

# Deeper Dive

## Understanding Autumn Holidays through Native American Experiences

by Laura Sanders Arndt

### Did you know November is National Native American, American Indian, and Alaska Native Heritage Month?

**H**alloween and Thanksgiving make autumn the favorite season for many Americans. That's why I wanted to understand more several years ago when an Anishinaabe friend and colleague told me that fall was the dreaded season for Native Americans, our country's Indigenous citizens. She explained that the line-up of three holidays—Columbus Day, Halloween, and Thanksgiving—perpetuated false and harmful stereotypes and stories of our country's Indigenous people year after year. I am a white non-Indigenous woman of European descent. Upon hearing that, I began my journey to learn the truth, and to share what I learn with others so that the voices and authentic stories of our country's Indigenous citizens' can help correct the holiday narrative.

A K'awaika/Diné mom\* shared with me a letter she's written to her child's teacher at the beginning of each school year, asking the non-Indigenous educators to be sensitive to the impacts these holiday celebrations have on her child and other Indigenous students and staff. Seeing these holidays through the words of an Indigenous parent can offer an "I-never-realized-that!" moment, awaken empathy, and create opportunity for personal reflection and positive change. Excerpts of this letter are included below.

#### Columbus Day/Indigenous Peoples Day

"The second Monday of October is typically reserved to 'celebrate' Columbus Day. To teach our children that 'America' was 'discovered' erases the millions of Indigenous people who were the original stewards of the land we now call the United States of America. It also erases the Indigenous people, like our family, that thrive and care for this earth. We kindly ask that any curriculum that reflects this holiday as a celebration be removed."

#### Halloween

"In our household, we celebrate Halloween as a time for children to use their creativity and spunk to express themselves. We encourage school leaders to remind parents and guardians that "Indian" or "Pocahontas" costumes, or any costume that replicates a person's ethnicity or race (i.e.

geisha, Mexican sombrero) in the school setting is [cultural appropriation] and perpetuates racist and oppressive values embedded in today's society. Please understand that this request is not an issue of being overly sensitive or policing a fun holiday. Rather, it's to assert the existence of empirically-based, peer-reviewed research that demonstrates the detrimental effects of stereotypical "Indian" images on Native youth."

#### Thanksgiving

"This holiday continues the narrative that Indigenous people were uncivilized and that the occupation of Indigenous land was a peaceful process. This inaccurate Pilgrim and Indian story—[told in books, videos, images, and in school and community activities—]—creates a facade of peaceful relationships between the Indigenous people and colonizers, and ignores the genocide of Indigenous communities. It also homogenizes Indigenous people. In the United States alone, there are over 580 federally-recognized tribes, a reality that is erased when kids cut construction paper to re-create themselves as the stereotypical Indian crowned with a headband and feather."

#### Now that I know, what can I do?

"The longest journey we will ever make as human beings is the journey from the mind to the heart" (Indigenous knowledge keeper, Chief Darrell Bob of the St'at'imc Nation). Here are some ideas.

1. Reflect on your own family's holiday traditions and how they represent the Indigenous people of our country.
2. Learn more by exploring the resources provided.
3. Make a positive change in your holiday traditions to include the authentic Indigenous story.
4. Share what you've learned with others.

*\* Humble thanks to Christine Nelson (K'awaika/Diné), Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Department of Higher Education, University of Denver, and Jonathan Nelson (Diné), MFA, Creative Director, Badwinds Studios for allowing me to share their words.*

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## Resources to learn more:

### Columbus / Indigenous People's Day

- [Indigenous Peoples' Day: Why it's replacing Columbus Day in many places](#), The Conversation
- [Celebrate Indigenous Peoples' Day in the Classroom](#), TeachHeart.org

### Halloween costumes and cultural appropriation:

- [Three tips to avoid offensive Halloween Costumes](#), NEA Ed Justice
- [Schools that Banned Halloween and Costumes](#), Reader's Digest
- [Transforming Indigenous stereotypes: Stories by us for us with Crystal Echo Hawk](#) podcast. Bioneers

### Thanksgiving story

- [ThanksTaking or ThanksGiving](#) podcast. All My Relations
- [The myths of the Thanksgiving story and the lasting damage they imbue](#), Smithsonian Magazine
- [Day of Mourning](#) video. Smokesygnals

### Children's literature and the Thanksgiving story

- [American Indians in Literature](#)'s blog and book list
- [A Racial Justice Guide to Thanksgiving for Educators and Families](#), Interfaith Worker Justice
- [Decolonizing Thanksgiving Is An Oxymoron – Kids Books Dismantling The Myth of a 'First Thanksgiving.'](#) Raising Luminaries: Books for Littles

### Research a land acknowledge of the Indigenous caretakers

- [Honor Native Land](#). US Dept. of Arts and Culture. Video
- [Native Land Map](#). Identify the original Native caretakers of a place
- [A Guide and Call to Land Acknowledgement](#), US Dept. of Arts and Culture