

Gilligan: Thanksgiving, 2017

By John F. Gilligan

Posted Nov 22, 2017 at 9:38 AM

Gratitude. That's the essence of Thanksgiving Day. It's also the essence of living well with others.

Thanksgiving is an integral part of the American culture. It provides a ritual that not only strengthens bonds but also heals and restores damaged relationships.

Gratitude is what makes for a healthy family. Without it, toxicity reigns. The same is true for a community, city, state and nation. That's why the Roman Republic of antiquity viewed the family as a sacred institution and the cornerstone of its empire.

This nation's Founders understood it the same way. Like the Romans, they were practical men. Their focus was on what would work, not utopias, ideologies or theories. They built a nation based on the observations and experiences of human nature.

Self-interest was known as the greatest of all human proclivities. The Founders knew its perils. Blind self-interest results in people seeing white as black and black as white. This led James Madison to formulate a government — the Constitution of the United States — in which self-interest would be pitted against self-interest. It was a practical, simple mechanism to prevent one person or group from dominating the other.

Here's Madison's reasoning: "It may be a reflection on human nature that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary."

Madison wasn't writing anything new in Federalist #51. Since the first settlements, Americans were alert to the darker side of our nature. To counter it, they employed prayer, fasting, Bible reading, religious services, and town meetings.

Thanksgiving Day had a similar purpose. It originated in the people before ever becoming a national holiday. In fact, there were many Thanksgivings on different days across the land. And gratitude being its essence served as an antidote to tunnel vision self-interest that ultimately undermines the common good. Think of it as a vaccine against the cultural viruses of immediate gratification, self-indulgence, vindictiveness, deception, manipulation, lies and violence.

Gratitude is a virtue. One must practice it to get it. Otherwise, self-interest becomes a black hole from which there is no escape.

American culture embodies the inheritance of Western civilization. The dignity of the person and the freedom to be that person have their roots in ancient Jerusalem and Athens. Both cultures taught that human beings flourish only within a community, the family its incubator.

Trying to make that a reality has been a labor of thousands of years. America has done it best, albeit imperfectly. Our Founders were fully aware of humankind's imperfectability. At best, politics would always be like porcupines attempting a group hug.

Differences and conflicts emerge in every relationship. How they get managed is what counts, not that they occur. And given the present discontent and animosities raging throughout America, Thanksgiving Day is just the balm we need to find ourselves.

Personal success, happiness, safety and prosperity are never the sole result of our own doing. It has much to do with the gifts that we have received from our families, communities, state, nation and, in the words of the Founders, "Divine Providence."

Traditions are the life blood of a culture. They stabilize human affairs. And today's remind us that we are not solitary but social beings. Together we either flourish or perish.

Thanksgiving's ritual helps us transcend self-interest for a greater good. By expressing gratitude for the kindness and generosity of our families and fellow Americans, we deepen our own humanity. In so doing, we make a better nation.

John F. Gilligan, Ph.D. a clinical psychologist, is president emeritus of the Human Service Center. He lives in Groveland.