CREATING HEALING SPACES FOR THANKSGIVING

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We know a little, but not much.

Well, we think we know a lot, but we don’t, not really.

Actually, we want you to think we know a lot; we know we don’t.

Factually, what the culture of power wants you to know, it whitewashes.

Most of us have a shared understanding about Thanksgiving. We were taught Thanksgiving honors the legacy of a phenomenal cross-cultural event. Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth Rock, Fall 1621. They met Natives, became friends, then decided to sit down and celebrate the gifts of bounty, family and friendship. In honor of that tradition, we pause for a moment the fourth Thursday every November (in the spirit of gratitude) to reflect on all for which we are thankful.

That’s hard for some of us to do because there are so many questions:
• Can the dinner be described accurately as friendly?
• How did Natives know the Pilgrims were having dinner?
• Did the Pilgrims send Natives invitations?
• Why would Natives accept an invitation to a dinner from Pilgrims who decimated their land, slaughtered other Natives and introduced them to deadly disease?
• Did the Pilgrims name themselves Pilgrims?
• For what were the Pilgrims giving thanks—family, friends, being conquerors, God, all of the above?
• Did they really eat turkey with dressing, cranberry sauce and sweet potato pie?
• Was this really the first Thanksgiving?

That’s not an exhaustive list. JCA is poised to assist with individual quests for truth. In this moment, though, JCA is captivated by the gift of opportunity each of us can seize.

The current social and political climate is responsible for the sense of urgency in the air to engage in difficult conversations across all lines of difference. It is responsible for creating stressful, even hostile environments we have no choice but to navigate. It is responsible for exposing the truth of who we are as a nation. We are broken. We are angry. We are fragile. We are fearful. We are misinformed. We are segregated. None of these things is going away until we learn the art of civil discourse.

Civil discourse absolves conversationalists from responsibility. None of us is accountable for the enlightenment of others. None of us carries the burden of making another person think a certain way or believe a certain way or live a certain way. There is enough room in the world for every thought and every feeling to co-exist…all of them.

Offering another freedom, space and the genuine interest in what makes them think and feel the way they do just might save someone’s life. If we commit ourselves to civil discourse, maybe people won’t coordinate rallies to be heard, videotape intolerance to express themselves, or use violence as a voice.

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Civil discourse is not easy; it requires practice. What better place to try it out than the table on Thanksgiving?

JCA knows you’re scared…scared of causing an argument that may disrupt family structures, dissolve friendships or create enemies. None of those things has to happen. None of those things should happen if these intentional steps are taken:

1) Center yourself. Take a moment to reflect on the importance of family, chosen or biological.
2) Recall what you know about the people gathered around you: age, geography, lived experience, prior conversations, social media comments, posts and shares.
3) Determine the purpose for engaging.
4) If the purpose of the conversation is to persuade/convert/win over/educate/caution, etc., stop! Return to number 1. Try again.
5) When the purpose of the conversation is to offer yourself as an active listener, proceed.
6) Listen. Listen to the whole story, interrupting only to ask clarifying questions.
7) Wait for the prompt to share your thoughts and feelings.
8) If no prompt is offered, don’t demand your turn. Thank your conversation partner for sharing. Move on. Process what you’ve heard. Hope for another chance to listen…and perhaps share.
9) If the sharing prompt is extended, Use “I” statements to tell your story.
10) Throughout the conversation, hold on to the fact that there is no other bond as strong as the one that binds y’all together—love, unconditional love.

This will shift the atmosphere.

JCA isn’t naïve. Not all conversations will end well. Resist frustration. Remind yourself there is more than enough work to be done. If the person(s) in conversation with you has no desire to listen, keep it moving. There are others beyond the four walls of your home ready, willing and able to take a step toward collective liberation. Save your energy for them. For now, eat. Drink. Be merry. Live to fight another day.