



Coming to America... Thanksgiving... Who is Missing From the Table?

# A Thanksgiving Reflection

## Belonging: Who is Missing from Our Table?

*If you are outside the United States, consider using this during any harvest festival or other celebratory time in your country. The image of the table as a place of welcome is universal.*

### TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS

#### **Purpose**

- To help students celebrate Thanksgiving while recognizing that our country has not always lived up to the ideal of “welcoming the stranger”
- To help students look at how they have been welcomed or excluded and/or how they have welcomed or excluded others
- To celebrate Thanksgiving, recognizing both the disappointments and blessings of our country

#### **Outcome**

By the end of this lesson, each student will:

- Read stories from other teens about being included and excluded
- Tell his or her own story of inclusion or exclusion
- Identify ways in which the U. S. both excludes and welcomes
- Create and participate in an activity that addresses exclusion and inclusion in the United States
- Commit him or herself to becoming a person who welcomes others

#### **Materials Needed**

- Teacher Instructions
- Handouts for Students
- Student Stories (Handout #1)
- Group Discussion Chart (Handout #2)
- Closing Activity (Handout #3)

#### **Lesson Plan**

- Outline of Activities
- Introduction (5-8 minutes)
- Who Is Missing From Our Table? (20 minutes)
- Closing Activity (15 minutes)

## 1. Introduction

Today we're going to think about the first table set in the United States, the table we all learn about as children in our families and at school, the table we will commemorate in a few days at our own Thanksgiving suppers. We all know the story of that first Thanksgiving. Tell me some of the details of the story we tell about Thanksgiving.

Allow students to share their answers for 1-2 minutes. Look for answers like, the Pilgrims and Indians shared their food, the Indians brought corn to that first meal, they were celebrating a good harvest, they were celebrating making it through the first year in this new land, etc.

**Yes, and why do we still celebrate that first gathering? What does it represent to us today?**

Allow students to share their answers, look for answers like, it represents the ideals of diverse peoples becoming friends, of offering hospitality to the stranger, of fellowship and generosity.

**Yes! We all know that parts of the story didn't really happen—for instance, Pilgrims never wore those big hats and belt buckles, they would have worn black on Sundays but not weekdays, this was not a religious ceremony, the indigenous people didn't bring corn, and no sweet potatoes were served, etc.—and we know the reality of how the settlers later treated the indigenous people of North America.**



Our national remembrance of Thanksgiving and the reality of Thanksgiving and of the relations between Pilgrims and Indians (also known as Native Americans, the First Nations, indigenous peoples, or by the names of their individual nations, such as Lakota) are quite different. But we remember and celebrate Thanksgiving because it represents the ideal of everyone being welcome at America's table, of welcoming the stranger, and of different peoples living in harmony together. Now that we're facing another Thanksgiving hundreds of years after the first one in 1621, we ought to think about how we can live it differently so that we don't just continue the mistakes of the past.

## 2. Who is Missing from Our Table?

**None of us here was part of that first Thanksgiving or any of the history that surrounds it, but we still have a responsibility to respond now to our national story. So, we need to look at our myth of the original Thanksgiving table, a table we want to believe was about peace and fellowship between two peoples, and we need to look at our own tables, literally and metaphorically, and who might not feel included at those tables.**

**America champions the ideals of equality, fairness, and welcoming the stranger to our table. Thanksgiving is a holiday that especially challenges us to examine whether or not we are living up to our ideals. Especially at this time of year, we must ask ourselves “Who is missing from the table?” and “Who should be at the table?” And we must continue to ask these questions at any of our activities, whether at a club or sport or student council here at school, at your place of worship, later when you look at colleges, and, finally, when you are an adult in the workplace or volunteering at any number of organizations.**



**Today I would like us to think about how each one of us and/or our families has or hasn't been welcomed to the American table and how each one of us seeks to welcome others to the American table.**

**We're going to begin by hearing some short stories from some teens in the Chicago area about times they felt welcomed and times they did not feel welcomed to America's table, and then you're going to have the chance to tell your own stories.**

Depending on the time available, read aloud 2-5 of the included teen stories (see Handout #1). Try to use students for the reading. *[Note: this will work better if you have given these students the stories in advance to practice reading them out loud.]*

**Do any of you identify with any of these stories? What stands out in these stories to you?**

Allow students to respond for 1-3 minutes. Take all reasonable responses.

