

November 25, 1984

The good words we have heard about feelings, and about how we color the world of those about us with the feelings we project, brings to mind some trouble I had with feelings on Thanksgiving Day.

I was journeying to a family gathering, and perhaps the tie ups in the public transportation system gave me rather too much time to think. There was at hand a copy of the New York Times to help this process along! Here I was on the way to a celebration which would probably be characterized by an over-opulent table and too much eating. Yet the Times told of the terrible starvation which was taking place in Africa. What feelings was it appropriate to have about our celebration of opulence, as contrasted with the desperate plight of so many of the world's people. I felt unresolved about this, yet I also felt clear that to approach the Thanksgiving celebration with condescension or dismay was not a feeling based in truth.

I opened the book I was carrying about Martin Luther King. Here was an account of the one person whom most of us, especially Friends, regard as the child of our own time and country who has brought us closest to spiritual greatness. The book described something interesting, for it recounted Martin Luther King's feeling of indebtedness and thanksgiving to Mohatma Gandhi, and then it told in turn of Mohatma Gandhi's great feeling of thanksgiving and indebtedness to Henry Thoreau and to Leo Tolstoi. And, furthermore, the book went on to describe Leo Tolstoi's great feeling of thanksgiving and indebtedness to American Quakers! Here was a very interesting circle of thanksgiving.

In particular, one element of this circle seemed relevant to my quandary about feelings. Late in life Leo Tolstoi gave up all his great privileges, assumed a life of utter Christian simplicity, and labored strenuously to feed those starving as a result of famine. And in the midst of these labors Tolstoi observed that although it was important to work to feed the hungry, even more important than this work is the need to love. Moreover, Tolstoi emphasized that it was essential to love equally those who are starving and those who are satisfied. For, he said, it may sometimes be possible to feed the hungry without love, but with love it would always be impossible not to feed them.

Perhaps the trouble with our thanksgivings is not that they are wrong, but simply incomplete. It is right to give thanks and praise for material abundance, and to love equally those who are satisfied as well as those who starve, but in this emphasis on the material things for which we have every right and duty to be thankful, we perhaps neglect the kind of thanksgiving of which King, Gandhi, and Tolstoi spoke—a thanksgiving for all those great Johnny Appleseeds of the spirit who were capable of sewing love and hope in our hearts where otherwise there would be only a desert. It is they who have given us a palette with which to color our world with vibrant and vivid hues.

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