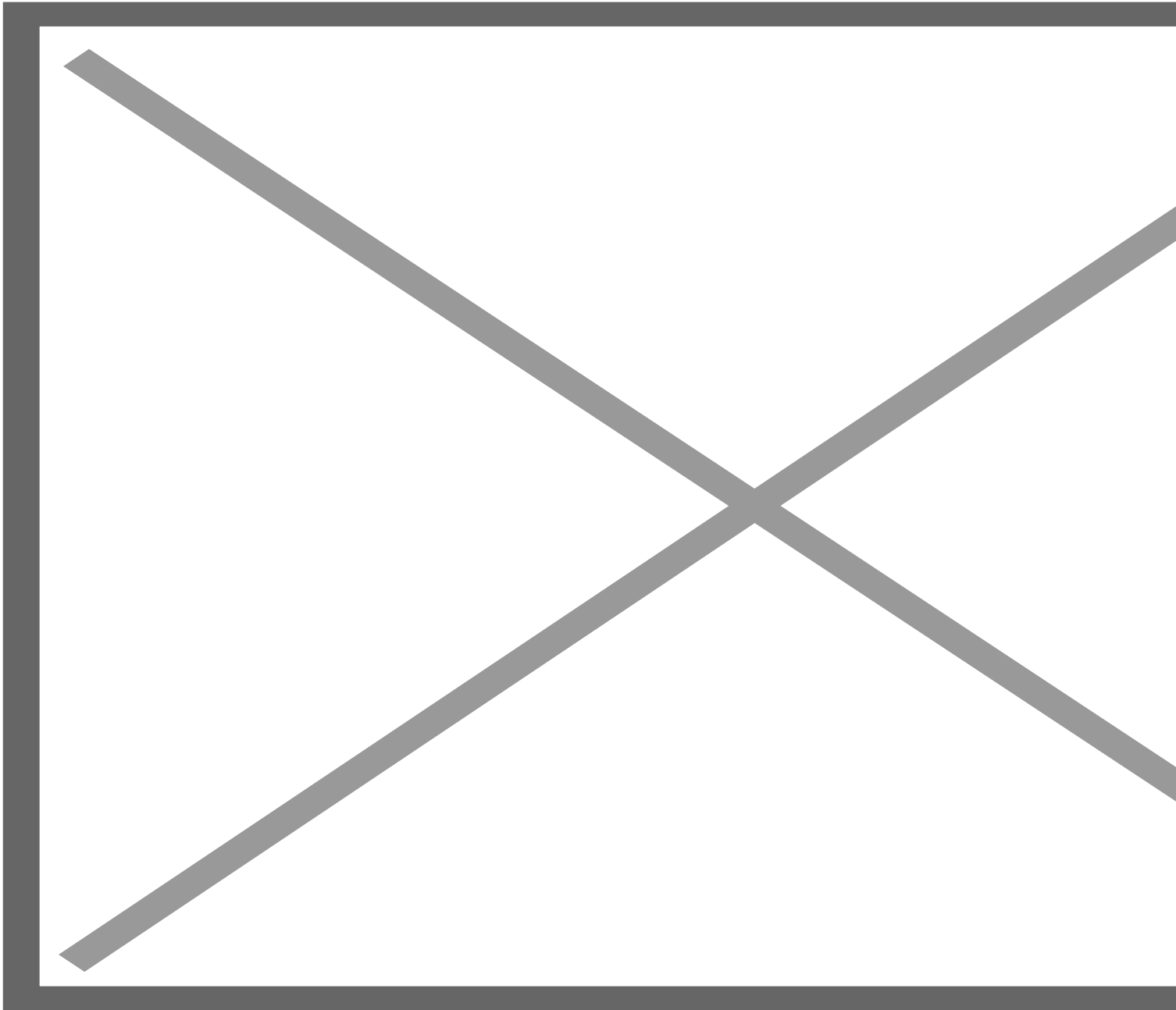


A tale of two Thanksgivings

Two adjacent items in a 1943 issue of *The Saturday Evening Post* highlight the conflict—and joy—inherent in our mythic meal.

by [Julene Tegerstrand](#)

November 26, 2025



Source image: Mellok / iStock / Getty

As Thanksgiving approaches, many people across the country hope their holiday will resemble Norman Rockwell's *Freedom From Want*. In the 1943 painting, a family gathers around an abundant table in peace and happiness. The gathering reflects the myth we tell about American Thanksgiving, about Pilgrims and Native Americans living in peace and united in abundance. The myth hides the truth that love has always shared the table with fear.

