



America's Table[®]

A THANKSGIVING READER

Celebrating our diverse roots
and shared values

America's Table:® A Thanksgiving Reader, created as a text of consolation soon after 9/11, is especially resonant this year, just months after the nation suffered through Hurricane Katrina, a devastating natural disaster of historic magnitude.

We are saddened by the empty places at the Thanksgiving table that silently remind us of the lives battered and lost.

We are chastened by the ferocious winds and floods that breached our faith in the nation's readiness.

We are determined to help the storm's victims rebuild their lives and to fulfill America's promise for all of her inhabitants.

America's Table® reminds us how our various backgrounds distinguish us and make America vibrant, while our democratic values and institutions unite us and keep America strong. As well, it helps us express our gratitude for being part of this unique story.

Profiles of individuals whose lives exemplify this story complement the narrative, which can be read aloud in about seven minutes before the Thanksgiving meal by simply going around the table and taking turns or having a leader designate parts.

Additional copies of *America's Table:® A Thanksgiving Reader* are available at the American Jewish Committee's Web site: www.ajc.org.

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Writing: Ken Schept
Editing: Roselyn Bell, Ann Schaffer
Art Direction: Linda Krieg

Adams Costa Spencer Lind Tanaka Carney Schultz Pucinski
Leibowitz McLaren Gonzales Szymankiewicz Giannini Humphreys
Zimmer Poulos Finley Morris Kahn Trugglio Singh
Sandburg Jackson Kogovsek Smith Rivera Acosta Demetrios
Nemec Sousa Peterson Yamaura Hansen Romano Farrell

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.

Garrahan Muller Johnson Bautista McGregor Yoo Fahmy
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

Marianela Jordan's comfortable life was literally blown away at age 5 when a hurricane destroyed her family's home and modest restaurant in the Dominican Republic.

Her mother went to America to earn a living. Within a year, shortly before Christmas 1979, the family reunited at a relative's home in Freeport, New York. But life remained difficult.

Seeing her mother work on an assembly line for \$103 a week while her father put in 16-hour days left Jordan indebted to their sacrifice, empathetic with the struggles of new immigrants, and determined to help.

**"I could have been a borderline kid,
but I always had somebody who
invested a little extra in me because
they saw something."**

After college, she worked at a foster care agency and at other nonprofits serving children. Today, as the head of Latino affairs for New York's Nassau County, Jordan assures that language and culture don't block immigrant access to needed programs.

She recently campaigned to become a Freeport trustee. Narrowly defeated, she plans to run again in two years.

"I didn't define myself as the Latino candidate. My message was, we're all part of the same community."



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.



Albert Cheng is a fourth-generation American.

At age 40, in 1988, he traveled to China for the first time, visiting Wushi, a hamlet in the coastal province of Guangdong, where he discovered that the Cheng family has lived for 26 generations, since 1044.

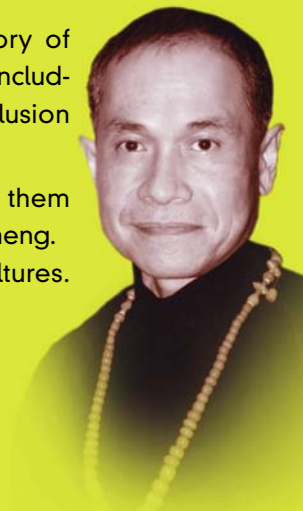
The trip animated him to combine his passion for genealogy with his mission as an educator and his belief in the importance of family history as an aspect of identity. Soon, he led his first group of young people to China in search of their ancestral villages.

“I saw what it does to people when they finally reconnect and say, ‘Yes, I do have a history.’ They understood the sacrifices that their parents and grandparents made to give them a better life here.”

Cheng then cofounded In Search of Roots, a San Francisco organization that annually selects about a dozen young Americans with Chinese or mixed ancestry for a yearlong intensive genealogical search, culminating in a trip to China.

It introduces them to cultural values, the history of China and the Chinese experience in America, including the more than 60 years of immigration exclusion that ended only in 1943.

“Knowledge of their Chinese heritage makes them stronger Americans and better people,” says Cheng. “They don’t have to imitate or adopt other cultures. They know who they are.”



