

Healing Thanksgiving

*"Indigenous Perspectives" - Monthly Broadcast on HealthyLife.Net
13 - November 26, 2021*

For audio podcast:

<http://www.ecologia.org/news/13.HealingThanksgivingNov2021.mp3>



*Randy with gift of locally grown corn,
part of the "End Thanksgiving Insult to Native Americans" petition drive*

Randy Kritkauský: Greetings, or may I say Bozho in Potawatomi, to those joining us for today's Indigenous Perspectives show. I'm Randy Kritkauský, an enrolled Potawatomi tribal member, and the host of Indigenous Perspectives. Joining me today for the program is Carolyn Schmidt. Our program theme today is "Healing Thanksgiving."

Indigenous Perspectives originates from Vermont, in the United States. Vermont is located on lands that the Abenaki people called N'dakinna. It's the un-ceded traditional territory of the Abenaki people who for thousands of years have been, and continue to be, stewards of the lands found here and across the border in Québec province in Canada.

Carolyn Schmidt: We begin by acknowledging where we come from, both culturally and geographically, as this program, Indigenous Perspectives, focuses on understanding our roots in Mother Earth and our connections with our ancestors.

Randy: Let me frame today's show by trying to explain our goal. We want the listeners at the end of the show to be more comfortable celebrating Thanksgiving while being aware of Native American concerns.

This has been a difficult year for our country. People are up in arms and fraught and confused about taking down statues and what is to be taught in schools about history. And Thanksgiving raises many of those uncomfortable concerns. I hope by the end of the show, we can lay some of those to rest for you and help you to plot a path to celebrating Thanksgiving in a joyous manner in your household.

Let me begin by making a very simple, but very important point about what Thanksgiving is. Probably many listeners have the notion, which they haven't examined, that somehow this venerable holiday has been handed down to us from time immemorial and that it's our obligation to celebrate it as it always was - this being the 400th year of what we consider to be the quote unquote original Thanksgiving.

But the idea that it is such a rigid fixed holiday is actually not very accurate. Before we look into the brief history, reflect on your own experiences with Thanksgiving. Are you celebrating this year exactly as your family did decades ago? Has the menu changed? The decorations? The activities, such as watching a movie or sports event? Probably your Thanksgiving holiday has changed in some very significant ways.

So too, it is with our national holiday. First, to begin with, the original Thanksgiving barely resembled what we literally paint as the original event in 1621. You know, the image we see on postcards and wrapping paper and children's books. Yes, Pilgrims did hold a harvest feast, giving thanks that

some of them - about 50% - had survived their difficult first year. Did they invite Indians? No, at least not initially. Though the Wampanoag, who had indeed provided settlers with corn and help them to learn how to plant it, first watched the Pilgrims warily from a distance. For good reason, which we will get into in this program. They wanted to watch these new arrivals and see if they could get a better understanding of what the settlers were up to. It's possible and likely, according to some accounts, that the Pilgrims did actually eventually involve the indigenous observers, perhaps on the second day of the festive celebration.

Autumn feasts of thanksgiving did become part of public life of New Englanders during the 18th century. But the notion of it being a joint celebration with Indians was not an element of that celebration for its first century or two. Thanksgiving first became a national holiday rather than a regional holiday when President Lincoln declared in 1863, that the last Thursday in November would be a national holiday of Thanksgiving. He did this in response to public pressure to create an event to affirm unity in the midst of the civil war.

It is at this time that the notion of Indians and settlers jointly celebrating also appeared and took root in our understanding of what the event is about. The national event took place - excuse me, the national event took notice - of a Plymouth town's efforts to promote itself as the place where New England and the nation were founded. While not historically accurate, the story appealed to a population that wanted to believe that a good Christian community had founded our republic. That idea became ever more appealing as the original Protestant settlers became nervous about the appearance of Catholics and Jewish immigrants. So once again, we see the holiday morphing.

By the end of the 19th century, as the nation became divided over the mistreatment of former slaves, the Northeastern United States wanted to distinguish itself from the pro-slavery South and Midwest. So Thanksgiving took on new themes, such as emphasizing the importance of the Mayflower Compact, which many school children know promised a - quote - "just and equal law and self rule under a democratic society." This idea was pushed to the forefront. New dimensions were piled onto the holiday.

