

Spontaneous order of turkey and touch football

Allen Mendenhall on a Thanksgiving tradition

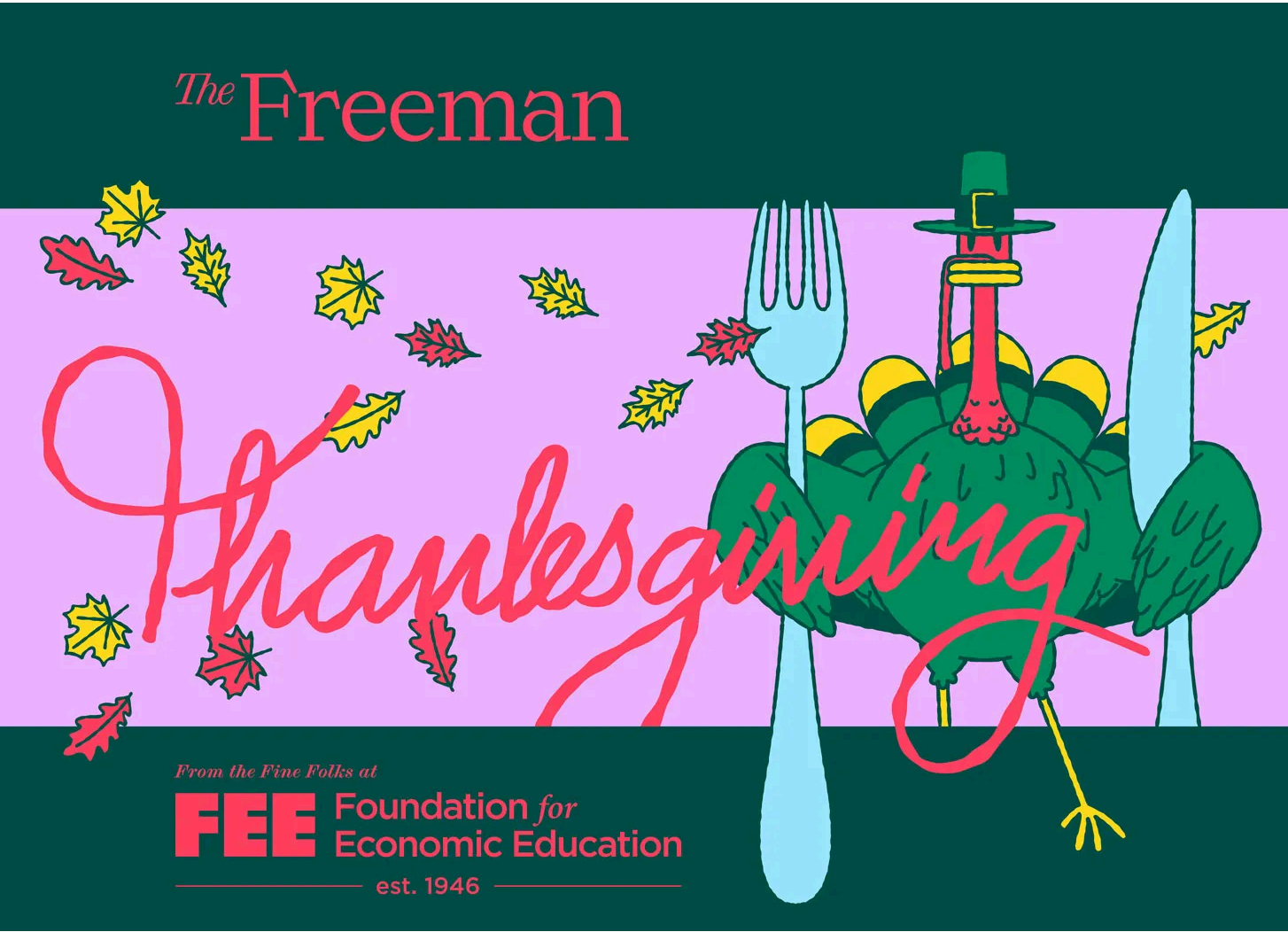
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A veritable library of essays connects Thanksgiving to economics: thoughtful examinations of Black Friday’s employment effects, fascinating studies of the turkey industry’s supply chains, and intelligent papers linking the holiday’s abundance to the prosperity markets generate.

Economists have shown us, quite convincingly, how millions of individual decisions about cranberry sauce and plane tickets produce the magnificent event we call Thanksgiving. These insights are valuable and true. But the heart of Thanksgiving beats with gratitude, not scholarship.

