**Thankful we can speak our minds this Thanksgiving**

By Patty Rhule

At the Freedom Forum, we’ve thought about creating T-shirts that read: “Free speech: Complicating Thanksgiving Dinner since 1791.”

But this pandemic-era Thanksgiving, as families and friends assemble around a Zoom screen or an actual dining room table to celebrate, all of the freedoms of the First Amendment should be high on the list as we count our blessings.

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution set a standard for the world. Our founding fathers said that Americans should have the right — without government interference — to speak their minds, practice a faith or choose not to, publish their ideas, assemble to protest or support a cause and petition the government for change.

“This is what is so great about America,” says social strategist Philippa Hughes. “We should be giving thanks that we can all have these amazing divergent views and nobody’s going to get killed for having these conversations.”

Shocked by the divisions revealed during the 2016 presidential election, Hughes launched a dinner club called [Blueberries & Cherries](https://www.blueberriesandcherries.com/), bringing into her Washington, D.C., dining room die-hard Democrats and righteous Republicans, armed with forks and knives, to discuss their beliefs in hopes of better understanding each other. Each meal ended with a blueberry cherry crisp, deliciously bridging the blue and red divide.

Later, supported by a grant, Hughes expanded her events across the country into [Looking for America](https://www.lookingforamerica.us/), which hosts art events and conversations in which people discuss what it means to be American.

Hughes’s goal is to break down the “polarization industrial complex” that’s often fed by social media. “That is a construct we have created,” she says. “There is profit and power to be had from keeping us polarized. I don’t profit from that, so why do we let others profit from that?”

Thanksgiving 2020 brings families together after a wrenching year of political upheaval and a deadly pandemic, when Americans exercised their First Amendment freedoms with newfound vigor:

* People in every state [**assembled**](https://www.freedomforum.org/assembly/) to protest police violence against Black Americans. Citizens also marched in support of the police;
* In the 100th year since women [**petitioned**](https://www.freedomforum.org/petition/) successfully for the right to vote, voters turned out in record numbers to make California’s Sen. Kamala Harris the first woman and woman of color elected vice president;
* The **free press** kept people informed of campaign news, social unrest and the latest scientific advice about COVID-19;
* Faith congregations, which refrained from gathering in person, worshipped through Zoom and Facebook or held drive-in services. Some filed suit, saying government rules restricting attendance [**violated their religious freedom**](https://www.freedomforum.org/2020/11/18/buckle-up-america-were-in-for-a-wild-first-amendment-ride/).

On Thanksgiving, [**free speech**](https://www.freedomforum.org/speech/) will be at the forefront of your dinner table. Can you, with your Trump 2024 bumper sticker, keep things civil with your niece in the Black Lives Matter T-shirt? Hughes has some advice for how to keep this from being a dinner sponsored by Tums.

“A great way to begin your meal is just to be grateful we can do this and have this conversation at all,” Hughes says. “That’s the beauty of America … You can have deeply held views and express them and we don’t have to hate each other.”

**Tip No. 1: Pretend you’re an anthropologist. Be curious and ask questions, but don’t interrogate.**

Ask the kind of questions that show you’re listening, Hughes says. “Say, ‘Oh, tell me more about that …’ Try to have a sense of delight and joy about it. It’s fun to hear stories, especially when it’s your family. You had fun with them before; you can continue to have fun.”

**Tip No. 2: Share your experiences in a nonthreatening way.**

It can be frustrating if the other side does not seem to be curious about you. “Find ways to share yourself — real stories beyond the data and the talking points,” Hughes says.

**Tip No. 3: Don’t pepper folks with facts.**

When it comes to forming opinions, [facts don’t always matter](https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=128490874).

Studies have shown that our perceptions are formed more by our experiences — however limited — than anything else, Hughes says. People who are confronted with challenging information tend to dig in their heels rather than open their minds to other possibilities. “People don’t want to feel dumb.”

**Tip No. 4: No name-calling. If things get too heated, step away.**

Hughes says conservatives may avoid conversations for good reason. “They’ll say … ‘I don’t want to get yelled at or called stupid by the liberals.’ That’s a very valid concern. The left does spend a lot of time calling the other side idiots.”

A liberal in a family of conservatives, Hughes says, “We’ve gotten close to not speaking. If you are close to that, step away, leave the room, get some fresh air. Take a walk together.”

**Tip No. 5: Empathy does not equal endorsement.**

“We may never reach common ground, but at least we’ll come to an understanding of why the person believes what they … believe,” says Hughes. “The only thing we can agree on is our humanity. We don’t have to agree on policy and how to fix problems.”

**Final tip:** Always pass the dishes to the right. That’s not a political statement, [it’s just etiquette.](https://emilypost.com/advice/passing-food-at-the-table/)