As the end of the 19th century witnessed the tragic final conquest of Native Americans in the west and several brutal military campaigns, New Englanders once again transformed Thanksgiving into a tale about how they treated

Indians well and fairly. While nothing could be further from the truth, the myth sunk its roots into the American psyche and our understanding of what Thanksgiving is.

Carolyn: And I can give an example that we discussed in our show last year also, of my own family experience and Thanksgiving tradition. My own *[birth]* family's experience - mainstream American - focused on the Indians, as well as the Pilgrims, but in a way that carried forth many, many problems. My father loved reading *[aloud]* The Wall Street Journal's annual editorial titled "The Desolate Wilderness," which is an excerpt from a Pilgrim's journal of their experiences. And the visions there - it's a very dramatic story about the Pilgrims setting sail into the unknown and dealing with lots of hardships and ultimately triumphing. But the one excerpt is "... and for the season, it was winter and they that know the winters of that country know them to be sharp and violent, and subject to cruel and fierce storms, dangerous to travel to known places much more to search an unknown coast. Besides what could they see, but a hideous and desolate wilderness full of wild beasts and wild men. If they looked behind them, there was the mighty ocean which they had passed and was now as a main bar and gulf to separate them from all the civil parts of the world."

Incredibly dramatic, very moving on a human scale and also not really historically accurate. But nevertheless, this was my an important part of my family's Thanksgiving tradition. But the year when I decided it was time to read it aloud and introduce our young daughter and my husband to this part of my birth family's tradition, they both being indigenous people with an indigenous sense, reacted. They were horrified, they were shocked. They stopped it. And it was a real wake up call to me that there were many other points of view on this whole issue.

Randy: So last year in a commemoration of this family event, I sent a very polite letter to The Wall Street Journal editorial board, asking them if they would consider retiring - I didn't say tear down or pull down your editorial, I said, did you consider please retiring - this 17th century editorial? And I had absolutely no response. Still have had no response. So some months ago I began to plot another strategy to correct this misrepresentation of who Native Americans were. And I sent a box of corn to The Wall Street Journal about a week ago. And in the box, I put a copy of a petition that I had organized with Change.org, which is online. And the petition asks once again, that The Wall

Street Journal take down what is essentially an insulting and racist 17th century commentary.

Carolyn: I'll just cut in - and then the title of the petition is "Take down the Thanksgiving Insult", and Randy can explain why he feels so strongly that this truly is an insult.

Randy: So the issue, of course, is referring to us as "wild men" and this country as a place of "savage hue." And then further stipulating that there really was no organized civil society here. And on and on. You know, it's, it's, it's 17th century views. And we do live now in the 21st century. So why did I send these guys corn? The reason is quite simply that sending them written missives didn't seem to be registering with them, and didn't really make them confront the fact that their historical narrative is grossly historically accurate.

For example, they show no gratitude toward the Wampanoag, the indigenous people they encountered, who gave them the ability to plant and harvest corn without which the settlement would have vanished from starvation.

Absolutely no acknowledgement of this whatsoever. So I filled this box with beautiful Indian corns of various varieties and drew their attention to it saying, "Hey, hold this in your hand and remember what Thanksgiving, the first Thanksgiving was actually about. It appears nowhere in your editorial."

So we are awaiting a response from The Wall Street Journal, as of the day we make this program [*November 21, 2021*] and we have, in order to make that point, succeeded in getting 50,000 people to sign on to our petition. I printed out the list of names - it's quite a stack of paper - and put it in the box with the corn. We'll see if The Wall Street Journal respects our requests, at least for an acknowledgement, no less an explanation. We've also done something else, which is we've sponsored along with Change.org: a contest to write a 21st century version of Thanksgiving to replace a 17th century outdated version of Thanksgiving. And one that is respectful of both the indigenous people who were here and respectful of Mother Earth.

The issue here is more than just an insult, a mild infringement of our sensitivities. What we're really dealing with here is an editorial that platforms an attitude of dehumanizing Native Americans that has for 400 years - or perhaps 500 years, if we go back to the time of Columbus - dehumanized us, such that we could be hunted down, eliminated and destroyed by disease - sometimes disease intentionally spread. That attitude of othering us is

written all over this editorial. Perhaps - perhaps - the editorial board didn't see that. We hope our petition will help them to see that. So what we're asking for in our alternative editorial, which will be posted on the Change.org website, is to model for them how in the 21st century, we can come together around this holiday and we can heal as a nation by being respectful of our diversity. And we can cease othering one another.