And gratitude, I’ve discovered through years of touch football-induced bruises, operates on less prosaic and pedantic patterns.

Consider: When I was young—though it feels like yesterday—Thanksgiving meant suiting up for the Turkey Bowl at my grandparents’ house. The teams assembled themselves with the inevitability of weather patterns: me, my brother, and my father on one side; my maternal grandfather, Papa, and his sons, my Uncle John and Uncle Steve, identical twins, on the other.

Uncle Steve, a lawyer who’d abandoned the courtroom for the pulpit (a lateral move if ever there was one), and Uncle John, who spent his career in Atlanta’s executive search business finding qualified bigwigs for important positions; these dignified men would transform, the moment that football touched their hands, into creatures feral and

childlike. They roughoused with a dangerous enthusiasm that made my mother and grandmother peer nervously through the kitchen windows.

The game had rules, I suppose, though I couldn't tell you what they were. We made them up as we went along, negotiating disputes with the passionate illogic of Ninth Circuit judges after too much wine. What mattered was the playing, the participation in something that emerged not from careful planning but from the delightful chaos of a happy family gathering on a cool November afternoon.

Years passed, though I couldn't say how or how many. Time performed its usual confidence trick. Suddenly, Thanksgiving had relocated to Uncle John's house, that glorious, red-bricked mansion stuffed with bookcases.

New players materialized: friends of the family, drawn into our orbit like satellites caught by gravity. They'd arrive expecting civilized recreation and discover instead something resembling ill-fated warfare, paradoxically marshalled by love.\

One year, Uncle John recruited a giant who'd played *real* football at TCU: a serious man with serious muscles. My brother, who at that time stood 6'2" and weighed about 240 pounds of college-aged confidence, accidentally launched this poor fellow into a decorative bush.



My brother's high school football instincts had kicked in, those involuntary reactions that coaches drill into young bodies until they're ingrained. The embarrassment on my brother's face when he realized what he'd done! He blushed crimson and stammered apologies while the still-strapping TCU alumnus extracted himself from the shrubbery, bewildered at how he'd ended up there.

Another year—was it the next one?—Uncle Steve's wedding ring flew off his finger during a particularly rambunctious kickoff return. We spent the remainder of the afternoon on hands and knees, searching through yellowing grass with the determination of prospectors. Uncle John arrived with a metal detector, waving it about like a divining rod.

We never found the ring. It's out there still, I suppose, a golden artifact of Thanksgiving past, waiting for a future archaeologist to unearth and puzzle over it.

The house was always full then. My grandparents, Nina and Papa, presided over everything with benevolent attention. My aunt's mother, Dot, laughed at our antics. All my cousins tumbled about, a commotion of youth who belonged to each other without quite knowing why. We took it for granted, the way you take for granted that autumn follows summer.

The most meaningful customs, like our Thanksgiving Day rituals, develop organically. Sure, the date was on our calendar, and there were invitations and headcounts, but no one designed our Turkey Bowl. No commissioner established the rules. No one decreed that Uncle John and Uncle Steve would become children again, that my brother would apologize to a massive stranger in bushes, or that we'd lose a wedding band to the jaundiced earth.

These memorable events arose from lively family interaction, accidental circumstances, and the stirring seasonal atmosphere. Just as markets coordinate the desires of millions into the abundance on our tables, families coordinate love and memory into conventions no architect could devise.

Now my cousins are scattered: married, far away, complicated by their own family dynamics and the relentless arithmetic of adulthood. My cousin John, who was three years old at what feels like our last big game, has graduated from the University of Illinois. He's Steve's son, named for Uncle John.

The new generation is either arriving or not, and my own life has assumed an embarrassing complexity that makes those old Turkey Bowls feel simultaneously immediate and impossibly far away.

Nina and Papa are gone. Dot is gone. The order we created together, that spontaneous flow of football and gratitude, exists now mostly in recollection and in whatever traditions we manage to pass along.

And perhaps that's the deepest truth of Thanksgiving: we cannot preserve these moments, cannot legislate them into permanence, cannot command them to continue.

We can only be grateful we were there, in the grass, looking for lost rings, becoming briefly and completely ourselves within the unpredictable, irreplaceable structure that families, at their best, create together.

This, too, is a kind of market: not of goods but of grace, where what we give and receive can never quite be calculated, graphed, or modeled—only cherished.

Maybe, just maybe, that's enough.



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