Now, I want you to have the chance to share your story. I'm going to put you in groups and let you tell a brief story, no longer than a minute, about either a time when you and/or your family were or were not welcomed OR a time when you did or did not welcome another. Then identify in a sentence how that experience represents something for which you are thankful or something that disappoints you about the United States. Choose a recorder, who will jot down those realizations, which we will use as part of our ending activity.



Pass out the sample stories (Handout #1) so students have examples from which to work; allow students 1-2 minutes to look at the stories and then to think about their own stories and realizations. Then place students in groups of 4-6 people, remind them to choose a Recorder, and pass out the discussion chart (Handout #2). Go over the discussion chart, emphasizing that students should focus on the realizations--good and bad--from their stories that will be shared in the closing reflection.

Allow students to work for 8-10 minutes. Be sure to walk around, to listen to the stories, and to look at the charts. Pass out the activity handouts. Call "time" and give the recorders a minute to organize their charts so they can participate in the final activity.

### 3. Closing Activity

**Good! As we prepare to celebrate one of the most important holidays of our country, it's so important that we pay attention to how we are welcomed and how we welcome others to the American table. It's crucial that we ask ourselves who is missing from any of the tables at which we sit and then to make sure that we reach out to and include those folks. Only when we pay attention to who is missing from our table can we act to make sure all our welcome there.**

Pass out the Thanksgiving Reflection (Handout #3) and go over the activity with the class. Remind them to maintain their focused and respectful attention as people's real stories and feelings will be shared. Invite the Recorders to come forward to present the activity; point out to the rest of the classroom the parts in which they will participate. *[Note: you should take the role of "Leader" in this activity, unless you have prepared a strong student leader beforehand.]*

Wait for the group to settle and become quiet, then read or have a student read the opening statement. Then allow student Recorders to read their statements aloud, each followed by a refrain led by the Leader (who will say, “We have been disappointed, but we are still thankful because we know . . .”) and responded to by the students (who will say “All are welcome!”).

When all the student recorders have read, lead students in reading aloud the commitment at the end of the ritual.

### Notes to Teachers:

The **bolded** text can be read out aloud and followed word for word; however, you may want to read over the material a few times so that you are comfortable putting these ideas into your own words, in the way in which you normally talk to your students.

If you teach in a religious school, you could supplement this lesson with prayers and/or turn the closing activity into a prayer service. The theme of gratitude is a perfect value to emphasize in this lesson and one often overlooked in our spiritual lives.

Consider turning this into a longer project:

- The class could study the myths and reality of Thanksgiving and of European contact with the First Nations.
- You could create a more explicitly “political” ritual by focusing on what groups are not “at the table” of power and decision making at your school.
- Students could research the stories of how their families came to the United States and come prepared to share those stories during class time.

### Resource

For a more authentic version of how Europeans and Indians interacted at the beginning of the history of the United States, see Chapter One: “Columbus, the Indians, and Human Progress” in Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States: 1492-Present*. New York: Harper, 1995.





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Handout #1  
Student Stories

### Danielle

"I know what it is to feel like a stranger. I grew up in a white suburb and right off the bat the kids looked at me funny, because I was darker than they were and I spoke with an accent. People would ask me "Where are you from?" during heritage day at school. I would say, "Oh, you know, my parents are from Mexico." And I felt embarrassed, almost ashamed of it. I didn't want to speak Spanish anymore, so I didn't, and I started to forget it. One day, my parents and I went into the city to 26th Street to visit some cousins that had just moved here from Mexico. I had aunts and uncles coming up to me speaking in Spanish, and I couldn't understand anything they said. My parents said, "Oh, she doesn't know Spanish. She doesn't like it." That day I was really confused because I tried to deny my Mexican roots so much that I didn't even fit in with my own family. I decided I wanted Spanish back in my life and I started studying it at school and speaking it at home with my parents. I will always remember how my family welcomed me that day even though I couldn't understand them. They made me proud of myself again."

### Elisa

"The first time I ever felt out of place was probably when I was starting high school. I was afraid I would never make good friends again because my new school was so large. To help me prepare, my mother told me her story about growing up in Nicaragua. It was before the communists took over, and her family was filled with lawyers. They had a nice house until they were wrongly accused by the communists and were forced to leave the country. My mother was the first to come to America by herself. She was only sixteen years old. Eventually, she made many good friends in America, and they made her feel at home. Her story helped me to cope with the change of going to a big, new school. Now I try to welcome new people. I met a foreign exchange student from Spain this year. I walked right up to her and started speaking Spanish. She looked so relieved to hear her own language. Making other people feel welcome makes you realize that we're not so different from each other and that our cultures have a lot of similarities."