Carolyn: One of the points that I've been wrestling with is, I mean, I really liked the whole elementary school pageant image of the Indians and the Pilgrims happily sitting down together and sharing in peace. It seemed like racial brotherhood, and communication, and coming together, and all these good things. And then the question is, since we're looking at everything surrounding the actual start of what's now called Thanksgiving, and it has so many problems, how do we move forward to keep the good things without counting on - without having to distort our sense of what really happened? This is something that frankly I'm still wrestling with.

Randy: Well, I think we're all wrestling with it. The whole nation is wrestling with it. As I said, this is the time in which we live. How, how do we hold onto threads of venerable traditions that give meaning to our lives, while getting rid of parts of those traditions which do harm? So I think the answer to your question, and I think we're going to return to this theme again and again, is quite obviously, and simply to go back to, what is giving thanks? What is Thanksgiving about? It's showing gratitude. The editorial of The Wall Street Journal does not show gratitude toward indigenous people.

And quite frankly, for me as an environmentalist and someone who's worked on environmental issues around the globe for decades, the second companion piece of the editorial is just as disturbing because in it, they claim that it was the industry and the technology, the superior technology and knowledge of Europeans, that made this nation great and rich. To quote from that editorial: "We remind ourselves that the richness of this country was not born in the resources of the earth, though they be plentiful, but in the men that took its measure. For that reminder is everywhere, in the cities, towns, farms, roads, factories, homes, hospitals, schools, that spread everywhere over that wilderness."

This is a year when just a week ago, world leaders gathered to figure out how to put an end to climate change. And they universally recognized that this model of exploiting the earth and its resources is rapacious and damaging. On

the contrary, The Wall Street Journal is celebrating the exploitation of resources.

So when I say there is an insult here, it is not just to indigenous people. It is, apropos of other programs that we have broadcast, an insult to people - living beings - that we consider to be our kin. We need to be respectful. We need to be grateful to them. So again, you keep coming back to what is the essence of Thanksgiving? It is giving thanks. It is giving thanks, not just to our fellow man, but to our fellow creatures.

Carolyn: So we're going to close this first segment with a quotation from a speech by a member of the Wampanoag nation, made on Thanksgiving day, 1970. He ends his speech saying, "What has happened cannot be changed. But today we work toward a better America, a more Indian America, where people and nature, once again are important." In the next segment of our show today, we'll pick up and explain the backstory and give context and information from Frank James' speech. Stay tuned.

Segment Two:

Randy: Welcome back to the second segment of Indigenous Perspectives. Today's show on Healing Thanksgiving returns us to the question of, what is an indigenous perspective on Thanksgiving? It turns out that it's quite complex, especially if you're an indigenous person. Carolyn is going to give us some insights into the life of one Native American activist who tried to resolve that dilemma. Carolyn?

Carolyn: Yes. On the one hand it's complex, on another hand, it's in a way pretty simple. There is a fascinating Wampanoag leader, Frank James, and the Wampanoag were the tribe that bore the brunt of the first Pilgrims' arrival, settlement, the interactions and the subsequent loss of land and life for their own people. So Frank James in 1970 was 46 years old and he was a leader in his own community. His background was that he had been in the US Coast Guard Auxiliary during World War II. After that - he's interested in music, he was a talented musician - he graduated from the New England Conservatory of Music but was unable to get a job as a musician in mainstream society because of his being a Native American. And so he became a music teacher and director of music of the regional schools on Cape Cod.

So for Thanksgiving Day 1970, this was the 350th anniversary of this traditional Thanksgiving. In 1970, the Massachusetts Department of

Commerce wanted a Wampanoag speaker to participate. They selected Frank James, but when he showed the organizers his speech ahead of time, as they had requested, they turned it down, denying him the chance to present the indigenous point of view about Thanksgiving!

