America's Table:® *A Thanksgiving Reader* is published by the American Jewish Committee's Belfer Center for American Pluralism in cooperation with the following partner organizations:
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP);
National Council of La Raza; National Urban League;
National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ);
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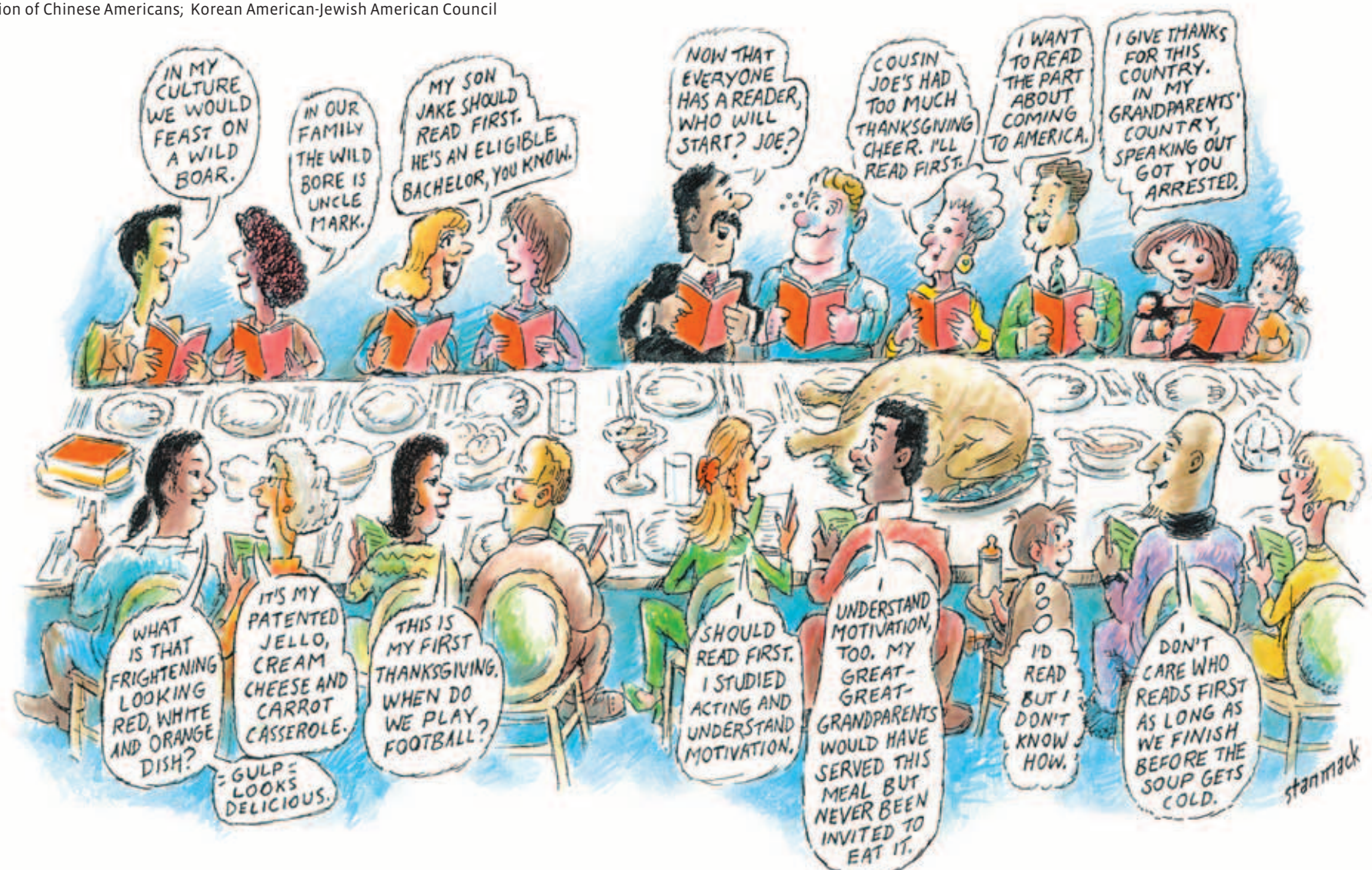
America's Table®

A THANKSGIVING READER



Celebrating our diverse roots and shared values

AJC
American Jewish Committee

Thanksgiving is a holiday that most Americans, regardless of background, celebrate more or less in the same way—with family, food, and football.

