



America's Table[®]

A THANKSGIVING READER

Celebrating our diverse roots
and shared values

Thanksgiving is America's unifying holiday, when people of all backgrounds celebrate in similar ways. Sometimes with football, parades, and turkey. Often gathering with family and friends.

America's Table® *A Thanksgiving Reader* 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 that story.

The central narrative can be read in about seven minutes, prior to the Thanksgiving meal. It's enriched with profiles of individuals whose lives exemplify America's vibrancy and strength.

How you read *America's Table*® depends on taste and time. A leader can designate parts. Or simply go around the table taking turns. Perhaps share your own stories. However you choose, *America's Table*® connects us in celebrating Thanksgiving together and in our own ways.

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

November 2004

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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.

Nemec Sousa Peterson Yamaura Hansen Romano Farrell
Garrahan Muller Johnson Bautista McGregor Yoo Fahmy
Sigarev Siegel Bowman Williams Caruso Lipowski Katz
Nwaguru Rosenbaum Kimura Beck Teters Koproski
Calderon Lew Durley Branovan Sharma Hassan Montalto Paterson

Ernest Calderon

“The law is my calling,” said Ernest Calderon.

He grew up in segregated housing with other Mexican-Americans, during the 1960s and '70s, in a small Arizona town dominated by a copper company where his father worked as a miner.

The changing rooms at the mine were integrated only in the early 1960s. A wage scale based on race was eliminated in the late 1940s, when returning GIs went on strike. Calderon's father was among the strikers.

A former marine whose family had lived in the southwest since the 1700s, he left school after the eighth grade. Success, he told his son, required an education in order to be smarter than the next person. Calderon's mother moderated that message with the love she showed to all individuals, regardless of background.

His parents' influence, and memories of the mining company's exploitative practices, convinced Calderon to choose law as a career. After 23 years as a lawyer, and as the immediate past president of the Arizona Bar, Calderon still gets his greatest personal satisfaction from pro bono cases, particularly when they involve battling unfairness or injustice.

**“Law is the great equalizer.
Our legal system is not perfect,
but the playing field gets leveled.”**



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.

Alexander R. Koproski's basement is filled with hundreds of used baseball bats and other gear that he regularly ships to Poland.

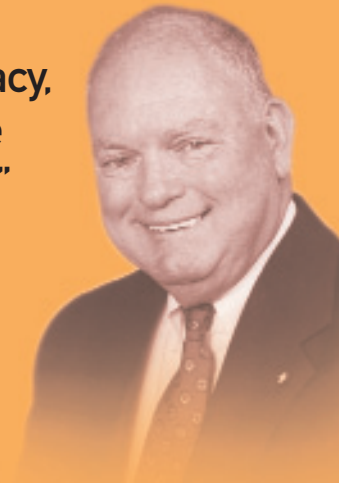
The son of a police officer and grandson of immigrant shopkeepers, Koproski sees America's national pastime as a way to transmit the values of teamwork and discipline to the country his grandparents left more than one hundred years ago.

On a recent visit to Poland, Koproski, a vice president of the nonprofit Polish-American Youth Baseball Foundation, personally delivered four dozen new gloves and signed a lease for a baseball field in a Warsaw suburb.

At home, the Stamford, Connecticut, civic leader helps today's Polish immigrants to America by raising scholarship money for their children.

Recalling the schooling and hard work that produced his business success, Koproski wants to fortify the next generation with the lessons of baseball and the benefits of formal education. He is confident that the recent immigrants will thrive here, and says of Poland:

**"To this new democracy,
I'm bringing a little
bit of America."**



Gerald L. Durley

In 1960, Gerald Durley arrived at Tennessee State University expecting to become a professional basketball player. Instead, he met Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The civil rights struggle became personal the day he tried on a cap in a Nashville department store. Although it was too small, the manager forced him to buy it, asking, "Who's going to buy a hat that's been on your woolly head?" After graduation, the Peace Corps in Nigeria opened other possibilities. "I saw people with the same complexion as me and they were in charge."

Determined to help the black community, Durley became a psychologist, but was unable to give people what they needed most, a belief in themselves. He earned a divinity degree, like his father, and for the past 18 years has been pastor of Atlanta's Providence Missionary Baptist Church.

Today, seeking to bring together all the city's communities, he worries about a growing level of fear and distrust.

**"The greatest challenge
is not to allow barriers
to be reconstructed."**



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.

Igor Branovan and his parents fled the Soviet Union when he was 13 years old, because anti-Semitic quotas on the number of Jews admitted to higher education limited opportunity. In America, Branovan became a surgeon.

While completing his residency, he recognized a high rate of thyroid cancer in New York's Russian-speaking neighborhoods. Branovan attributed this phenomenon to radiation exposure during the disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear reactor in Ukraine in 1986.

He now aggressively campaigns to have cancer research institutions focus more attention and resources on the problem.

Branovan's involvement with America's Russian Jews quickly expanded to a broader concern with the group's integration into American life.

At age 36, he has emerged as a community leader whose appreciation for the opportunities new immigrants find in America is complemented by a desire to preserve the rich heritage that they bring with them.

“As an older generation passes, it's important for the children to retain a sense of their heritage.”

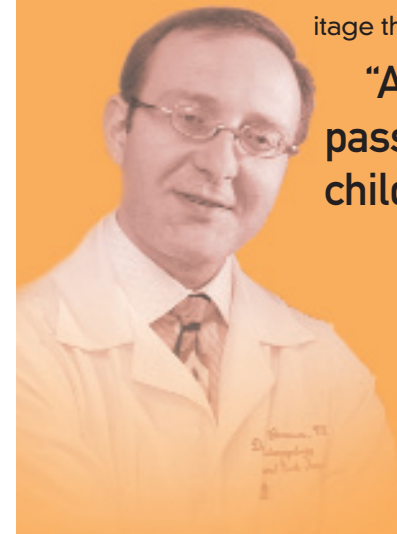
Susan Lew's parents opened a modest grocery store in San Diego when the family arrived, in 1965, after the Chinese communists nationalized their textile business.

