitude together as a nation for surviving another year of the pandemic is only one of them.

Another is the fact that some people right here in New York State — the indigenous people our history books have taught us to call the "Iroquois" — will be communally joining in expressing thanks this coming holiday, and this is rich and multi-layered: it contains a 10,000 plus year-old parallel history of the land we live on, that we're so thankful for.

"Certainly there are some Haudenosaunee ('Iroquois') who will be choosing to celebrate Thanksgiving on November 24 this year—" said Brenda LaForme during a recent interview when asked "do the 'Iroquois' celebrate Thanksgiving?"

"Our people have been taught about this holiday throughout the years of their public schooling and exposure to social interactions with the outside world,

but—" and here Brenda's voice rested, with a pause that filled generations of unwritten history, "in our tradition, there's much, much, more to 'giving thanks' than one holiday celebrated annually in November."

Brenda, whose real name is Odasiyo, is first and foremost the proud member of the Onandaga Nation, born into the Beaver Clan through her mothers' matrilineal lineage. As a living embodiment of her birth name — "one who is given the ability to conform to what is needed"— Brenda excels as a valued member of the staff at the Iroquois Museum in Howes Cave in Schoharie County. This is the place where she shares with visitors an abundance of largely unknown information about her people, the Haudenosaunee, in her role as Cultural Interpreter and Education Program Coordinator.

"In English, Haudenosaunee--" (pronounced "hoe-dee-noh-SHAW-nee", is Brenda's patient correction to my bumbling efforts to repeat this word), "translates as 'the People of the Long House.'" The name refers to the Six-Nations across northern New York State as one contiguous confederacy, or

symbolic 'longhouse'. "This is much like the many states of America, bound together as one nation called the United States" Brenda explains, with her gift of making understandable great cultural divides. "At one time, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy stretched from Lake Champlain in the east all the way to Lake Erie in the west, under one roof of council, or government."

Concerning the confusion over the name "Iroquois", Brenda tells us the story like this:

"When the French first arrived in North America, they befriended themselves with the Algonquin people of Canada. The Algonquins, at that time, were our enemy and so they identified us to the French with a term considered derogatory—black adder, a forest snake." Those European newcomers added their own French ending to the name"... and

ever since, we have been known to the white race as the 'Iroquois' — a name we reject. We are the Haudenosaunee." Brenda pauses here a moment, before acknowledging with a rueful smile "— but history...*HIS-story*...has always been written by the victors." In this case, the male victors.

When asked about the Indigenous people's own description of the "first" Thanksgiving, Brenda is patient in answering with the truth. "When the Pilgrims landed in Massachusetts, they were in a very desperate state. The people were weak, sickly, in want of food, were smelly and had scurvy. The Indigenous people they met (the Wampanoags of Cape Cod) took pity on them, and cared for them, supplying them with food and necessities. Without this critical help, they never would've survived the hardships of that first rough winter."



PHOTO CREDIT: SUZANNE M WALSH

Brenda LaForme, the Cultural Interpreter and Education Program Coordinator at the Iroquois Museum in Howes Cave, NY, stands in front of the most important display in the museum--the true story of the Indigenous People of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy in New York State.

To this reality — that the Pilgrims landed in the middle of December, unprepared to endure the bitter cold we know so well in the northeast — Brenda adds an ironic post script: “In return for the life-saving hospitality they received, the Pilgrims raided the native people’s critical winter food stashes and supplies of corn belonging to the Indigenous people who had saved their lives.” To this day, the nearby hill where the Pilgrims “found” that food supply on Cape Cod is known as ‘Corn Hill.’”

I asked Brenda, then how do the Haudenosaunee people in our region reconcile celebrating Thanksgiving? Her answer is of utmost simplicity: her people celebrate Thanksgiving every day of their lives. Each morning, before they rise from their bed, before their feet even touch the floor, they give thanks, first to the Great Spirit, the Creator of all. Thanksgiving is then rendered to Mother Earth for supporting life, and then to the Sun, Moon, Stars and for their fellow human beings, and to the very air they breathe all around them; for the water, plants and animals — even insects — and more. They give thanks to *ALL*. “In its simplest form, our prayer of gratitude is, ‘nya-wen!’ meaning, ‘thank you.’”

Brenda continues to share that, as prayer, nya-wen is more easily felt in one’s heart than explained in English, and by expressing this kind of quiet, interiorly-felt gratitude for the boundless gifts of life, her people place themselves in a state of spiritual connection with all things. This is not idol-worship. This is true prayer — the state of acknowledging each and every thing, including ourselves, as an integral part of the universe. “Through this veneration, one becomes aware of communion with all of creation.”

This has been the spiritual foundation of the earth under our feet here for countless ages, way before the Pilgrims landed safely on Cape Cod.

I came away from visiting the Iroquois Museum with a much richer understanding of Thanksgiving, and realized afterward a great gift had been given, in knowing that hope had been securely embedded here in the earth of New York State.

The Iroquois Museum’s 2021 season ends on November 30, so there’s still time to visit. For more information go to their website at iroquoismuseum.org or call 518-296-8949.

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