### Marco

“One day in class we were discussing the war in Iraq, and a girl made a comment saying, “Why don’t those people from the Middle East emigrate to the United States?” The teacher said we have immigration quotas, and then another girl said, “We already have enough problems over here with the Mexicans jumping the border.” I was shocked and angry. I know a lot of people who have crossed the border. My family is filled with these people. They arrived here as strangers, suffered a lot, and worked hard for this country. My parents have worked hard every day to send me to a good school. I am very grateful for that. I think it’s important for all of us to remember to welcome people who are seeking a better life here. I told my story in class that day and we came to a better understanding after that.”



### Crystal

“Everyone in my family is 100% Puerto Rican. Except for me. I’m 50% Puerto Rican and 50% Black. Because of this, my extended family treats me like a stranger. When we get together at family holidays or parties, my cousins will walk right past me as if I do not even exist. They whisper about me as if I can’t hear them. They look down on me like I’m less than they are. The thing is, I don’t mind having this mixed heritage. I like it. I like having such a rich background. Being treated like a stranger in my family has taught me a lot about not judging other people.”

### David

“There are a lot of males in my family. And they’re all really into sports, especially baseball and basketball. And that isn’t my thing; I’m just not into it. I’m more into fine arts, like singing, art, drama, and stuff like that. Sometimes I feel like an outcast, like I’m not in the club. So I got involved in a gospel choir and I love it. I’ve decided that part of my job there is to help out the new people and make them feel like they belong to our choir. One year, there was this girl, she could sing but she didn’t have any training. She had a beautiful voice, but she just didn’t know how to use it. So I accepted her and I taught her how to take care of her voice and that’s how we became good friends. Just because you don’t fit in one place, doesn’t mean you can’t find a good connection somewhere else.”

### Your Story

Talk to your parents and grandparents about how your family and/or your ethnic group migrated to your country or region.



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### Handout #2: Group Discussion Chart

**Directions:** Choose a Reporter for the group who will record a brief description of each person's story and what that story represents for that person. Moving in a circle, each person should take 1-2 minutes to tell a brief story about either a time when you and/or your family were or were not welcomed OR a time when you did or did not welcome another. Then identify in a sentence how that experience represents something for which you are thankful or something that disappoints you about the United States.



Handout #2:  
Group Discussion Chart

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Name of Storyteller	Brief Description of the Story (a few words)	My Country has disappointed me by . . .	I am thankful for my country because . . .





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Handout #3:  
Closing Activity

**Leader:**

As we prepare as members of this school community and of the United States to celebrate the original Thanksgiving table, the table that is used as a symbol of fellowship and welcome, we remember those who are not included, those who have too often been left out of the discussion, the decision making and the fellowship of our school and of our country. We remember times during which we have been left out or we have excluded others. And we remember times when others have extended their hands in welcome to us or when we have been the ones to include others. May we remember to include all people at the tables at which we sit in the future. There is room for all of us.

**REFLECTION**

*Directions: Each Reporter reads the statements from his or her chart, beginning with the disappointments and ending with the thanks. Each Reporter comes forward, faces the classroom and says:*

I represent the disappointments and thanksgivings of my group. Our country has disappointed us by . . . We are thankful for America because . . .

Leader: We have been disappointed, but we are still thankful because we know . . .

**All Students: All Are Welcome!**

Leader:

Today we celebrate the true table of Thanksgiving.

A table large enough for all races and ethnic groups.

A table where all may sit, no matter how rich or how poor.

A table where any language may be spoken.

The table for those who are different from me.  
From you. From us.

The table that has a place for all of us at this school  
and for those outside these walls.

The table for you and me.

The table for all of us.



## COMMITMENT

**All Students: Today I commit myself to asking “who is missing?” whenever I sit down at a table. I commit myself to inviting others to join me at the table rather than only thinking of myself and people like me. I know standing up for the outsider and the forgotten will take courage; people may laugh at me or be angry with me. Still, I will stand up for the table of Thanksgiving where all are welcome and no one is turned away.**