So in response, Frank James and other Wampanoag organized their own event called the National Day of Mourning. And he gave his speech there. So he was heard. And this national day of mourning on Thanksgiving Day is something that has been picked up and carried forth till today. So from his original written speech, quote:

“Today is a day of celebrating for you, but it is not a time of celebrating for me. It is with a heavy heart that I look back upon what happened to my people. The Pilgrims had hardly explored the shores of Cape Cod four days before they had robbed the graves of my ancestors and stolen their corn, wheat and beans. Massasoit, the great leader of the Wampanoag, knew these facts, yet he and his people welcomed and befriended the settlers, little knowing that before 50 years were to pass, Wampanoags would no longer be a free people. The Wampanoags and other Indians living near the settlers would be killed by their guns or dead from diseases that we caught from them. What has happened cannot be changed. But today we work toward a better America, a more Indian America, where people and nature, once again are important. We the Wampanoags still walk the lands of Massachusetts, our spirit refuses to die.”¹

Randy: Carolyn, this is a really remarkable statement by a remarkable man. And what is, I think noteworthy is the conclusion of his speech, which goes back to the themes of our earlier programs, when we were talking about Indian residential schools and the notion of forgiveness, but not forgetting.

And I think what this man is quite heroically offering is to try to move forward, but recognizing that other people in this nation need to realize that for the Wampanoag and others of us who had relatives in residential schools, et cetera, that we can't forget the injustice and cruelty that occurred. On the other hand, even though his tribe is arguing that for them, it is a national day of mourning and not celebration, he's not saying that we should all throw

¹ Frank James' 1970 speech has been quoted and reprinted in many different sources, including: James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996, page 96, and David J. Silverman, *This Land is Their Land: The Wampanoag Indians, Plymouth Colony, and the Troubled History of Thanksgiving*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019, pages 13-15.

away the turkey and sit around and mourn for the day. What he's saying is, let's bear in mind the reality of this history and then figure out how to move on and celebrate the land and the people and show gratitude toward the land. It's, it's really a remarkable accomplishment.

Carolyn: I'd say also that you really gain strength from looking honestly at your problems and where they come from. I mean, this is true for a lot of basic psychology of how individuals cope with problems in their personal lives. But I think it also applies very much to what a nation and a culture of people can do. I think we have to look honestly at the problems, the loss of land, the loss of life, all the assaults that occurred by the white settlers against the Indians, because that is part of the reality. But then we need to use that as a springboard for how can we, how can we do it better? And again, I - I keep being struck by James's closing comment about "what has happened cannot be changed. But today we work toward a better America, a more Indian America where people and nature once again are important." And he was making this point in 1970, just a little bit, I guess, six months after the first Earth Day. And it's pointing us in a direction that I think is an important shared element that we need to acknowledge.

Randy: And that is indeed is the theme of the writing contest that we sponsored. We weren't asking people to lament all of the injustices and itemize them for Thanksgiving. We were asking them to help plot a course toward healing Thanksgiving, rescuing the essence of being grateful and affirming our relationship with the planet. It's a positive reaction. And, I think, one worthy of our most intense effort, and really courage, you know, at this particular time in our history.

Carolyn: I think another thing we could be grateful for in addition to our own being alive, having a nice meal, being with family, whatever it is that strikes us on Thanksgiving Day, is also to be grateful that we can understand the concerns of others and be grateful that we have an ability in this country to try to deal with them openly and fairly as we move forward.

Randy: We'll take a break and be back in a few minutes.

Segment Three

Carolyn: Welcome back to Indigenous Perspectives. We've been talking today about the indigenous perspective on Thanksgiving, as shown by the speech of

Frank James, and also about The Wall Street Journal's Thanksgiving editorial, giving the mainstream perspective. So we're a society of free speech. We've heard two different points of view on this topic. To what extent does this sort of all balance out? Randy?

Randy: It's almost obvious embarrassing to have to state it, but it is unfortunately a reality of life in this country that some voices are amplified far, far more than others. And The Wall Street Journal, of course, is the epitome of affluent white entitled America. Until the USA Today newspaper appeared, it was the most read widely circulated newspaper in the United States. It still has, I believe more than a million readers. So on the one hand, we've got an editorial that's appeared for 60 years, showcased in a prestigious newspaper, basically dehumanizing indigenous people. And on the other hand, we have Frank James, the descendant of a Wampanoag, presumably in the view of The Wall Street Journal descendant of the "wild men," trying to correct this misunderstanding. His voice, as eloquent as it is, is small compared to that of The Wall Street Journal.