Eric N. Gioia was elected to the city council four years ago, at age 28, from some of New York's most ethnically and economically diverse neighborhoods.

His Queens district includes African-Americans and recent arrivals from the Dominican Republic, China, Colombia, Ecuador, India, Korea, Mexico, and Peru, as well as the children and grandchildren of earlier European immigrants. Gioia's father, uncle, and 86-year-old grandmother still operate the flower shop that the family opened in 1901, soon after emigrating from Sicily.

The epiphany for Gioia arrived in junior high in the form of then Governor Mario Cuomo. He reminded the students that he was an Italian kid from Queens who grew up in the back of a grocery store and went on to become governor.

"I didn't know this was a career option," says Gioia. "I thought you just went into the flower shop."

**"I'm allergic to flowers. We often say
this was God's way of pushing me
out the door and into public service."**

Instead, he worked his way through college, attended Georgetown Law School, won an internship in the Clinton White House, and spent several years in corporate law before launching his political career.

"I visit every public school in my district every year and speak. There could be some kid sitting there who goes on to do something great."



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.

Rick Noriega was home from Afghanistan only a few weeks in early September when Houston Mayor Bill White asked him to transform the city's convention center into a temporary shelter.

The Texas state representative assembled a core staff of about 120 and over 1,000 volunteers, who, in the first week, provided refuge and services to over 22,000 individuals displaced by Hurricane Katrina, mostly from New Orleans.

“I’ve been just going so fast on adrenaline, coffee, and emotions.”

Noriega relied on his experience in the Texas Army National Guard during a storm in the mid-90s and his role coordinating the security of airports and other potential targets after 9/11. More recently, he supervised the training of roughly 20,000 Afghan forces.

A fourth-generation Houstonian, whose great-grandmother crossed from Mexico with her young son in 1911, Noriega drew inspiration from the many local citizens who came forward to help.

“I had a big, elderly gentleman show up wearing a baseball cap and a short-sleeve Western shirt. He says, ‘Put me to work.’”

The man, a local business leader it turned out, quickly organized a network of buses, taxis, and air shuttles, willingly missing a few days of chemotherapy in order to assist others in need.

Photos: Adam Aronson



Rev. Michael Ellison preached about the homeless families on a Sunday morning in early September.

Twelve people in cars with Louisiana plates had been spotted at a gas station by Sgt. Flint Blackwell of the Harris County Sheriff's Department. They seemed distraught after a daylong unsuccessful search for hotel space in Houston.

“We decided to set up our own relief fund,” says Ellison, “to help those families who might not be getting relief from national organizations.”

The congregants of Zion Hill Baptist Missionary Church, a small community of 200 members near Houston, adopted the 12 people and several other families and provided food, shelter, clothing, and assistance in finding work.

“We were moved in our hearts to do something.”



Rev. Michael Ellison and members of his congregation during a Sunday morning service (above).

Rick Noriega (r.) in Houston's convention center with Christina Cavral of the mayor's office and Richard Schechter of the American Jewish Committee.

Aileen Josephs's clients remind the Florida immigration lawyer of her own family history.

Her grandfather fled Poland for China, eventually settling in New York, where her father grew up poor and speaking Yiddish. As a young man, he went to Cuba for work. Imprisoned after the Bay of Pigs, he ultimately moved to Mexico where Josephs was born.

She never felt fully at home. The society reminded her that she was Jewish, while her parents admonished her, "Always have your passport valid; you always need to know that you have a way to escape."

Her struggle with identity and her sense of social justice coalesced into a career at Brandeis University, when she interned at Greater Boston Legal Services. Working with Salvadorian refugees, she empathized with their challenges. Her first job, with the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), took her to New York.

"I love the fact that no one asks where you're from. I can be Jewish and at the same time go to Spanish Harlem and eat things from Mexico."

Today, she obtains green cards and foster care for Mayan teenagers who, driven by economic desperation, leave behind parents and siblings in Guatemala to seek work in America.

"The Mayans have the same needs that my father and my grandfather had, and the same issues—poverty and lack of access because they can't communicate."



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?

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.



Joseph Kassab fled Iraq in his early 20s.