In a world too often threatened by differences, Thanksgiving also is a day to appreciate how our various backgrounds make America vibrant, while our democratic values unite us and keep America strong. *America's Table®* tells this story and helps us express gratitude for being part of it.

Profiles of eight individuals, whose lives and work exemplify these themes, complement a brief narrative. The narrative, on the white pages, is intended to be read aloud prior to the Thanksgiving meal by simply going around the table and taking turns or having a leader designate parts. Read the profiles or save them for later. Perhaps share your own stories.

The American Jewish Committee first published *America's Table* after 9/11, and distributes it annually in cooperation with the human relations organizations listed on the back cover.

Additional copies of *America's Table:® A Thanksgiving Reader* are available at the American Jewish Committee's Web site: www.ajc.org. For information about how to become a corporate sponsor of *America's Table®* or use the publication in company diversity programs, contact Ken Schept at 212 891 1446 or scheptk@ajc.org.

November 2006

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We are each on a journey.

These are the names of the generations that came to America.

They reveal individual lives that represent the story of our nation.

These are the names of the generations that built America.

They recall our parents and grandparents and mirror ourselves.

These are the names of the generations that will care for America.

They remind us why we gather at this Thanksgiving table.

Sigarev Siegel Bowman Williams Caruso Lipowski Katz
Nwaguru Rosenbaum Kimura Beck Teters Foulks Koproski
Calderon Lew Durley Branovan Sharma Hassan Montalto Paterson
Jordan Cheng Gioia Noriega Ellison Josephs Kassab Phillips Puri
Letona Linares Brooks Gilchrist Mineta Levine Patel Tsosie

M. Elena Letona At age five, Elena Letona and her younger sister Maria tossed their toys over the balcony of their parents' apartment to poor children in the street.

This spontaneous act of childhood generosity in El Salvador ultimately culminated at Centro Presente, the immigrant rights agency in Boston that Letona heads. First, however, she traveled on an episodic journey of self-discovery that began when her father decided that his six-year-old should become a piano virtuoso.

He sent Letona abroad, at age thirteen, to continue her music education in America, while living with relatives in Los Angeles. The following year, he sent Maria and eventually moved both girls to New Orleans, where they won many local piano competitions. A third younger sister arrived, and Letona cared for her while attending Oberlin Conservatory of Music.

"I discovered that I wasn't a great pianist."

Moving to Boston after graduation, Letona found work in the city's Department of Health and Hospitals. "That was an eye-opener. I was shocked to learn that here in the United States there could be such poverty." At thirty, she entered a doctoral program in public policy.

"It was a conscious decision. It wasn't like the piano."

At Centro Presente, Letona reconnected "with aspects of my life that I'd forgotten or hadn't known or buried." Having cared for her sisters when they came to America, Letona now reassures an extended family of new immigrants, "Where you come from is good. Who you are is beautiful."

The insightful questions of our children, innocently asked, compel us to reconnect with our past.

When our families went to America.

How they got here.

What they found.

Why they came.

At every table the answers are different, but much the same.

Many of us were immigrants and refugees from all regions of the world, fleeing the afflictions of poverty and oppression.

Drawn by the promise of a better life, we chose America and she took us into safe harbor.

Not every journey was easy.

The first arrivals sometimes shunned those who followed.

Not every journey was voluntary.

The first African slaves landed in Jamestown a year before the Pilgrims settled in Plymouth.

Not every journey was righteous.

Native Americans were devastated by a new nation's need to conquer, cultivate, and build.

Guillermo Linares "I always saw myself as a farm boy," says Guillermo Linares, New York City's Commissioner of Immigrant Affairs.

