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True Thanksgiving is Always Autobiographical

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Thanksgiving Day is wonderful. Delightfully, though cards and family gatherings are an important part of its celebration, gifts have never become a part of Thanksgiving Day. It has not been commercialized like other community holidays. Each person is free to fill the day with meaning designed by them self and each can look forward to the day with personal anticipations.

As our families grow and mature, our greatest hope and anticipation is that all of the family can be together on this day. But, the danger for thanksgiving is when “anticipations” (hopes) become “expectations” (the demand for things we believe we deserve). Anticipations fill the year and our lives with brightness; expectations dull the light of events and often steal our joy with the thoughts of what we don’t have. This year, our family is thankful that our oldest grandchild can be with us, even if for only a short while. We anticipate this thanksgiving with the giving of thanks that he will be with us. The joy of this celebration is enhanced with the realization that soon, inevitably, we will not all be together on this, which is for us, the most important of days.

Do you know the song, “You and Me Against the World?” Its lyrics are:

“You and me against the world. Sometimes it seems like you and me against the world. When all the others turn their backs and walked away You can count on me to stay.

“Remember when the circus came to town. And you were frightened by the clown. Wasn't it nice to be around someone that you knew Someone who was big and strong and looking out for you.

“You and me against the world. Sometimes it feels like you and me against the world. And for all the times we've cried I always felt that God was on our side

“And when one of us is gone. And one of us is left to carry on. Then remembering will have to do. Our memories alone will get us through.

“Think about the days of me and you. You and me against the world .”

This is the idea: “And when one of us is gone, and one of us is left to carry on; then remembering will have to do; our memories alone will get us through.” If we relish and celebrate the present with thanksgiving, the future which may leave a vacancy in our presence or in our hearts can be filled with the joy of thanksgivings of the past.

Expectations the enemy of Thanksgiving

There is an enemy of thanksgiving; *it is expectations*. Often, we are not able to give thanks because of the disappointment resulting from our expectations; things which we wanted, or things we thought we deserved, or things we thought we would get and did not. The height of our expectations can often make us lose sight of the gifts we have. Once, I had a patient who came to see me. The patient was elderly and was feeling badly. The illness had weighed down the joy of life. I asked the patient, "How long have you been ill?" The answer came, "For two weeks." Knowing the patient's age which was decades beyond the person's life expectancy, I asked another questions, "How did you feel before that?" The answer was, "I have enjoyed great health all of my life." I opined that the current condition was treatable and that I thought a full recovery was in the offing; then I said, "We can help but before we deal with the current illness, we are going to give thanks for your ____years of great health." When the patient began to focus on what had been received rather than what was now expected, healing started.

Rather than causing us to lament the empty chair at the thanksgiving table this year, the absence of a cherished person should drive us to be thankful for the years he or she was there and to allow the memories to fill us with the hope that they will someday once again be with us. Expectations will erase the warmth and pleasure of memories; while thanksgiving for what we have had will dampen our disappointment in current events and will enable us to give thanks in the midst of that disappointment.

Where is my one-hundred dollar bill?

Do you remember the story of the man who knocked on a door and when the lady of the house answered, he handed her a one-hundred dollar bill. With surprise and excitement, she thanked him effusively. For the next twenty-nine days, he returned daily and repeated the same act. On the 31st day, he went to the lady's neighbor's house and handed her a one-hundred dollar bill. The lady who had received thirty, one-hundred dollar bills looked out her door, and shouted, "Where's my one-hundred dollars?" What had happened? Her thanksgiving had turned to expectation and it spoiled her joy. This happens to us in so many ways.

The autobiographical nature of thanksgiving derives from the reality that thanksgiving is impossible outside of the context of a life. In the recent presidential election, a great deal was made over the statement that one candidate made, when he said, "You didn't build that." It was said awkwardly and it was interpreted in its worst light, but the truth is that all of our lives are a collage of the contributions, influences and support of many others. It can be said of us all, "You didn't build that alone; many others contributed to your success. You worked hard and you took a risk but without the support and encouragement of others, few of us would have succeeded." It does not diminish the value of what you have achieved to acknowledge the contribution of others.

Shortly after moving to Beaumont over thirty-five years ago, I was asked a question at a Sunday school party. A successful business man said, "Aren't you proud of what you have achieved?" He added that he had worked hard and deserved his success. I responded, "I have worked hard, no doubt, but I can think of seven occasions in my life where things could have been radically different. I am grateful for the opportunities that I have had and I freely acknowledge that others who deserved as much were not as blessed as I have been."

