

Why I'm Not Thankful for Thanksgiving

by MICHAEL DORRIS

Native Americans have more than one thing not to be thankful about on Thanksgiving. Pilgrim Day, and its antecedent feast Halloween, represent the annual twin peaks of Indian stereotyping. From early October through the end of November, “cute little Indians” abound on greeting cards, advertising posters, in costumes, and school projects. Like stock characters from a vaudeville repertoire, they dutifully march out of the folk-cultural attic (and right down Madison Avenue!) ughing and wah-wah-wahing, smeared with lipstick and rouged; decked out in an assortment of “Indian suits” composed of everything from old clothes to fringed paper bags, little trick-or-treaters and school pageant extras mindlessly sport and cavort.

Considering that virtually none of the standard fare surrounding either Halloween or Thanksgiving contains an ounce of authenticity, historical accuracy, or cross-cultural perception, why is it so apparently ingrained? Is it necessary to the North American psyche to perpetually exploit and debase its victims in order to justify its history? And do Native Americans have to reconcile themselves to forever putting up with such exhibitions of puerile ethnocentrism?

It's Never Uncomplicated

Being a parent is never uncomplicated. One is compelled, through one's children, to re-experience vicariously the unfolding complexities of growing up, of coping with the uncomprehended expectations of an apparently intransigent and unaffected world, of carving a niche of personality and point of view amidst the abundance of pressures and demands which seem to explode from all directions. Most people spend a good part of their lives in search of the ephemeral ideal often termed “identity,” but never is the quest more arduous and more precarious—and more crucial—than in the so-called “formative years.”

One would like, of course, to spare offspring some of the pains and frustrations necessarily involved in maturation and self-realization, without depriving them of the fulfillments, discoveries, and excitements, which are also part of the process. In many arenas, little or no parental control is—or should be—possible. Learning, particularly about self, is a struggle, but with security, support, and love it has extraordinary and marvelously unique possibilities. As parents, our lot is often to watch and worry and cheer and commiserate, curbing throughout our impulse to intervene. The world of children interacting with children is in large part off-limits.

Passivity ends, however, with relation to those adult-manufactured and therefore wholly gratuitous problems with which our children are often confronted. We naturally rise against the greed of panderers of debilitating junk foods; we reject dangerous toys, however cleverly advertised; and we make strict laws to protect against reckless motorists. We dutifully strap our children into seatbelts, keep toxic substances out of reach, and keep a wary eye for the dangerous stranger.

With so many blatant dangers to counter, perhaps it is unavoidable that some of the more subtle and insidious perils to child welfare are often permitted to pass. The deficiencies of our own attitudes and training may be allowed to shower upon our children, thus insuring their continuation, unchallenged, into yet another generation. Much of what we impart is unconscious, and we can only strive to heighten our own awareness and thereby circumvent a repetition ad infinitum of the “sins of the fathers” (and mothers).

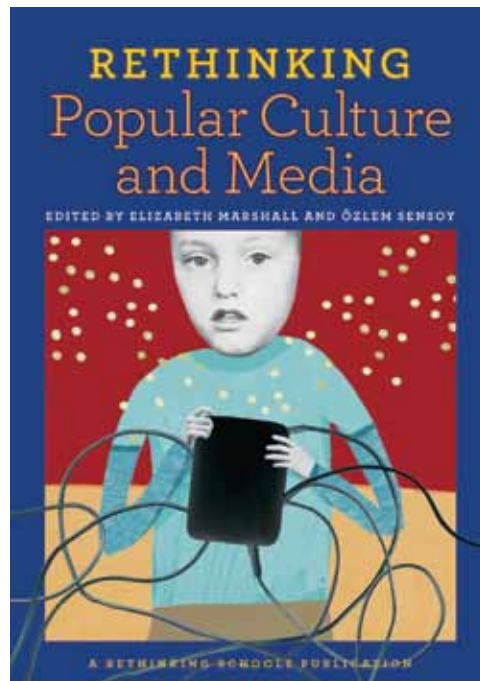
And of course, we all make the effort to do this, to one degree or another. It is therefore especially intolerable when we observe other adults witlessly, maliciously, and occasionally innocently, burdening our children with their own unexamined mental junk. Each of us has undoubtedly amassed a whole repertoire of examples of such negative influences, ranked in hierarchy of infamy according to our own values and perspectives. Even with the inauguration of certain broad controls, Saturday morning cartoon audiences are still too often invited to witness and approve violence, cruelty, racism, sexism, ageism, and a plethora of other endemic social vices.

