

Latter-day pilgrims have lessons to teach

Thanksgiving has come and gone. Most of us had a nice turkey dinner with our families. I doubt, though, we thought much about what being grateful for living in America really means. My Thanksgiving was almost like that.

Then Sergei asked me to lunch.

Sergei is a janitor in my building. He emigrated here from Kazakhstan with his family and some luggage. For 20 years he was a mechanic in a Novorossiysk shipyard. Now he cleans my office.

I eat lunch with Sergei and the other Russian-speaking custodians every couple of weeks or so. We normally eat in the basement, but that day Sergei took me into a conference room for the cleaning staff's Thanksgiving luncheon. The boss made the turkey, but everyone brought something to share. Sensing my discomfort, they brought me a plate piled high with Thanksgiving goodies. Who was I to say no?

The meal began with an inclusive prayer. I heard the usual items on the list of things to be thankful for: Friends, spouses, family. But something else struck me: "We're grateful for our jobs."

Think about that — grateful for a job. How many Americans think like that any more? Some people think everyone has a right to a job. They are wrong.

Such a "right" exists only in countries that are poor and unfree. It is incompatible with freedom in any meaningful sense. Recent immigrants know this, because they know about freedom. It's why they come to America. It is why they succeed, while to our shame, many native-born Americans do not.

If you were a fly on the wall, you'd think you were at the United Nations.

You'd hear English, sure, but also Spanish, Russian and Serbo-Croatian.

And if you spoke Serbo-Croatian, you'd know the story of Zelga.

Zelga is a refugee from Bosnia. She was one of the lucky ones, who managed to get out of a hell on earth. Was the supermarket crowded when you bought your turkey? Did you have to wait in line for 10 minutes? 15? Zelga used to wait in line, too. For bread. Every day.

What Zelga won't tell you, unless she knows you well, is that snipers kill people who stand in bread lines. People of the wrong birth culture get picked off like ducks



OPINION
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in a shooting gallery. Zelga's husband lost four friends that way.

If you're having trouble remembering what's great about America, try this: America is a nation at peace. Black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Christian, Jewish, atheist and Muslim Americans are not killing each other. You may not think that's a big deal. Immigrants know differently.

You've read a lot on these pages about an important religious dispute. All parties involved are just as passionate and committed to their cause as they could possibly be. But because we're Americans, we'll fight it out in the courts, not out in the streets. We wage our battles with pieces of paper, not pieces of shrapnel. Do we truly appreciate what a rare and precious thing that is? Does anyone?

Most new arrivals to America are invisible to us. Separated by barriers of language and culture, they pick our crops, serve the food made from them, and sweep away the crumbs we leave behind. They are also a convenient scapegoat for our national woes. "They" take our jobs. "They" don't speak English. "They" subvert our way of life.

It's human nature to divide the world into "good people" (like us) and "bad people" (not like us). People who aren't like us are "strangers."

Immigrants are "aliens." The Russian word for German means "those who can't talk." The Hebrew word for non-Jews means "the others." The list goes on and on.

That had survival value long ago, but not any more. We must fight it. Demonizing immigration takes America down the road of European tribalism and barbarity that our own immigrant ancestors fled, often at terrifying personal risk.

I've attended plenty of meetings in that conference room. But that day the table looked different. Piled high with more and better food than those around it had ever seen in the countries they left behind, the sense of gratitude was palpable. You could taste it, like the thick gravy on the turkey, or Zelga's fruit-filled cream cake. Next Thanksgiving, I want to be as thankful to be here as they are. Every American should be.

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