Born in the remote northern Nineveh province, where the Chaldeans, his people, have lived since antiquity, he moved with his family to Baghdad at age 5.

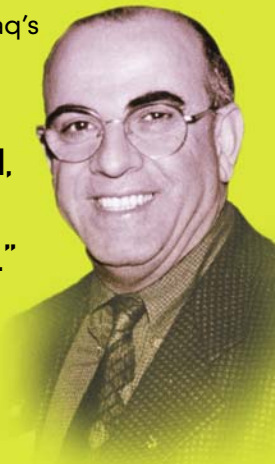
They expected to find more opportunity in the city, but encountered discrimination because of their Christian minority status, refusal to join the Ba’ath Party, and awkwardness communicating in Arabic, since Aramaic was their native language.

Despite these difficulties, Kassab studied to become a microbiologist. He obtained a forged passport and left for Italy, where he gained approval to enter the United States, and settled in Detroit.

Kassab then embarked on dual career paths—as a research scientist and as a human rights advocate, organizing delegations to counsel Iraqi refugees waiting, often for many years, in “transit countries” for admittance to the United States, Canada, or Australia.

After Saddam Hussein’s regime fell, Kassab returned to his homeland for the first time, to present officials with a program for educating the Iraqi people about democracy. Today, he is president of the Chaldean National Congress in Michigan, advocating for Iraq’s indigenous Christians.

**“The first pillar of democracy is that
the majority rules. But the second,
even more important, is the respect
and recognition of minorities.”**



Colette Phillips connects people.

As chief executive of her own diversity marketing firm, she introduces corporate clients to the distinct cultures and economic power of minority communities. In her private life, she helps those communities achieve social and economic access.

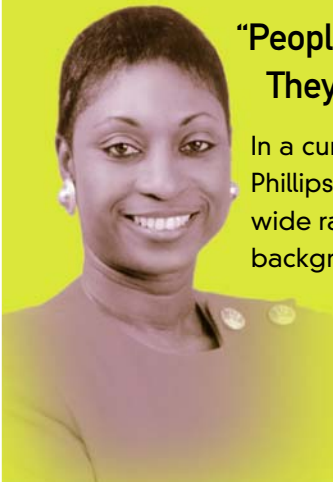
Born into a family of entrepreneurs in Antigua, where, Phillips recalls, “every significant authority person in your life looks like you,” she assumed that the rest of the world resembled her Caribbean island.

Then she went to college in Boston during the school busing tensions of the early 1970s, and “learned a lot about racism and bigotry.” After graduation, she returned to Boston with two complementary goals: to build her own business and to help heal the city.

In the early 1990s, she conceived and, with the American Jewish Committee, helped establish Boston’s Black-Jewish Economic Roundtable, a group that continues to produce enduring personal and business relationships. In a similar way, she later increased the interaction between the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce and the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

**“People do business with people they know.
They do business with people they like.”**

In a current initiative she calls “culture for all cultures,” Phillips introduces Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts to a wide range of local communities, so that people of all backgrounds visit and support it.



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.

Sanjay Puri established and chairs the first Indian-American political action committee.

Indian-Americans have been successful individually, says Puri, who formed the U.S. India Political Action Committee in 2002. He believes that USINPAC will help the community leverage its economic success into political involvement for influencing issues of particular concern, such as immigration policy or the India-U.S. relationship, and for improving the society.

“We have some unique sensibilities,” says Puri. “We can sensitize the political and thought leaders of this country about a global view. Sometimes in America we become too inward-looking.”

In addition, he asserts, Congress and state legislatures need to reflect America’s increasing diversity. Only one Indian-American, the second ever, serves in Congress. Puri wants to make sure that Indian-American candidates “don’t have to think twice about running because they didn’t get the financial resources.”

Puri arrived in Washington, D.C., from India at age 21 to attend graduate school. After a brief tenure as a financial analyst at the World Bank, he started a medical technology company. Today, he is chief executive of his second start-up, Optimos.

“The greatness of this country is that someone like me, who came from India, has access to the political system just like anyone else.”



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.





**American
Jewish
Committee**

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National Urban League

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(NCCJ)

Cuban American
National Council

Islamic Supreme Council
of America

Japanese American
Citizens League

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