So that is why, after my unsuccessful attempt to write a letter as another single Native American to The Wall Street Journal, I enlisted the support of others, and 50,000 people have supported my effort. This is one of the ways that we can get our message out and get it heard and get it understood. This radio program is another way that we can get our message out, but the balance - or the imbalance - is still there. It's an uphill struggle to be heard and to be understood respectfully on our own terms.

Carolyn: I think that's a really good point about the continuing struggle and also the need for allies, including plenty of people who are not directly involved themselves in the displacement and experiences of the First Nations / Native American people when the white settlers moved in. There's an analytical, thoughtful comment by an author who wrote a book on this topic. And he says, quote: "Focusing on the Pilgrims' noble, religious and democratic principles, instead of on the shameful Indian wars and system of slavery more typical of the colonies, enabled whites to think of the so-called Black and Indian problems as Southern and Western exceptions to an otherwise inspiring national heritage."²

When I read this, it really struck me because that was how I had been. And to a certain extent, as someone from the Northeastern US, still have the sense you

² Silverman, This Land is Their Land, page 6.

want to think we are the good people and relegate the problems in our society and in our history to the background. And I think part of correcting this imbalance is putting the other perspectives in the foreground so that they're out there and their reality is acknowledged.

Randy: I think to return to this theme of the advantage of The Wall Street Journal is, as Carolyn just pointed out, what The Wall Street Journal is telling us is what we really kind of want to hear. We want to be patted on the back and told that we were you know, wonderfully moral people who founded a republic on religious principles and democracy and law equal for all. And if you come along as an indigenous person and start questioning that, you immediately make your audience feel uncomfortable.

That's why we titled today's show "Healing Thanksgiving." It's not our purpose to pop the balloon of tradition. It's our purpose to rescue from the murky mire of factual misrepresentations, what is worthy of being rescued and to cling to it and move it forward. Just like Frank James says at the end of his speech. This is enormously challenging. It's the work of social change - not to tear things down, but to replace what is there with something better and to allow us to act on and fulfill our aspirations instead of being distracted by our delusions.

Carolyn: And I'd say this is really important for the holiday of Thanksgiving, because for people in the United States, for many people, it really is their favorite holiday. It's always been our daughter's favorite holiday, and it's a - people envision fun, family, friends, good food, tradition, celebration, being thankful for whatever it is that people value the most for their own lives. And these are all really good things. So how do we keep them and build on them without doing damage?

Randy: Tradition is a double-edged sword. It can enrich our lives, it can give us moral guidance, or it can blind us and give us an overblown sense of ourselves. So what we're looking here today in this program is to give listeners permission to rethink, and re-examine their understanding of what this day is all about. And with their families to work together, to make it live up to the promise of what we'd like to think was the first Thanksgiving, which is community sharing food and understanding and gratitude with others who are quite diverse, and also showing gratitude toward Mother Earth, which we all know now is desperately in need. So I think we'll hold that thought and

take a break and come back and conclude with some examples of how holidays can [be] and are constantly being transformed.

Segment Four:

Randy: Welcome back to the final segment of Indigenous Perspectives and our Thanksgiving show titled “Healing Thanksgiving.” I want to return us to the theme that I brought up at the beginning, which is that holidays, celebrations, are really something that we have a remarkable degree of control over. We are not tradition bound. And that indeed they must evolve in changing historical circumstances. If you can take that lesson away from today's show and apply it to your Thanksgiving celebration this year and going forward, I think we will have made enormous progress.

Let me give you an example of the kind of thing I'm talking about. The holiday that we refer to in the United States as Labor Day has for most of us now become an end of the summer long weekend, where we have a barbecue or go for a mini vacation and celebrate the end of summer.

We've almost forgotten what its origin was. Its origin was to celebrate labor – workers - primarily industrial manufacturing workers - from a time period when our society was largely composed of people who worked on farms or worked in factories. Labor Day was created at the end of the 19th century by the labor movement. And it was the aspiration of the creators that they would draw attention to the needs of workers for such things as an eight hour work day. They immediately ran up against an obstacle, a problem. And the problem was that there was another labor day that was celebrated all around the world, very, very prominently in Europe, on May 1st. The problem was that for Americans and for people who are essentially politically fairly conservative, May 1 is also a day when socialists and communists celebrate the power of the working class. American unions and American government leaders really didn't want to go there.