Until age fifteen, in the Dominican Republic, he cared for six younger siblings, gathered enough water and wood for cooking, and helped his grandfather with his land, horses, and cattle.

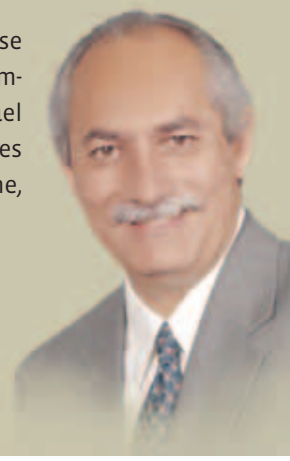
He did poorly in school before seventh grade, which he repeated. "The teacher, Mr. Wellington Lewis, somehow had the ability to awaken confidence in me."

Linares's mother, meanwhile, decided that her children's prospects were too limited. She moved to the United States, and the family eventually followed. Guided by the work ethic of his grandfather, the inspiration of his seventh-grade teacher, and the ambition of his mother, Linares, driving a taxi to earn tuition, graduated from City College.

He began a teaching career, and in 1983 joined New York's Board of Education. Elected to the New York City Council in 1991, Linares became the first Dominican to win elective public office in the United States.

"This is a country where you can dream
and have dreams come true,
if you work hard."

President Bill Clinton named Linares chair of a White House Hispanic education initiative in 1999. Although he was completing a long postponed doctorate when Mayor Michael Bloomberg offered him the commissioner post, Linares accepted. "I got this far because so many people helped me, expecting nothing back other than I help someone else."



Harold Brooks teaches young people the lessons about education, enterprise, and understanding that he learned growing up during the 1960s in an impoverished neighborhood of St. Louis.

Pushed to excel by his African-American teachers, Brooks worked weekends in the produce department of a grocery store owned by a Jewish shopkeeper, and spent after-school hours in an enrichment program run by Jesuit priests.

Father Pat McCorkle showed the family a film about a Catholic boarding school. The facilities impressed the teenage boy until he realized that the school lacked an important necessity—teenage girls. "Father," his mother responded, "could you bring the paperwork tomorrow?"

On his last day working at the grocery store, the owner, Harry Kramer, handed Brooks a generous check and said,

"It's just for you. Go out and be successful."

Brooks finished boarding school, studied theater in college, and then auditioned for acting jobs. When marriage and fatherhood required a more stable income, he became a police officer, spending days off and vacations mentoring children. For the last twenty years, Brooks has counseled inner-city foster care youth in Philadelphia.

He also serves as copresident of Operation Understanding, an organization, formed in cooperation with the American Jewish Committee, to promote mutual respect between African-American and Jewish high school students. Brooks recently helped arrange a trip to Senegal and Israel.

We are each part of America's journey.

We did not leave history behind, like unwanted baggage at immigration's door.

Our particular pasts and our shared present are wedded in hyphenated names:
African-American,
Irish-American,
Italian-American,
Korean-American,
Polish-American.

We are not always on a first-name basis with one another.

But we quickly become acquainted in playgrounds and classrooms, in college dorms and military barracks, and in offices and factories.

We feel at home.

In some parts of the world, our differences would be threatening.

We feel enriched.

In America, our differences resonate in our names, language, food, and music. They inspire art and produce champions and leaders.

We feel free to disagree.

We are a family, and what is a family gathering without debate?

Monsignor John Gilchrist heads interreligious affairs for the Archdiocese of Newark, which includes four northern New Jersey counties that are among the nation's most ethnically and religiously diverse.

Born in 1929, he grew up in Belleville, New Jersey, a town just up the Passaic River from Newark, where Irish Catholic families like his lived in modest single and two-family homes, side-by-side with first and second-generation Italians and Jews. He and his friends didn't think in these categories, however.

