

“ALMOST GROWNUPS”
Joel 2:21-27; Matthew 6:25-33
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Thanksgiving Day, 1978, and I was invited to Thanksgiving dinner at the Yale chaplain’s house. I had spent the hours from 8:30-1:00 working at the community Thanksgiving dinner, like our Stone Soup, in a cold and drafty church basement. In contrast, Thanksgiving dinner at the Yale Chaplain’s house was about as formal an event as occurred in my world in the mid-1970s. You have to realize that I was of the generation that went off to college with three pairs of blue jeans, a couple of t-shirts, two flannel shirts, and two turtlenecks, and one back-up dress to be worn for state occasions.

Thanksgiving with John and Pat Vannorsdall, the Yale chaplain and his wife, was such an occasion. John and Pat were - and still are - wonderfully hospitable people. Every year they invited a group of friends, usually those far from family, to join them for a Thanksgiving feast. In subsequent years, I found out that there would usually be about 20 who would be gathered at 2:00P.M. on Thanksgiving day - a mix of undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty - but this was my first time.

It was a different kind of event for me. It wasn’t a student gathering, or an official college function. It was John and Pat inviting a group of people to be their guests, some of whom happened to be students. But there was a very grown-up feel to the day. This was an adult party, and we who were students were there not as our parents’ children, or as students, but as grown-ups among other grown-ups, which was at the same time both wonderful and a little scary. I certainly knew enough to say “please” and “thank you,” not to spit in my soup or grab the drumstick off my plate. My anxiety was more complex than that. Thanksgiving at John and Pat’s was a place to test my developing adult self, a place where it felt like much was expected of me, but my hosts were utterly confident in my ability to pass.

I was not nearly so confident. In fact, I remember that first Thanksgiving dinner at the chaplain’s as the first time that I felt like a fraudulent not-quite-really grown-up. You know that feeling - where you’re speaking the language and behaving appropriately, but inside you’re thinking, “I’m not really adult enough for all this. I’m just faking it.” I felt that way a lot when I first had my children - me, a mother, hah! But that’s another story.

2:00 Thanksgiving day, I knocked at the door of 66 Wall Street, and was ushered into the living room where I was offered either sherry or apple cider. People talked and mingled and ate Pat’s wonderful hors d’oeuvres until 3:00, when we found seats, and John read aloud to us. It was his tradition every year to “read around a bit” in William Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation*. For those of you who aren’t colonial history buffs, William Bradford was the first governor of Plymouth Plantation, where the group we call the Pilgrims arrived in 1620. Bradford’s writings are the place we find the story of the first Thanksgiving, but John was not content to read just that part of the account. He wanted us to feel the experience of being strangers in a wild and foreign land, trying against all odds to build houses and put in crops, to carve out a life between

the forests and the sea. He read to us, for probably 30 minutes, of days of hope and triumph, and others of pestilence and starvation, terror and death. John is a wonderful reader. He drew us in until we could almost feel the ache of hard work, the bitterness of the winter wind, and the miracle of a substantial meal and a hot fire. No one stirred when he finished his reading, until after a moment, Pat came out from the kitchen and quietly invited us all to come to the table.

The table was beautiful: Pat's grandmother's crystal and silver and French china, candle light, beautiful and abundant food. The conversation was as plentiful as the turkey. One thing about Yale gatherings is that there's never a lack of either confidence or opinions. Believe it or not, I was one of the quiet people at the table, not quite sure of my footing, wondering first if I would ever really feel like I belonged at a gathering like this. I was at the age when all my worldly goods would fit in the back seat of my car. I couldn't imagine being a real grown up with a house and furniture, or even silverware that matched. But beyond that, I wondered if I wanted to belong to this adult world - confident, prosperous, successful. I had spent the earlier part of my day ladling out overcooked green beans next to painfully dry turkey on paper plates to those who had close to nothing - people who wore ill-fitting clothes and smelled bad, and knew nothing of William Bradford and probably cared even less - and here I was now eating my perfect meal with congenial companions off heirloom china. I didn't know how to put these two pictures together. As I looked at John and Pat, they seemed entirely comfortable and at ease, but John had been there, too, that morning in the church basement cutting pumpkin pies and setting out the slices on individual plates. John and Pat were as principled and compassionate people as I could want to meet. I figured in that moment that being a real adult - not just a young woman faking it - being a real adult meant that along with the matching silverware and inherited plates came a resolution of conflictedness about being privileged and affluent in a world of need.

I didn't ask the question, but I could have kissed the graduate student two places to my right who did. He, like John and me and probably five of the other guests at the table, had worked the community dinner that morning. I forget his name, but I will guess he was a divinity student and Lutheran by upbringing, because he was very earnest and he called John "Pastor John" which I now think of as a typically Lutheran form of address. "Pastor John," he asked in a lull in the conversation, gesturing around him, "how can we sit like this in the middle of the poverty of this city?"

In the silence that followed, John filled his pipe, something he did habitually when he was thinking; and he looked at the student with a look of utmost concentration and said, "That's a good question. I really don't know. I struggle all the time wondering if there's a place I can position myself where I use the gifts I have to their best and serve God's people and live comfortably in my soul. I haven't found that place yet." And in a typical John move, he looked around the table and asked, "What about the rest of you?" And all these adults who, a moment earlier, had been jovial and self-confident and oh-so-together, began to speak of their unease, their compromises, their lack of being able to see a clear way through to living unsullied - with a completely clear conscience - in a world of so many opportunities and so much misery, good and evil not keeping cleanly to opposite sides of the street.

It was one of those defining moments for me. John and Pat were really old - almost 60 probably - and the other non-students there were in their 30s and 40s. Clearly for them lack of

conflictedness had not come along with mortgages, dining room chairs, and children. I had thought them real grown-ups because they had it all figured out; but maybe it was that being adult meant living fully in the midst of ambiguity. Maybe being adult meant never really being fully comfortable because we live in an uncomfortable world. Maybe being adult meant levels of soul comfort and discomfort living side by side within you.

The conversation stayed sober for a while as the pumpkin pie was served: where and how to most significantly impact the urban poor, the role of the university, federal educational policy, and the actions of the state legislature. Then the mood lightened, and we went back to the living room for coffee and games.

It was a cloudless November night as I walked back home through the almost deserted streets. I thought about idealistic courageous Pilgrims creating a new society in the wilderness - and in the process displacing and often behaving badly to the native people they didn't adequately respect. I thought about the community dinner and the Vannorsdall's dinner, and one of the world's richest universities in the midst of one of New England's poorest cities. I thought about the real adults that night and all that they weren't clear about; and as I walked home, I found myself thankful - thankful for questions and opportunities, for the gift of people who are honest and thoughtful and do not shrink from the messiness of the world. Most of all, though, I found myself thankful that at that moment I only had to be almost grown-up. Thanks be to God. Amen