

The Power of Turkey

I have found something more compelling than food. It is turkey. The custom of the American Thanksgiving dinner celebration requires turkey to be served, whether people like it or not.

Last Wednesday, the Food Section of the *Sacramento Bee* featured Thanksgiving dinner menus. Gracing the first page of the section was a picture of a Norman Rockwell painting depicting a typical 1940's Thanksgiving Day meal. Children and grandchildren sitting at the festive table, grandfather sitting at the end, but all eyes are on grandmother, who has just arrived at the table carrying her pride and joy, a large, newly roasted, golden brown turkey. The traditional ceremony of grandfather carving and serving the turkey would soon begin.

Let me explain the power of turkey. Last Thursday, I received a telephone call from a reporter at Channel 10 who said she had an idea for a news story: how well are local charities doing with their appeals for Thanksgiving dinner donations? She said some of the station managers and staff wanted very much to see this kind of story on the air. What did I think? "Good idea," I said. Truth be told, it is not a new story but a very old one, and it runs once a year during the annual run-up to various Thanksgiving dinners sponsored by local charities for homeless and hungry people.

What I appreciated about her question was the fact that her media co-workers had given some thought to how they might help homeless people on Thanksgiving Day. A television news story would be their personal contribution. Sensing her own desire, I went on to tell her that the food donations for the Loaves & Fishes Thanksgiving dinner had thus far been slow, and because we were planning to feed more than 2,000 guests, while I was not pessimistic, I was concerned about the lack of donations so far. She seemed convinced that the Channel 10 idea for such a story would be a good one, but not feeling well, she was at home for the day and would call me tomorrow.

The next day, the Friday before our Thanksgiving dinner, which was to be held on the Tuesday coming, Frank Wolf of Channel 3 called to ask how Loaves & Fishes was faring in its preparations for the upcoming Thanksgiving dinner. (A few years back, Frank had shot a documentary film, *A Day in the*

Life of Loaves & Fishes, for an independent television company. The owner of the company donated the finished documentary to assist our fundraising efforts, which we used with some success.) Frank and I chatted a bit, and I told him essentially what I had told Channel 10 the previous day: food donations were slow coming in, I was not pessimistic but I was concerned whether we would have enough to feed 2,000 people. He thought it would make a good television news story, and he would dispatch a television crew. I suggested our food warehouse might be a good visual. He agreed.

A few minutes later, Rosie Gaytan, a Channel 10 news reporter called. She was picking up the threads of the story from the other reporter who had called me on Thursday. She asked if she could come over and do the story. I agreed and suggested that our warehouse might make a good visual. She agreed it would. I confided to her that Channel 3 also wanted to do the story, though I wasn't sure exactly when they were coming. She asked me not to give it away; she was on her way. I said OK.

Stan, the director of food donations, had laid out the warehouse in such a way that when our supporters delivered Thanksgiving donations on the Sunday and Monday before the Thanksgiving dinner (to be held on Tuesday), each food item would have a designated area. He had printed attractive signs and placed them above each set of storage pallets. The signs read, "Peas," "Yams," "Pineapple," "Cranberries," "Apple Juice," "Socks," etc. In addition, Stan had used room dividers to create a large enclosed area in which several dozen 8-foot-long tables were set up. In this area, two signs read, "Pies."

The Channel 3 crew arrived first with Alice Scott, the assigned reporter. She was still touching up her makeup when I came up to the car. I was dressed in a forest green Loaves & Fishes sweatshirt with the large logo front and back. I greeted Alice, and with the cameraman, we walked into the warehouse together. And there was the story. A long warehouse aisle of nearly empty pallets, each section identified by its own sign, and in the large enclosed area there were two pies sitting on one of the tables under the pie sign. "What about turkeys?" she asked. I had not anticipated this question because our donation food appeal asked for turkeys, cooked and sliced, to be delivered a day or two before our dinner. I took her to a large freezer in the corner of the warehouse, opened the door, and looked in; there were six turkeys. I turned to Alice and said, "We have to feed 2,000 people next Tuesday, our cupboards

are bare, but I am confident that the people of Sacramento will once again work the miracle of the loaves and fishes.” They shot film for almost 30 minutes, and then it was time for Alice to do her stand-up piece. She opened the freezer door, took out a turkey, held it up to the camera, and said, “Loaves & Fishes does not have enough turkeys for its Thanksgiving dinner.”

No sooner had Channel 3 driven away than Rosie Gaytan of Channel 10 drove up. I took Rosie on the same tour, including the nearly empty turkey freezer. The camera crew filmed for 20 minutes, Rosie did her stand-up piece, and they left. That was it.

The next morning, Saturday, all six telephone lines lit up, and calls about donations of turkeys were still coming in to the office late that same afternoon. All day Sunday, the same. People drove to Loaves & Fishes bringing turkeys – one turkey, two turkeys, ten turkeys. And if they did not have turkeys, they brought money for us to purchase turkeys. One person gave \$500 to buy turkeys. The automobile traffic in front of Loaves & Fishes became so backed up on Sunday that people driving to donate turkeys had to wait in line for as long as 20 minutes before they could park in front of the loading dock of the warehouse. People drove from as far away as Modesto, Stockton, and Lodi to bring turkeys. On Monday morning, all six telephone lines lit up again, and an absolute turkey frenzy ensued. By the end of Monday, the day before our Thanksgiving dinner, Loaves & Fishes had received more than 1,000 frozen turkeys and enough cooked and sliced turkeys to feed 6,000 people. At least \$5,000 had been contributed to purchase turkeys for the Thanksgiving dinner. In a 48-hour period, Loaves & Fishes had been overwhelmed with food. The warehouse area set aside for cooked pies filled up during the first couple of hours on Sunday, and emergency storage space had to be found to store all the pies. More than 1,000 gallons of apple juice came through the door. “Wonderfully overwhelmed” best describes my amazement.

There are some symbols people will die for, and believe me when I write this: Thanksgiving Day turkey is one of those symbols.