

We can't afford to banish politics from the Thanksgiving table



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by Michael I. Niman, Truthout

I've got no more patience for pundits and their annual calls to not discuss politics at the Thanksgiving table. Take USA Today's self-described "civility expert" Steve Petrow, who just gave the nation a comical list of nine ways to avoid "political food fights." Rule number 7 reads: "No baseball caps at the table.... Especially if they say 'Make America Great Again' or 'Make Racism Wrong Again.'" So, everything is cool if we don't talk about racism. But let's be real — being silent when racism is insurgent all around us will not lead to peace, or much to be thankful for next year. Ignoring racism is not civil.

To be clear, I'm calling for people who aren't targets of racism to stand up. People of color shouldn't always bear the burden of having to confront racism. Neither should this burden fall on people who are facing danger from abusive family members. Rather, I'm calling on people who occupy positions of privilege and power — those of us who won't be put in danger by initiating an argument — to embrace necessary conflict on Thanksgiving.

We can't let racism and other hatreds slide in the name of a tranquil dinner. This is our civic responsibility. Your uncle's racist rants put people in danger. Ignoring racism and those who enable racism, who excuse

racism and who offer up our White House and Congress as tools to enable racism, is a privilege that folks affected by racism don't have. Yes, when you ignore racism, you tacitly accept it and enable it. Your apathy at the Thanksgiving table is the fetid soil in which racism and other forms of hatred grow. Ignoring racism, like ignoring white privilege, is itself an exercise in white privilege. This applies doubly on Thanksgiving, a colonial holiday that works to erase Native genocide and celebrate white colonizers. When we acknowledge this fact — that the holiday itself is grounded in oppression — it becomes all the more clear that some of us have a responsibility to confront the voices of injustice echoing around our tables.

This Thanksgiving, in addition to the issues of racism, misogyny, kleptocracy, genocide, ecocide and economic inequality, we have the full court attack on the very concept of reality to contend with. Right now, we attribute this attack on reality to Trumpian politicians and the Fox media universe — but undermining the concept of reality has long deep roots in fascist politics. The Trumpists invented none of this — they just arrived at a moment in history when social media was primed to undermine reality and stoke hate by sowing fear and offering a perverse sense of excitement to those lost in the fog of information warfare. And now they've got your uncle.

I don't really give a shit about your uncle, by the way. I know I should, and if I were a better person, I would. But I'm having trouble finding kind feelings for people who, at best, are indifferent to my freedom to write columns like this, are indifferent to our shared human rights and indifferent to our planetary survival. But for those of you with privilege and power who will be sharing your Thanksgiving meal with the racism of others, there's got to be some reason why you are there — maybe you have some shared feelings, love or kinship. So perhaps you want to reach into the fog out of love. Or maybe the best strategy is to prepare for a strategic conflict. Either way, if for no other reason, please try to reach your uncle so that he is no longer a threat to others. I get that your Trumpist relatives are angry and probably have righteous grievances, like most of us. That's where you'll connect with them. You might find a lot of common ground. Y'all probably support net neutrality, dislike the Clintons, don't trust Big Tech, and worry that your vote will be hacked. As your discussion widens, you'll find that your conflict isn't so much a political disagreement — which requires a common set of facts to disagree about — but worse, you live in two different reality ecosystems. This is why this discussion is so important. The truth is, the downside of fascism has always outweighed whatever fantasies it dangled in front of its chosen enablers. And history has shown that it always ended badly for both fascism's supporters and its targets alike. The antidote to fascism is reality — true accurate news. That's why whenever any form of fascism emerges, its disinformation has to be confronted. Reality is on your side, so try to be patient.

Don't get trapped into defending CNN or MSNBC. They're not your friends. They're just a better flavor of the same poison that's enabled corporate greed and the growing social inequality that maybe sent your uncle off into this tarpit in the first place. Likewise, don't get lost discussing the Bidens — this is just a distraction. Your uncle (or whoever) may well throw lots of non sequiturs your way — all somehow linked in their universe.

Prepare yourself for Thanksgiving by bringing props. If there are books, articles, videos, comics, whatever that you might get your uncle to look at, take those along. But remember, blowhard uncles don't like to admit mistakes, so don't hit them upside the head with dogma — just gently point them in the right direction. Maybe your Thanksgiving dinner conversations can lead to book exchanges for the winter holidays. Admittedly, it's more likely these conversations will just depress and frustrate you — maybe even get you kicked out. Not having them, however, has far worse consequences.

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