Attitudes pertinent to “racial” or “sex-role” identity are among the most potentially hazardous, for these can easily be internalized—particularly by the “minority” child. Such internalized attitudes profoundly affect self-concept, behavior, aspiration, and confidence. They can inhibit a child before he or she has learned to define personal talents, limits, or objectives, and tend to regularly become self-fulfilling prophesies. Young people who are informed that they are going to be underachievers do underachieve with painful regularity.

Indian Fakelore

The progeny of each oppressed group are saddled with their own specialized set of debilitating—and to parents, infuriating—stereotypes. As the father of three Native American children, aged ten, six, and three, I am particularly attuned (but not resigned) to that huge store of folk Americana presuming to have to do with “Indian lore.” From the “One little, two little . . .” messages of nursery school, to the ersatz pageantry of boy scout/campfire girl mumbo jumbo, precious, ridiculous, and irritating “Indians” are forever popping up.

Consider for a moment the underlying meanings of some of the supposedly innocuous linguistic stand-bys: “Indian givers” take back what they have sneakily bestowed in much the same way that “Indian summer” deceives the gullible flower bud. Unruly children are termed “wild Indians” and a local bank is named “Indian Head” (would you open an account at a “Jew’s hand,” “Negro ear” or “Italian toe” branch?). Ordinary



citizens rarely walk “Indian file” when about their business, yet countless athletic teams, when seeking emblems of savagery and bloodthirstiness, see fit to title themselves “warriors,” “braves,” “redskins,” and the like.

On another level, children wearing “Indian suits,” playing “cowboys and Indians,” (or, in the case of organizations like the Y-Indian Guides, Y-Indian Maidens and Y-Indian Princesses, simply “Indians”), or scratching their fingers with pocket knives (the better to cement a friendship) are encouraged to shriek, ululate, speak in staccato and ungrammatical utterances (or, conversely, in sickeningly flowery metaphor)—thus presumably emulating “Indians.” With depressing predictability, my children have been variously invited to “dress up and dance,” portray Squanto (Pocahontas is waiting in the wings: my daughter is only 3), and “tell a myth.”

Not surprisingly, they have at times evidenced some unwillingness to identify, and thus cast their lot, with the “Indians” that bombard them on every front. My younger son has lately taken to commenting “Look at the Indians!” when he comes across Ricardo Montalban, Jeff Chandler, or the improbable Joey Bishop in a vintage TV western. Society is teaching him that “Indians” exist only in an ethnographic frieze, decorative and slightly titillatingly menacing. They invariably wear feathers, never crack a smile (though an occasional leer is permissible under certain conditions), and think about little besides the good old days. Quite naturally, it does not occur to my son that he and these curious and exotic creatures are expected to present a common front—until one of his first grade classmates, garbed in the favorite costume of Halloween (ah, the permutations of burlap!) or smarting from an ecology commercial, asks him how to shoot a bow, skin a hamster, or endure a scrape without a tear. The society image is at the same time too demanding and too limiting a model.

What Does One Do?

