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Be thankful for our loved ones, near and far, on this most American of holidays

By Diether Haenicke

Date: November 24, 2009

I have always considered Thanksgiving the quintessential American holiday — not Christmas, not Memorial Day, not Halloween.

Other countries also celebrate these latter days, but Thanksgiving has its own, unique tradition in our country's history, and my little granddaughters, who are just learning about this special feast in school, tell me in great detail about the Mayflower, the Pilgrims, their adventurous arrival, and the days when these first immigrants set foot on American soil.

When I came to the United States, I had been educated by my American wife about the significance of Thanksgiving, so much so that I made it a point, during a trip to Massachusetts, to visit Plymouth Rock. I knew it as the historic landing point of the Pilgrim Fathers and expected it to be a gigantic landmark, much like the Rock of Gibraltar towering over the coast of Spain and sternly facing the African continent. But Plymouth Rock did not meet my grand expectations. Compared to the Rock of Gibraltar it was a mere pebble, laden with glorious myths and some real history, but a pebble nevertheless.

This came on top of another disappointment. My mother-in-law had served me her fabled pumpkin pie at my first stateside Thanksgiving dinner in Detroit, and, since pumpkin, in any form of preparation, is very much an acquired taste and not an obvious delicacy to most Europeans, I had failed her by not tuning in to the exuberant exclamations of praise that arose from other members of the family. I still don't eat more than a spoonful of it, although I have learned to join in the family chorus of pumpkin pie admirers.

Years later, when I directed a program for American students in Freiburg, Germany, Thanksgiving arrived, completely unnoticed by the German calendar. But my students expected the traditional holiday fare: turkey, cranberries, pumpkin pie — the whole deal. Discretely they

handed to my wife their mothers' recipes for stuffing, pies, and sauces, expecting invitations for the great day. As newlyweds, neither my wife nor I had cooking skills beyond scrambled eggs and cheese-noodle casseroles.

But we lived right at the French and Swiss borders and in the midst of a culinary Mecca. I knew an excellent chef at a nearby four-star restaurant and related our problem to him. He looked at the recipes from Michigan and Wisconsin mothers and discarded them all with a gesture of disdain. The turkey would be too dry, and where could one get cranberries and sweet potatoes in Germany? He also flatly refused to try his hand at pumpkin pie since he considered the main ingredient unfit for human consumption.

We decided to give him free reign, and he produced a most delicious French version of Thanksgiving dinner — a very moist turkey wrapped entirely in bacon with a chestnut and apple stuffing, accompanied by a delicate local white wine. Our students' enthusiasm for the meal, particularly the liquid part, was so great that I had to cut off the wine supply very soon.

During the last few days I have looked repeatedly at Norman Rockwell's painting "Thanksgiving: Mother and Son Peeling Potatoes." A simple country kitchen, ingredients for the meal arranged on the table in front of which sit a graying mother and her adult son, the latter in military uniform with ribbons of decorations above his shirt pocket, both peeling potatoes. The son, home for the holiday, is smilingly telling his mother a story. She looks at him with quiet pride, but also with worry, hardly believing that this big, strong man is the little boy she raised. No hugs, no kisses, mother and son don't touch — and yet it is a picture of love and utmost intimacy as the two sit close together at home preparing the family's Thanksgiving meal.

And it makes me think how many families sit in their homes these days, wishing that their loved ones in uniform would be with them for the holiday, worrying for their safety and praying that no harm befall them.

And as I give thanks for the many blessings I constantly receive, I count foremost among these blessings our American soldiers who stand in the field, facing great danger in protecting us.

Would they were all back home when the next Thanksgiving approaches.

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mlive.com/kalamazoo*