Flatter – Praise – Worship

There is a true story told of a real-state tycoon. He was featured on the cover of a prominent national magazine. He bought hundreds of copies and had all of his staff together to boast of his achievement and recognition. Three men sat at the back. They had been keys to the growth and success of the company and when none of them were recognized, they decided to leave the company. Less than a year later, their new company was prospering and the old company was under investigation for fraud. For the lack of a grateful heart to acknowledge those who contributed to his success, the arrogant boss lost everything.

A friend of mine is known for saying: “Flattery must be corrected; praise must be deflected; worship must be rejected.” “Flattery” is when we are honored for something we didn’t earn or deserve, such as, “You sure are smart.” Which of us earned or deserved whatever mental acuity we have? If you are a theist, as I am, you would respond to that flattery by saying that was a gift from God. If you are not, you might say, “I had really good parents.” In any regard, we strengthen ourselves when we recognize and acknowledge that we are what we are because of gifts we were given. I often tell people, “I have a passion over which I have no control and for which I deserve no credit.” The passion which drives my life is a gift. I did not earn it, or find it, or build it.

“Praise” must be deflected. This simply acknowledges that our lives are a collage of the influences and contribution of many. We must work hard and we must take chances, but without others, none of us would be who, what and where we are today. Few things are as attractive as sharing the accolades of your achievement with those who knowingly or unknowingly advanced your career, supported your efforts, and/or who helped you succeed. Sharing the praise does not decrease your achievement but it does enhance your humanity because it acknowledges what we all know; we do not live alone and we do not succeed along.

“Worship” must be rejected. No man or woman can or should become the “ultimate concern” of our lives and we must not allow ourselves to be put in that position by anyone else. Not only will certainly disappointment them, but often will see the disappointment as a betrayal. To receive “worship” will make us an ogre, a tyrant, a bully, or one unable to receive real love because of the false sense of our superiority to others.

The autobiography of Thanksgiving

- The first Christmas I remember was 1949. The family received a wonderful radio which expanded our horizons and prepared us for living in a bigger world than Camp Livingston, Louisiana, a decommissioned, World-War- II military, training camp. My heart is warmed with those memories.
- The only time my brother and I came home and our mother was not there, we were certain she had been abducted; we searched each closet expecting her to be stuffed in a corner. I am thankful for imperfect but wonderful parents who prepared me to be an imperfect but committed parent.

- In September, 1962, I saw a nineteen-year old girl. I am thankful I met her, as I am thankful that less than three years later in August, 1965, I married her. I smile as my heart is filled with the trills and joys of those three years and of the intervening 47 years and three months.
- In October, 1968, I opened a mail box at a former residence to retrieve a letter which would change my life. I remember November 4, 1968, when my wife's gift to me was that letter in a frame. It was my acceptance letter to medical school. I have it and treasure it to this day.
- In January, 1971, our daughter was born and began her life-long process of charming the world.
- In May, 1973, our son was born and began his life-long process of pushing the envelope of life.

I could go on but there is not space. Thanksgiving must always be autobiographical and in that it is, we can learn to live our lives in a manner which will make us an occasion for thanksgiving in the lives of others.

Adverse Events and Thanksgiving

For several weeks, I have had pain when I eat. It got to the point that I sought medical help. Realizing that I could have the same condition that took the life of my dear friend; it was sobering. With the proper tests, it was found that I have a serious but treatable and curable condition but my response to these events has been noteworthy.

First, at sixty-nine, this was the first time that I have ever experienced anything which represents an aging process and something which I cannot ignore and which places a limit on what I can or cannot do. That has been sobering. It has given me an opportunity to "practice what I preach" and to give thanks for 69 years of excellent health, vitality and energy, while facing limitations on all three.

Second, this experience has given me a new appreciation for the wonderful people I am blessed to know and in whose healthcare I am privileged to participate. I have gained such a deep respect and admiration for people who live with chronic conditions which significantly affect their lives. It has renewed my commitment to esteem and to support these people, many of whom have not had the seven decades of excellent health upon which to build their response to declining health.

Third, this experience has deepened my reverence for life and for the stewardship we all have for the gifts we have received. This experience has enhanced my thanksgiving this season and it has made me realize how much we, as Americans, owe for the gift of being born American citizenship. And, as it has made me want for myself and others good health and excellent healthcare; it has made me want others to share in the blessing of being citizens of the United States of America.

As my family gathers around the thanksgiving table to pray and then to sing *America The Beautiful*, the words will be autobiographical. Will you join us this year in singing?

O beautiful for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain!
America! America!
God shed his grace on thee
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!

Remember, thanksgiving is best when it is shared