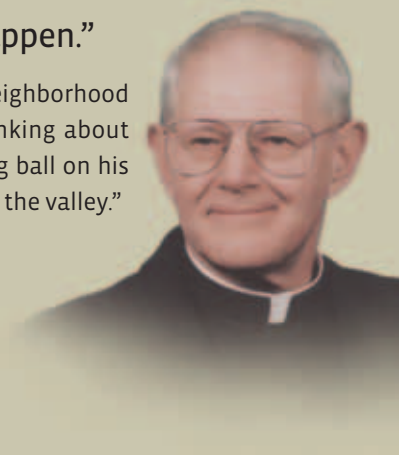
"All of that religion stuff and ethnic stuff was foreign to us," says Gilchrist, "even in high school."

His interreligious involvement began following his ordination, while studying at Seton Hall's Institute of Judeo-Christian Studies, and after traveling to Israel with Sister Rose Thering, the activist nun who fought against anti-Semitism. Beginning in 1980, he worked on Catholic-Jewish dialogue. "We never ducked an issue."

Today, says Gilchrist, "We're finding that the new immigrant, coming into a new land, feels uneasy, unwelcome, and not understood." The established religious communities must help to allay their fears, he argues.

> "If we don't live well together, all sorts of bad things will happen."

He remains optimistic, recalling a time and a neighborhood where people got along. "I'm sitting here thinking about Belleville and my friend Murray Glazier, playing ball on his front steps, and his father's little candy store in the valley."



Norman Mineta saw his father cry for the first time on December 7, 1941.

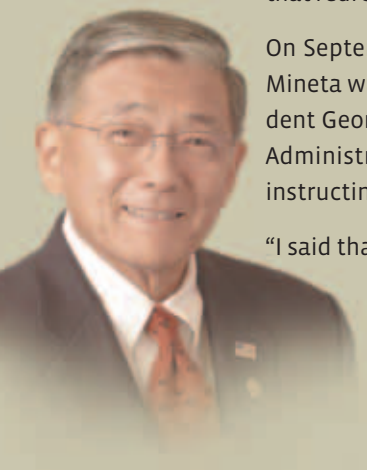
"He couldn't understand why the land of his birth was attacking the land of his heart."

Kunisaku Mineta had arrived in America from Japan at age fourteen, in 1902, worked as a laborer on a sugar beet farm, learned English, advanced as a manager, and eventually established a thriving insurance business in California.

On May 29, 1942, ten-year-old Mineta and his family left San Jose on a train of about fifty cars carrying the local Japanese-American community to the Santa Anita Racetrack in Los Angeles, which was among the temporary centers where detainees assembled while internment camps were built.

The family spent much of the war at the Heart Mountain camp near Cody, Wyoming. They returned home to San Jose on Thanksgiving Day 1945, Mineta recalls. "Even thinking about it now makes me cry."

Mineta entered public life in 1962, with an appointment to the San Jose Human Relations Commission. He became mayor in 1971. Elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1975, Mineta served for twenty years, introducing the bill that redressed the forced evacuation of Japanese-Americans.



On September 11, 2001, when America was attacked again, Mineta was Secretary of Transportation, appointed by President George W. Bush. He set up the Transportation Security Administration and within a year hired 65,000 employees, instructing them with a lesson from his past.

"I said that there was not going to be any racial profiling."

We believe in fairness.

In America, the loudest voice does not always have the last word, and every voice has a right to be heard.

We act with hope.

Not because life is perfect, but because we are free to face life, and all its imperfections, on our own terms.

We rely on faith.

In a sturdy and tested framework of law and government that works because of the confidence we place in it and in each other.

We are each responsible
for keeping America on course.

"Are we there yet?" the children ask.

We know the answer.

We pursue justice.

But still have a way to go.

We celebrate freedom.

But endlessly debate what it means to be free.

Our table is brimming.

But not everyone receives a fair portion.

Daniella Levine heads an advocacy organization called Human Services Coalition of Dade County.

She founded HSC eleven years ago to help individuals and communities achieve prosperity and engage in civic life in Miami, one of the nation's poorest and most diverse cities.

Levine's social vision emerged early, when her father's job took the family to Latin America. She left the New York suburbs a lonely elementary school girl and returned a self-confident teenager troubled by the poverty of Brazil's favelas.