As a parent, what does one do? All efficacy is lost if one is perceived and categorized by school officials as a hypersensitive crank, reacting with horror to every “I-is-for-Indian” picture book. To be effective, one must appear to be super-reasonable, drawing sympathetic teachers and vice-principals into an alliance of the enlightened to beat back the attacks of the flat-earththers. In such a pose, one may find oneself engaged in an apparently persuasive discussion with a school

librarian regarding a book titled something like *Vicious Red Men of the Plains* (“Why, it’s set here for 20 years and nobody ever noticed that it portrayed all Indi . . . uh, Native Americans, as homicidal maniacs!”) while at the same time observing in silence a poster on the wall about “Contributions of the Indians” (heavy on corn and canoes, short on astronomy and medicine).

Priorities must be set. One might elect to let the infrequent coloring book page pass uncontested in favor of mounting the battlements against the visitation of a traveling Indianophile group proposing a “playlet” on “Indians of New Hampshire.” These possibly well-intentioned theatricals, routinely headed by someone called “Princess Snowflake” or “Chief Bob,” are among the more objectionable “learning aids” and should be avoided at all costs. It must somehow be communicated to educators that no information about native peoples is truly preferable to a reiteration of the same old stereotypes, particularly in the early grades.

“The Indians Had Never Seen Such a Feast!”

A year ago my older son brought home a program printed by his school; on the second page was an illustration of the “First Thanksgiving,” with a caption which read in part: “They served pumpkins and turkeys and corn and squash. The Indians had never seen such a feast!”

On the contrary! The Pilgrims had literally never seen “such a feast,” since all foods mentioned are exclusively indigenous to the Americas and had been provided, or so legend has it, by the local tribe.

Thanksgiving could be a time for appreciating Native American peoples as they were and as they are, not as either the Pilgrims or their descendant bureaucrats might wish them to be.

If there was really a Plymouth Thanksgiving dinner, with Native Americans in attendance as either guests or hosts, then the event was rare indeed. Pilgrims generally considered Indians to be devils in disguise, and treated them as such.

And if those hypothetical Indians participating in that hypothetical feast thought that

all was well and were thankful in the expectation of a peaceful future, they were sadly mistaken. In the ensuing months and years, they would die from European diseases, suffer the theft of their lands and property and the near-eradication of their religion and their language, and be driven to the brink of extinction.

Thanksgiving, like much of American history, is complex, multifaceted, and will not bear too close a scrutiny without revealing a less-than-heroic aspect. Knowing the truth about Thanksgiving, both its proud and its shameful motivations and history, might well benefit contemporary children. But the glib retelling of an ethnocentric and self-serving falsehood does not do one any good.

Parents’ major responsibility, of course, resides in the home. From the earliest possible age, children must be made aware that many people are wrong-headed about not only Native Americans, but about cultural pluralism in general.

Children must be encouraged to articulate any questions they might have about “other” people. And “minority” children must be given ways in which to insulate themselves from real or implied insults, epithets, slights, or stereotypes. “Survival humor” must be developed and positive models must, consciously and unconsciously, be available and obvious. Sadly, children must learn not to trust uncritically.

Protecting children from racism is every bit as important as insuring that they avoid playing with electrical sockets. Poison is poison, and ingrained oppressive cultural attitudes are at least as hard to antidote, once implanted, as are imbibed cleaning fluids.

No one gains by allowing an inequitable and discriminatory status quo to persist. It’s worth being a pain in the neck about.

In preparing this essay on stereotyping and Native American children, I did not concern myself with overt or intentional racism. Native American young people, particularly in certain geographical areas, are often prey to racial epithets and slurs—and to physical abuse—just by being who they are. No amount of “consciousness-raising” will solve this problem; it must be put down with force and determination. ♦

The late Michael Dorris was an author of award-winning novels for adults and children. He was of Modoc heritage. This essay originally appeared in the Bulletin of the Council on Interracial Books for Children, Vol. 9, No. 7.

Knowing the truth about Thanksgiving, both its proud and its shameful motivations and history, might well benefit contemporary children. But the glib retelling of an ethnocentric and self-serving falsehood does not do one any good.