A year after the English arrived in Plymouth in 1620, they shared a meal with the Wampanoag people—a meal that bore little resemblance to the grade-school plays my classmates and I enacted, with our paper hats and buckled shoes. The meal was shared between two traumatized groups of people whose relationship was built on survival. The English had barely made it through the winter, losing half of the passengers who set sail from England. The Wampanoag had endured devastating losses due to European diseases and stood in the shadow of the powerful Narragansett Nation. In a landscape of shifting power, their alliance with the English was strategic.

The so-called first Thanksgiving was a truce meal, a pause in conflict rather than the end of it. The Wampanoag did not break bread with the English because they liked them. They did it because the alternative was worse. The Narragansett were stronger, and survival required uneasy cooperation—not unlike Republicans and Democrats agreeing to end a government shutdown because the cost of not doing so is too high. Peace has always required people to endure tension long enough to imagine something better.

Rockwell offered the country that imagination. *Freedom from Want* was published in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1943, when the world was at war and President Roosevelt called the nation to fight for the four freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom to worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. Rockwell's image was not nostalgic; it was a prayer. It was meant to give a weary nation a picture of the shared life it fought to protect.

On the very next page, the *Post* ran an essay by Filipino writer and activist Carlos Bulosan. He wrote about the immigrants and laborers who were excluded from the abundance depicted in Rockwell's painting: "It is only when we have plenty to eat, plenty of everything, that we begin to understand what freedom means." Together, Rockwell's image and Bulosan's words reveal two truths in tension: our yearning for abundance and the harsh reality of the people left out of this abundance. From the start, *Freedom from Want* was meant to be in conversation with Bulosan's reminder that freedom means little if some are kept from the table.

This Thanksgiving, our tables will not be much different from that meal between the English and Wampanoag or from the *Post*'s paired pages of hope and hunger. The world still aches for justice. Political rifts, social divides, and religious differences can make gatherings feel exhausting or even dangerous. The Rockwell painting depicts what we all long for: a sense of belonging. Yet when we flee the very spaces where belonging is formed, including the ones filled with eye rolls and arguments, we forfeit the belonging we crave.

My favorite Thanksgiving memory is the time my dad dry-walled our garage and turned it into a dining hall. We rolled carpet over the oil-stained concrete, dragged in couches, and filled it with cousins, laughter, and the smell of turkey. One year, my dad and my aunt ended dessert by flinging whipped cream at each other. Within seconds, it was a full-blown pie fight. The two grown adults shrieking like children became family lore.

If that same group gathered today, the tension would be thick with competing politics, denominations, and news feeds. I would brace myself for what Uncle Tom might say about the state of health care or the ceasefire in Gaza. But if I stayed home to avoid the conflict, I would miss the laughter, the games, and the chance to see people I love experience child-like delight again. Avoiding the argument also means forfeiting the joy.

We may have misunderstood what the Thanksgiving meal is meant to represent. Those who participated in the original meal never meant for it to become a symbol of abundance or peace. It is a practice, a rehearsal for life in

a plural nation. The original meal was born in tension, Rockwell painted through that tension, and we live inside it. The table has always held conflict. That is normal.

So how do we stay? How do we hold our seat when the conversation turns to ranting or judgment slinging?

In the spirit of that first Thanksgiving, we can call a truce—not to avoid disagreement but to stay in relationship while the conflict unfolds. There are small things you can do to support yourself this holiday season. Before you walk through the door, think of one thing you genuinely appreciate about each person you will encounter. Maybe it is your brother's humor, your aunt's pies, or your mom's devotion to her faith. Feel the appreciation rise in you for each person. A small act like that steadies your nervous system. This kind of gratitude does not erase history; it simply creates space within us for presence, both ours and theirs.

When difficult conversations arise, conflict is a sign that people still care enough to be in a relationship. Families, like democracies, argue because the stakes are love and belonging, the things we most need to survive. Ask people to tell their stories, not recite their beliefs. Curiosity will do more good than certainty ever will.

This year, when the conversation veers toward politics or faith or whatever makes your pulse quicken, resist the urge to retreat into silence or sarcasm. Take a breath. Find one true thing to thank God for in that moment, even if it is simply that you are alive and together. The first Thanksgiving was full of conflict. Ours will be too. That is not failure; that is family. Gratitude keeps us in the room long enough to remember why we came.