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Opinion

## The first Thanksgiving

By John F. Gilligan

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The lesser angels of humanity were running rampant well before 1620 when the Mayflower arrived.

Along the North Atlantic seaboard — Newfoundland to Cape Cod — European fisherman for a century had been trading with the Natives. But killings, retaliations and atrocities pockmarked their relationships. Here and there Natives were captured, sold in the African slave markets or just murdered. In revenge, some Europeans were disemboweled or roasted alive.

Trading transactions included goods, knowledge and skills. Diseases, too. Between 1618-19 tribal populations were decimated. Many were reduced by 90%. Others didn't have enough to bury their dead. One was left with just two old men. Worse, some neighboring tribes that escaped the epidemic were subjugating others, capturing their children and enslaving the adults.

External threats and internal discord destroyed the balance of power and peace that had previously existed. Under stress societies can implode. New England was a case study.

Cape Cod was the Mayflower's first stop that November. In their attempts to make friends with the Natives, later known as the Wampanoags, they were greeted with a volley of arrows. The Pilgrims had no knowledge that English fishermen a few months earlier had murdered a group of innocent Wampanoags, tricked into climbing aboard the ship's deck.

Like cars colliding at a crossroads, a cultural clash of worldviews, beliefs and lifestyles were in store for the Pilgrims and Natives. To preserve a culture, people will fight and have fought to the death.

The Pilgrims also had internal passenger conflicts. Their goal was a religious settlement, but it required financing. To ensure profitability, the joint-stock company insisted that a contingent of their own people be included. They were known as “Strangers,” who not only commanded the ship, but belittled the religious congregation to no end.

The Mayflower had sailed with cross-purposes: religion and profit. Their destination was the Mouth of the Hudson River. But harsh necessity changes plans, mindsets and behaviors.

Two months of a treacherous ocean passage left everyone malnourished, sick and craving for water. They had to land soon or die. The voyage also evoked an awakening. The Strangers realized that without cooperation and collaboration no one could survive.

Compromises were made that would be embodied in the Mayflower Compact. Pilgrims argued for a civil government based on the consent of the governed. Even marriage would be a civil matter. No government would control religion as it did in England.

All agreed that laws passed should be “for the general good of the colony” to which “we promise all due submission and obedience.” Strangers and Pilgrims gave their word of honor by signing the Compact before ever setting foot on soil. Discord would not destroy this colony as it had in Jamestown.

But could a “compact” be made with Massasoit, leader of the Wampanoags, whose tribal members were executed on that English ship? Vengeance was the protocol.

Yet there existed a common and greater good that could bridge their cultural divides, thirst for vengeance, animosities and fears. It was trade.

If the colony were to succeed, it needed food and safety, and skins and furs to sell in England. The natives wanted knives and axes.

From the Pilgrims' December landing at Plymouth until March 1621, there was no direct contact with the Wampanoags. Meanwhile, disease, illness and the winter cold took its toll: only 52 of the original 102 settlers were alive. The Pilgrims were at the mercy of the Wampanoags.

Trade is fundamentally about relationships: truthful, honest and trustworthy. That didn't exist. In March, two statesmen reshaped the social fabric: Massasoit and the colony's elected governor, Wm. Bradford. Practical men, they created a hard-nosed mechanism to forge trust.

Whoever committed an offense against one society would be handed over to it for judgment and punishment. This was a live and let live deal. And it put a quick end to fear and violence, saved the colony from starvation and led to mutual cooperation, collaboration and trade.

With that March agreement, the Wampanoags suddenly arrived to teach and help Pilgrims plant corn, beans and squash. At harvest time the two cultures celebrated the fruits of their "compact," Thanksgiving. In the following decades, Massasoit created a never before seen Wampanoag nation. And the Plymouth Colony flourished from their trade.

Cultural differences were transcended by a commitment to a common and greater good. The Pilgrims and Wampanoags did it and so can we. It speaks to our national vision — working together for the common good. That's how we preserve and grow America. And it's embodied in our Thanksgiving ritual.

John F. Gilligan, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist, is president emeritus of Fayette Companies/Human Service Center. He lives in Groveland, Ill. Hi email is [jfgilligan@hotmail.com](mailto:jfgilligan@hotmail.com).