
OPINION

THANKSGIVING

Thank goodness for activists

By Robert Epstein

This Thanksgiving you'll probably sit down with relatives to a meal of turkey, stuffing, and pumpkin pie. And you probably know that Thanksgiving has something to do with the first European settlers in America — the Pilgrims — who landed at what we now call Plymouth Rock in Massachusetts in 1620.

But here's what you probably don't know. You might not be celebrating Thanksgiving at all if it weren't for a very determined activist named Sarah Josepha Hale. Born in 1788 in New Hampshire, in her 30s she suddenly found herself widowed and with five young children to care for. Soon after her husband died and with the help of her late husband's friends, she was able to publish a book of poems and then, not long after, a novel. A few years later, in 1827, she began the career that would consume her for the rest of her life — as an editor of women's magazines.

For 40 years, until just before she died, she was the chief editor of the most popular and influential woman's magazine in America — called *Godey's Lady Book*. The title doesn't sound very sexy, but by the time of Hale's death, the magazine's circulation was over 150,000. That's an enormous number, especially when you con-

sider that the population of the United States in 1870 was one seventh what it is today.

The first Thanksgiving feast — the culmination of a three-day event — was celebrated by about 50 Pilgrims and ninety Native Americans in 1621. Over the next 50 years or so, only two more feasts of this sort were held by the early colonists, but from the 1670s onward, Thanksgiving feasts became more common and eventually were held annually in most states.

But different states celebrated the Thanksgiving holiday on different days, and it was up to each governor to decide whether to declare the holiday at all each year.

This is where our activist comes in. Concerned about the growing tension among the states in the early 1800s, Sarah Hale believed that a national Thanksgiving holiday — one mandated by the federal government and celebrated by the entire nation on the same day — could help unite the country. She used her prominence as a magazine editor, as well as the pages of her magazine, to lobby governors and presidents to create this national holiday. After more than 30 years of cajoling, she finally got her wish in 1863, when President Abraham Lincoln — recognizing her idea as a way of trying to heal the war-torn states — declared the fourth Thursday of every November to be a national day of Thanksgiving. In 1941, Congress created the form of the holiday we know today: a legal holiday on which schools are closed, mail isn't delivered, and retailers shamelessly take over our lives.

As I said before, if Sarah Josepha Hale had never existed, it's very possible that Thanksgiving as we know it would also not exist. Hale was an "activist" — a rare and unique person who says, "Pay attention! We can do things better! Here's what we must do!"

Some activists try to bring rights to disenfranchised groups, some try to stop wars, and some try to create national holidays. What they all have in common is determination, strong belief, and a willingness to tolerate both apathy and criticism — sometimes at enormous cost.

Even if we don't agree with them, it's hard not to be fascinated by activists. Where do such people come from? Are they born or made? Are they trying to shed some guilty feelings they acquired as children or teens? Were they influenced by a charismatic role model? Did they suffer some great personal wrong — the death of a loved one, for example — which they're now trying to right?

Every factor that you can imagine probably propels one activist or another, including his or her genes. Activists tend to be highly empathetic individuals, and empathy is, in part, an inherited trait.

Whatever the factors, and however irritating some activists might seem, we probably need more of them. Activism is a form of caring — one of the most noble forms of caring that civilization has ever created. This Thanksgiving, let's not just be grateful for the feast; let's also remember our activists — and one in particular: Sarah Josepha Hale.

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