To make it even more complicated, the [May 1] day of Labor Day is too uncomfortably close to a painful event in American history, which is the Haymarket affair, which in [May 4] 1886 resulted in a great deal of violence, a dynamite explosion, killing of police and killing of workers in Chicago. The country was on edge about how it felt concerning labor agitation. So in 1886, the movement began to have Labor Day moved from May 1st to the early days of September.

So you see, we are constantly figuring out ways of solving problems of reconciling values within our society. We're constantly re-inventing the day. And again, I doubt that many of us are celebrating unions any longer on September you know, Labor Day you know, it's, it's the backyard barbecue, but so be it, let's try to hold onto the original meaning when we celebrate that day, while we're having that barbecue. It's kind of the theme that we're talking about for Thanksgiving: while you're having that meal, take a little bit of time to be mindful of the serious, deeply serious implications of what the holiday is about.

Give you one more example, what we call Veterans Day. It was originally Armistice Day, celebration of the end of World War One. It's still celebrated in France and across Europe as the end of the war to end all wars, World War One. It was a celebration of peace and the prospect of peace. In the United States, it's become a time to parade the military and military hardware and celebrate the war makers and the war machinery. So we have a way of inverting, transforming constantly, our holidays. It's okay. It's okay to tamper with tradition. We do not need to be tradition bound. We need to have permission to remake our important moments on the calendar so that they reflect our current needs.

Carolyn: I think also an important point is that people are always selecting parts of history that speak most deeply to them, parts of history that they are impacted by, things, they are proud of, things they are worried about. So the question is, how do we frame them? And how do we, as Frank James said, "work toward a better America, in this case, a more Indian America where people and nature once again are important."

Randy: So imagine it this way. We're not asking you to adopt Thanksgiving cards and little cutouts on your wall saying this is the day of mourning. That's probably very appropriate to the sentiments and deeply held feelings of the indigenous people who first encountered [*the settlers*]. And that would include Frank James and his relatives.

But look at it this way. Imagine we're coming up to another holiday, another one of our favorite holidays, which is, for many of us, Christmas. So if you're a Christian and you celebrate Christmas, does knowing someone else is going to be celebrating Hanukkah at approximately the same time diminish your Christmas? Does knowing that someone who is African-American and chooses to celebrate Kwanzaa instead of Christmas diminish your holiday? Or

might you possibly participate in and learn more about their celebrations and be enriched by looking at different ways of celebrating the same kinds of values?

I think that is, I hope that is the message of today's program. You are in charge of what you want this date to be. Maybe this year, you will read this brief quote from Frank James about what an indigenous perspective was on Thanksgiving. Don't think it will spoil your Thanksgiving. It might just enrich it.

So with that, we'll sign off. And I want to say once again to our viewers, Migwetch, thank you for listening. I hope that this broadcast has given you time and space to reconnect with your roots in Mother Earth and with your ancestral roots. Before your busy day distracts you from this moment, I encourage you to take a few minutes to reach out and feel the presence of living flora and fauna. And perhaps even that of your ancestors. Allow yourself to touch their presence, capture that moment and hold onto it.

And also, if you will write to me and let me know about your experience, I can be reached at randykritkausky@hushmail.com, or through my website, www.randykritkausky.com, where you can also find transcripts and supplemental materials for indigenous perspective radio programs. That will include for today's program, a reference to the book that we have borrowed from very heavily today. The book is this land is their land written by David J. Silverman. The subtitle of the book is the Wampanoag Indians, Plymouth colony, and the troubled history of Thanksgiving. It is a rich source of information about the complexity that surrounds this holiday.

Carolyn: And on Randy's website, also, he has information about the Wall Street Journal petition and everything that has followed along from that.

Randy: Migwetch. Goodbye. See you again soon.

References:

David J. Silverman, This Land is Their Land: The Wampanoag Indians, Plymouth Colony, and the Troubled History of Thanksgiving. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019.

“End Thanksgiving Insult to Native Americans”. Change.org petition started by Randy Kritkausky

<https://www.change.org/p/end-the-wall-street-journal-s-thanksgiving-insult-to-native-americans>

“Indigenous Perspectives” monthly podcast is hosted by Randy Kritkauskay, and broadcast on the fourth Thursday of each month, 12 noon Eastern Time (US & Canada), on HealthyLife.net.



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