

# Manning: Thanksgiving Myth Creates Fairytale of Land Theft, Betrayal, Genocide

ICTMN [Sarah Sunshine Manning](#)

11/23/15

As Thanksgiving approaches, many schools throughout the U.S. are making preparations for the standard, and all too cliché, Thanksgiving Day lessons, and fairy tale-esque Thanksgiving plays.

And more often than not, the school Thanksgiving activities are largely based on what ultimately amounts to myth, created to serve the imaginations of the dominant society, and simultaneously functioning to erase the tragedies of Indigenous nations.

The myth usually goes a little something like this:

*Pilgrims came to America, in order to escape religious persecution in England. Living conditions proved difficult in the New World, but thanks to the friendly Indian, Squanto, the pilgrims learned to grow corn, and survive in unfamiliar lands. It wasn't long before the Indians and the pilgrims became good friends. To celebrate their friendship and abundant harvest, Indians in feathered headbands joined together with the pilgrims and shared in a friendly feast of turkey and togetherness. Happy Thanksgiving. The End.*

From this account, the unsuspecting child might assume a number of things. Firstly, they may assume that pilgrims merely settled the New World, innocently, and as a persecuted people, they arrived to America with pure and altruistic intentions. Secondly, children might assume, and rightfully so, that Indians and pilgrims were friends, and that this friendship must have laid the framework for this “great American nation.”

So, what exactly is the harm in this school-sanctioned account of history? Understandably, the untrained eye may not notice the harm in such a myth, as most Americans are victim to the same whitewashed lie as the rest, and dismantling a centuries-old myth certainly does prove challenging.

But the first lesson for educators and adults to digest is the fact that this narrative is egregiously whitewashed and Eurocentric on many levels. Moreover, it is a lie, which serves to rob American children of valuable historical lessons.

Truth be told, this beloved lie was packaged solely for nationalistic consumption when, following the bloody Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln declared Thanksgiving a national holiday in 1863. Back then, Americans were desperately in need of unity and inspiration. Hence, the myth of the first Thanksgiving was born to inspire and unite.

Beyond the myth, and the seemingly good intentions of Abraham Lincoln (who actually [despised Indians](#)) the actual story of pilgrims and indigenous people went down much differently.

As a social science educator, I strongly advocate for the unabridged study of human history; for the many valuable lessons imbedded in the stories of our past. Changing any story, essentially, means short-changing American society from some extremely valuable lessons – lessons that function to plant the seeds of social consciousness and humanitarian evolution.

So let's take a look at a different version of history; a [fuller version](#), and hopefully, extract some meaningful lessons from our shared past:

*One day, the Wampanoag people of the Eastern coast of the Americas noticed unfamiliar people in their homelands. These unfamiliar people were English pilgrims, coming to a new land which they dubbed "America," in order to settle and create a new life.*

*The Wampanoag were initially uneasy with the settlers, but they eventually engaged in a shaky relationship of commerce and exchange. Also, in observing that the pilgrims nearly died from a harsh winter, the Wampanoag stepped in to help.*

*The Wampanoag chief, Massasoit, eventually entered into agreements with the pilgrims, and, on behalf of the Wampanoag Nation, decided to be allies while each nation coexisted in the same space together. At one time, the Wampanoag and pilgrims shared in a meal of wildfowl, deer, and shellfish.*

*After Massasoit's death, the Wampanoag nation became weakened as a result of disease contracted from the English. It wasn't long before the pilgrims began tormenting surrounding tribes, burning entire villages to the ground, while indigenous men, women, and children lie sleeping.*

*Uneasy with the growing cruelty, greed, and arrogance of the new people in their homelands, the Wampanoag began to distrust the pilgrims. The pilgrims soon demanded that the Wampanoag submit to them, and give up all their weapons.*

*Shortly after, the pilgrims and Wampanoag were at war, and in the end, the pilgrims rose victorious. At the close of the war, the Wampanoag were nearly decimated, and the son of Chief Massasoit, Metacom, was killed by the pilgrims, dismembered, beheaded, and his head impaled on a spear outside of Plymouth Rock. Metacom's young son was sent to the West Indies as a slave, along with numerous other Wampanoag and surrounding tribes.*

*A day of Thanksgiving was declared, and to celebrate, the pilgrims kicked the heads of dead Indigenous peoples around like soccer balls. (This was not the end ...)*

*As indigenous nations throughout America were continually betrayed by European settlers, killed by disease, germ warfare, hunted for bounties, sent overseas as slaves, and ultimately pushed out of their homelands and onto prison camps (now commonly known as reservations), few survived the depressing conditions. As a result of centuries of historical trauma, indigenous nations today have staggering rates of depression, mental health disparities, suicide, and deaths due to alcohol and drugs. Indigenous people continue to struggle to cope with historical trauma, and heal deeply impeded wounds which stem directly from colonialism. This, still, is not the end.*

### The Real Story of Thanksgiving

**Directions:** Read "The Real Story of Thanksgiving" and answer the following questions:

#### BEFORE READING:

1. What does the picture below indicate about what many American citizens believe about the first thanksgiving people involved?



Worksheet clip "The Real Thanksgiving." This is a worksheet I created for my American Indian history class at Tiospa Zina Tribal School in South Dakota.

The lessons to be gained from the truths of history are many, and conversely, those lessons are lost in whitewashed myths.

While glossing over the very real consequences of colonialism, the mythical version of Thanksgiving creates a fairytale of land theft, betrayal, brutality, and genocide, virtually functioning to erase the very real and traumatic experiences of entire indigenous nations. This phenomena of whitewashing and outright erasure of indigenous history, in many instances, is not only inhumane and oppressive to the indigenous people, but it is also unfair to all Americans who stand to learn from rich and equally tragic history.

Without question, colonialism is great for the colonizer, and disastrous for the colonized. Colonization reduces entire populations, and leaves generational wounds that linger stubbornly for centuries. This is a lesson that all Americans must heed.

As a result of propagating the mythical version of Thanksgiving, American children and adults alike, become confused about history, and moreover the Thanksgiving lie outright prevents a

collective American understanding of the contemporary struggles of Native American people today.

Without understanding the 500 years of colonial impact on indigenous people, scores of bigoted attitudes have emerged, as Americans cannot seem to wrap their heads around the many struggles of tribal communities today that stem directly from colonization.

To be sure, the Thanksgiving myth has many consequences, and aside from breeding ignorance and reinforcing bigotry, the myth silences the already marginalized indigenous people, who desperately need to hear, share, and tell our story as a part of the healing process.

It is time to let go of the myth and embrace truth, and we must start in schools, where young children look to their teachers with inquisitive eyes as the all-knowing authorities.

As educational institutions, schools must be progressive in bravely moving toward truth, while moving away from any semblance of ongoing myth-sanctioning.

This change is long overdue, and all of our children deserve truth, meaningful lessons, and a robust dose of humanitarian development. And the great news is: our entire world stands to benefit from it.

Depending on the age of students, different degrees of the story can and should be told. Educators can find ideas [here](#).

And conversely, the myth, the school plays, and the story of happy Indians and friendly pilgrims needs to be abandoned, wholesale. This leveling out of myth creates space for new conversations and lessons of unity, and deeper understandings of what it truly means to be a good human being, and that is something to be thankful for.

*Sarah Sunshine Manning (Shoshone-Paiute, Chippewa-Cree) is a mother, educator, activist, and an advocate for youth. Follow her at [@SarahSunshineM](#).*