

In the Spotlight: Thanksgiving unifies us a nation

Posted Nov 24, 2011 at 12:01 AM

Updated Nov 24, 2011 at 7:17 AM

No one can succeed or even survive without the help of others. Or, as John Donne wrote at the time of the Pilgrims: “No man is an island.” This reality lies at the core of Thanksgiving Day.

No one can succeed or even survive without the help of others. Or, as John Donne wrote at the time of the Pilgrims: “No man is an island.” This reality lies at the core of Thanksgiving Day.

The day also serves as a unifying force. Whenever the nation was in great peril, its leaders called for a day of thanksgiving.

It all began with William Bradford. Only 51 out of 101 Pilgrims survived the first winter. They needed help to survive the next. And so they gathered together with their helpers, the Wampanoag, to celebrate America’s first Thanksgiving Day.

Washington called for a similar day with his devastated and half-frozen troops at Valley Forge. And Lincoln during the bleakest days of the Civil War called for a national day of thanksgiving. Great leaders know in their gut: “No man is an island.”

It was Lincoln who established our fourth Thursday of November as Thanksgiving Day. There’s more to the history than this, but it’s the meaning behind it that counts most. And gratitude is the idea that captures it best.

Gratitude is a complex idea, like beauty or happiness, composed of simpler ideas. In this case, they are the little humanizing virtues of appreciation, thankfulness, acknowledgement, and indebtedness. So we can also think of gratitude as the psychological vaccine against the vices that dehumanize: self-centeredness, grandiosity, superiority, and pride.

There is gratitude for those who came before us, who built the nation, who died that the nation may live, and for our parents who nurtured us. There is gratitude for those who educated us and who created the communities in which we could live, work and prosper. And there is gratitude for those who helped us become who we are and for a thousand hands that assisted us along the way, for there is no such thing as a self-made man or woman.

Together a family makes a family, together a community makes a community, and together a nation makes a nation. In the end, we all depend upon one another to make the world a better place, to celebrate our joys, and to endure the sufferings in the struggle of life. There is recognition here that the nation is not only built, but also preserved from the bottom up: individuals cooperating, supporting, collaborating and helping one another by making the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

Thanksgiving Day is truly an American ritual. It speaks to our belief in a common humanity; it embraces all people of varied ethnicities and faiths; and it reminds us that our well-being today is as much the fruit of the work of others as it is our own. This is reason enough to be grateful and wish one another, "Happy Thanksgiving."

John F. Gilligan, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist and president emeritus of Fayette Companies. He lives in Groveland.