While attending Yale, Levine worked as a "Big Sister," believing that achieving greater social and economic justice depends on providing children with a constructive home life.

After earning degrees in law and social work, she expanded her focus from children and families to communities. The system frustrated her, she explains metaphorically: Babies keep coming down a river and are rescued one-by-one until somebody goes to see who's throwing them in. "I've been going up the river for twenty-four years now in Miami."

Today, Levine feels even more strongly about the connectedness of people to each other and to the planet. A new HSC initiative, Imagine Miami, asks individuals, regardless of financial status, to create a community that works for everyone.

"I can vacillate from feeling powerful to being the speck of dust that we are," says Levine. She finds strength in her Jewish heritage and weekly Torah study. Otherwise, she adds, using the Yiddish for audacity,

"I don't think I'd have the chutzpah."

Eboo Patel began the Interfaith Youth Core in 1998, at age twenty-three.

Based on his belief that the major religions share an ethic of service, the Interfaith Youth Core fosters understanding among young people by linking them in social action projects and sparking conversations about their diverse faiths.

The idea sprang from his effort to find commonalities in the three key influences in his life as a devout Muslim, born in India and raised in the suburbs of Chicago. Patel cites the Koran as the source of his own impulse to serve. His immigrant parents reinforced sacred text with example, devoting every Saturday morning to helping new arrivals navigate the government bureaucracy.

They also encouraged openness to different cultures and experiences. "When I was about thirteen, my father walked into my bedroom and said, 'OK, kid, it's time to read good books.'" He handed over a stack that included Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and a couple of Steinbecks. "We went to see the Moody Blues when I was nine."

Patel conceived the Interfaith Youth Core after college and developed the idea while attending Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. He envisions an interfaith council on every campus and a day of interfaith youth service in every city worldwide.

"My life could have been a big disaster. I have a head full of radical spangles and enough naiveté to try stuff," says Patel.

"I work like a dog to get things done. I learned that from watching my immigrant parents work and work and work."

Progress can be slow as we propose and protest, argue and advocate.

But we are grateful to be part of this vigorous democracy.

We enjoy its unparalleled privileges and accept its obligations:

To pursue our dreams while helping others.

To advance our convictions while respecting others.

To prepare our children for the gift of the American journey.

Rebecca Tsosie first visited the Indian center near her home in Los Angeles at age twelve.

"It saved my life in a lot of ways, and put me on the path that I am on now," says the Arizona State University law professor and defender of Native American rights.

Her father, a member of the Yaqui people, indigenous to Sonora, Mexico, arrived in Los Angeles during the 1940s and married a blond, blue-eyed descendant of Europeans who had mixed with the native Ojibwa people from the Midwest.

"I always felt like an odd character because I am from these different parents," Tsosie observes. "I didn't click with the Mexican-American kids or with the Anglo kids."

Her father told her stories about Yaqui deer dances and tribal lands in the Sierra Bacatete, mountains of northwest Mexico. "I would dream about these places," she recalls.

Mentors at the Indian Center West in Culver City encouraged Tsosie to attend college. She earned a B.A. in American Indian studies from UCLA, received a scholarship to the university's law school, and embarked on a law career initially as a way for a divorced mother to support her family.

Today, in addition to teaching and writing, Tsosie represents Native American litigants pro bono. She recently reconciled complicated aspects of federal Indian law with property law to settle a title claim in favor of an Oklahoma family. "They won the land back," says Tsosie.

"There's no feeling like that in the world, when you do something for people who had no hope and were so sad."

We are the stewards of America,

her ideals and institutions, her cities and natural beauty.

We are entrusted to understand America's past and guide her future.

To create an ever more just America that is secure and free, abundant and caring for all her inhabitants.

We are thankful for the freedom to worship.

We are thankful for the freedom to speak our minds.

We are thankful for the freedom to change our minds.

We are thankful for the freedom to chart our lives.

We are thankful for the freedom to work for a better world.

We are thankful for the freedom to celebrate this day.

In America, each of us is entitled to a place at the table.