

AMERICA'S TABLE



A THANKSGIVING READER™

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. And it helps us express our gratitude for being part of that story.

On the right-hand pages, 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.

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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.

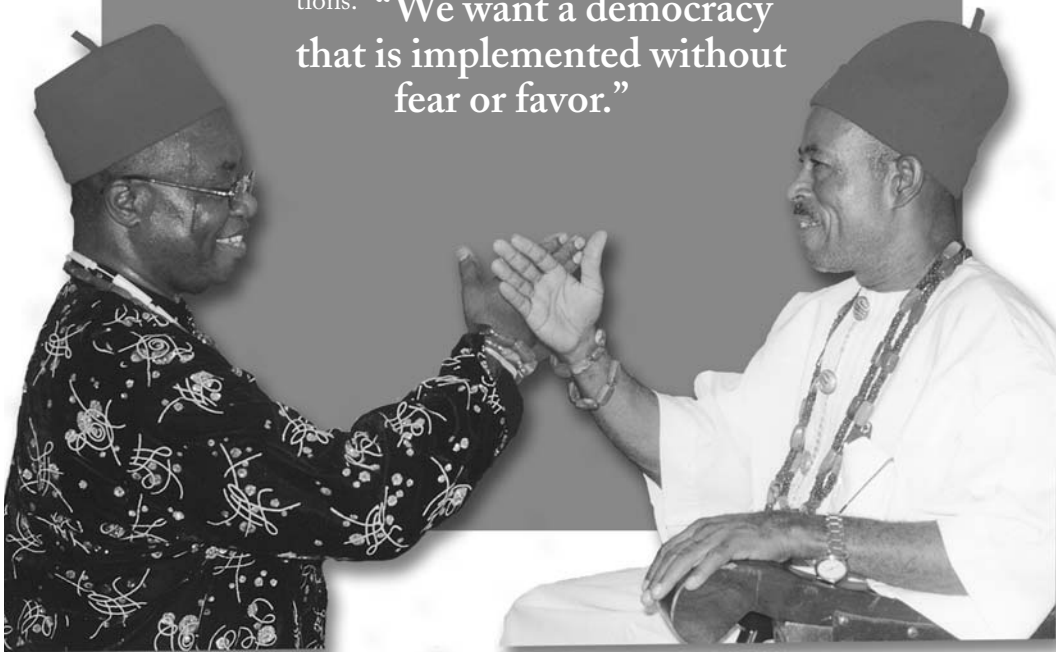
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Nwaguru Rosenbaum Kimura Beck Teters Foulks

Cyril Nwaguru was ten years old, and the oldest of ten siblings, in 1968, when civil war broke out in Nigeria. When the war ended, two years later, Cyril had lost one brother, four uncles, and eight cousins. Family needs preempted his personal dreams until, against his father's wishes, he left Nigeria in his early twenties.

Today, with advanced degrees in social work and urban planning, Cyril Nwaguru applies what he learned about human suffering to help disadvantaged families at Michigan's Wolverine Human Services organization.

And he contributes what he has learned about democracy in America to the people of Nigeria, where he returned last April, as an officer of the World Igbo Congress, to monitor elections.

“We want a democracy that is implemented without fear or favor.”



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.



In December 1938, Fred Rosenbaum's mother hung a cardboard identification tag around his neck and kissed him goodbye as he boarded a train in Vienna for the trip across Nazi-occupied Europe to Holland and passage to England. He was twelve years old and one of roughly 10,000 children saved by strangers in Britain's Kindertransport rescue operation.

Thirty years later, while visiting the Oregon coast with his own young children, he determined that a local underused military base would make a perfect summer camp for the inner-city children whose deprivation he confronted regularly as volunteer chairman of Portland's Housing Authority. Every summer since then, children have spent a week at the beach. **"I thank God that I can**

**participate in this country and
open doors for others."**



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.

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, Korean-American, Irish-American, Italian-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.

Lillian Kimura often speaks with high school students about what her life was like at their age. In April 1942, she had just turned thirteen and was looking forward to the Girl Scouts when the government relocated her family from Glendale, California, to a Japanese internment camp in Owens Valley.

The next three years in confinement shaped a future battling racism, first as a Chicago social worker and ultimately as a high-ranking official of the YWCA determined to increase diversity and opportunities for women.

When she lectures today as a member and past president of the Japanese-American Citizens League, Lillian Kimura uses personal experience to impart her powerful message: “You must be vigilant that people are not oppressed and that their rights are not violated. Anyone could be next.”

“You cannot be complacent about participating in a democracy.”



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.



Kim Beck's family has lived in Wisconsin since the late 1800s. But like many Americans, generations of assimilation had dulled his sense of ethnic identity. When Kim joined the Milwaukee Ethnic Council several years ago, his new role connected him with many recent immigrants. Their stories inspired Beck to research his own.

He discovered the interfaith struggle of his grandparents, Reinhold Block, whose father, August, came from Prussia, and Margaret Dunlevy, daughter of Patrick, who emigrated from Ireland. The marriage between a German Lutheran and an Irish Catholic alienated both families. Beck is now president of the Ethnic Council, which promotes understanding. "Finding common ground can be difficult," he said. One characteristic shared in common, he learned, was the need to preserve ways in which people are different.

"We need to understand that people aren't all the same and don't think alike."



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 tumult of 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.

Charlene Teters' grandmother was a tribal storyteller, imparting Native American wisdom in the Spokane language mixed with English.

In the city, however, "walking with her was almost painful," Charlene recalls. "She wore a skirt, but with moccasins. And she'd wear a lot of beads. I'd trail far behind her."

Charlene's shame made her angry. Years later, her own children's shame made her act. As a university crowd cheered for the football team's Indian mascot, she watched her embarrassed son and daughter try to make themselves invisible. Since then, through speeches, demonstrations, and in her teaching and artwork, Charlene Teters has attacked the abuse of Indian images in American sports and the media. Today, her daughter is learning Spokane.

**"To be an American
does not mean we must forget
our specific cultural markings."**



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 its inhabitants.

We are thankful for the freedom to worship.

We are thankful for the freedom from hunger.

We are thankful for the freedom to challenge 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.

Chihuahua lacked electricity and opportunity, especially for women, when Josephina Avila Foulks was born in the Mexican village, in 1936. As the oldest child, she was second mother to twelve siblings. At age fifteen, and against the wishes of her parents, who expected her soon to be wed and pregnant, she left.

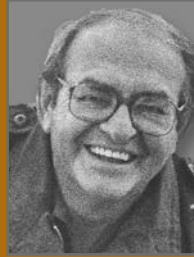
With little education and few prospects, she worked as a mother's helper, learned English, sent money home, and traveled to Texas and then Alaska, where she enrolled at the university. By the time she settled in California, with a husband and young family, Josephina had studied early childhood education and discovered her life's mission—helping disadvantaged children exceed society's limited expectations and their own.

She recently retired from the La Jolla early childhood education center that she started with twelve kids thirty years ago, and where, today, more than 200 children learn to appreciate one another's backgrounds.

“Children need to learn about and respect other cultures.”



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



What is your story?

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)

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National Urban League

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Japanese American Citizens League

Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies

New America Alliance



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