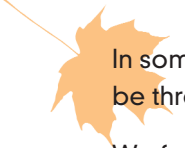
Ten years later, Lew began investing the family's limited savings. Her mother recommended real estate, recalling that when devaluation made money worthless in China, land still held value. Lew first purchased local property and then expanded to Asia. Grateful for her success, she applied her entrepreneurial talent as a San Diego port commissioner, to help transform the region into a center of global commerce.

Today, Lew shares her first-generation experience with new Asian immigrants, urging them to contribute to America's political and economic life by adopting the country's language and culture, but to balance their lives with traditional Asian values, such as devotion to family and community, and respect for education.

Lew and her husband opened a second Chinese restaurant to share more Chinese culture.

“I want to change the perception that Chinese cuisine doesn't go with wine.”





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.

Prem Sharma's childhood in Burma had ended at age 10, in 1942, when the Japanese invasion drove the family through dense jungles, to relative safety but extreme poverty in India.

His life began to change in 1946, when Gandhi arrived in his village. Leaders resisting British occupation reassigned some of the local boys from sabotage to security. Sharma's group formed a ring around Gandhi to protect him from the crush of desperate followers. Drawn by Gandhi's message of nonviolence, Sharma and others left the militant movement.

While attending school, Sharma was caught in the mayhem that ensued after Pakistan was partitioned from India as a Muslim state. Crowded on a train with other Hindus seeking safety in India, he recalls passing a train crammed with Muslim refugees bound for Pakistan.

“They looked at us not with hatred, and we looked at them not with hatred, but with understanding, because we were both victims.”

The dentist and educator recently captured the lessons of his extraordinary childhood in a novel called *Mandalay's Child*. He shares his intensely personal commitment to diversity and tolerance, and his gratitude to America, with many groups, including children in Milwaukee's public schools.



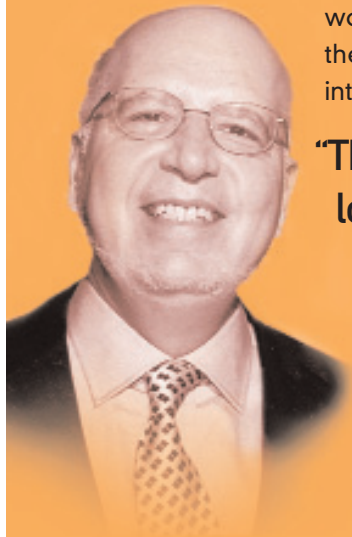
Nicholas V. Montalto

In the early 60s, Nick Montalto, whose grandparents come from Sicily, led a rock-and-roll band in Brooklyn called Herbie Waxman and the Velvetones. Nick was Herbie. The name helped secure jobs in the predominantly Jewish neighborhoods of Flatbush and Borough Park.

At Manhattan College, most of his classmates were Irish. After graduation, Montalto lived in Morocco and then spent two years in the Peace Corps in Iran.

This exposure to other cultures led him to study immigration history at the University of Minnesota, where he discovered the International Institutes that had assisted early immigrants. For the past 25 years, as head of the International Institute of New Jersey, Montalto has helped new immigrants integrate into American society. Many of today's newcomers are fleeing civil wars in West Africa. He worries that some people could be left out of the mainstream unless others assist in their integration.

“There is a success story if you look back over two centuries, but I don't think success is inevitable.”



**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.



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.

Mahjabeen Hassan

Born in Pakistan, the daughter of an air force officer, Mahjabeen Hassan knew early that she wanted to be a doctor. She chose New York for her surgical training and residency because Americans, she believed, would consider her competence as a doctor more important than her status as an immigrant, a Muslim, and a woman.

Her life took an unexpected turn 20 years ago, after she opened her practice, when her father died. His death coincided with her first pilgrimage to Mecca. Despite professional achievement and worldly comfort, she increasingly felt unfulfilled. Her spiritual journey culminated in 2001, when she covered her head with the hijab.

On 9/11, the world changed. Colleagues and patients regarded her with suspicion. During visits to family in Pakistan and other Muslim nations, she heard descriptions of America that bore little resemblance to the adopted country she knew.

She responded as a healer, correcting misperception about Americans with positive messages and countering the apprehension of her patients with compassion.

**“I feel like an ointment;
people find something
soothing.”**



David A. Paterson

When David A. Paterson was denied a summer job after his junior year of college, it was not because he was African-American.

Rather, explained the prospective employer, himself a civil rights activist, it was because he thought that Paterson, blind since infancy, would be unable to pack lunches for day campers.

At age 19, Paterson concluded that school was useless since no one would hire him.

Paterson later attended a living skills program for blind people. Instead of finding empathy, however, Paterson was shocked by some of the racist remarks made about African-Americans.

The two experiences initially left Paterson hostile and bitter. But he also felt empowered, as if fate had provided him with a heightened perception of humanity and an opportunity to foster understanding.

At age 31, in 1985, Paterson entered the New York State Senate, where today he serves as Democratic Leader. "I remembered that feeling of being isolated," he said.

**"I wanted to find people
who felt excluded and,
through the arm of
government, invite them
to be part of things."**



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.**

What is your story?



America's Table:[®] 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)

Cuban American National Council

Islamic Supreme Council of America

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New America Alliance

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