

Gilligan: No democracy survives without civility

By John Gilligan

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We are social beings. To flourish in mind, body and spirit requires human relationships. And at the core of every humanizing relationship is gratitude. But that implies a set of other virtues that transcends self-interest: generosity, mutual respect, civility and self-restraint.

“For this one virtue,” — gratitude — argued Cicero in 54 BC, “is not only the greatest, but is also the parent of all other virtues.” Gratitude is a form of benevolence and an act of recognition for what others have given us. It fosters social harmony and serves as a vaccine against strife.

Cicero was a political philosopher and statesman of the Roman Republic. He was also the hidden architect of our well-read Founding Fathers as they constructed the United States Constitution. The point here is the American tradition of Thanksgiving — gratitude — didn’t materialize out of thin air.

When Cicero wrote, he had already intuited that Rome was on the verge of imploding. He was appealing to his fellow Romans to return to the basic political virtues that had united them for almost 500 years. It was a last-ditch attempt to save the Republic from its self-destructive internal discords and strife.

Unfortunately for Rome, gratitude had degenerated into an empty word. It was no longer a cultural virtue, a habit of the people. Gratitude had morphed into a value. And a value without virtue is worthless.

In contrast, Americans institutionalized gratitude within its national traditions and rituals: Thanksgiving Day to “God, Country and Family.” We made it an integral part of our culture. It was not some abstract value to be admired but a virtue, a habit to be practiced. And to counter the gravitational forces of human self-interest, every president since George Washington has proclaimed each year a Thanksgiving Day.

This tradition reminds us that our well-being is dependent on the good will of others. After a political season of fierce competition and taking no prisoners, which the Romans could never dial down, Thanksgiving is a call to the higher angels of our nature — that we

are fellow Americans and that the common good of all is our American project. The lesser angels to guard against are resentment, anger, discord, maliciousness, revenge, intimidation and violence.

Gratitude implies civility. It's quite simple. No democracy survives without civility. The fall of Athens and Rome speaks loudly to that. Without it, strife reigns supreme and the common interests destroyed.

Civility is first nurtured in the home. It's where we learn and develop habits of gratitude, benevolence, collaboration, forgiveness, tolerance, and self-control. These are nuclear forces that unify a family. But they are also the very habits, i.e. virtues, that allow us to live well together as a nation.

All democracies unleash centrifugal forces of conflicting social interests. Civility is its counterforce. And the cornerstone of every democracy is the family. The Romans knew it and so did our Founders. When the family cracks, national breakdown follows. Ignorance of this reality is deadly.

A healthy culture builds traditions and rituals to counter the forces of power, greed and blind ambition. That's why we have a Thanksgiving, Fourth of July and a Memorial Day less we become so self-absorbed in our own pursuits that we forget who we are as a people.

Nothing happens in a vacuum. A national context of support and public agreement is needed. And the U.S. Constitution does exactly that. It's where we commit ourselves to "form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity."

We may differ about the best means to achieve those ends. But that hardly means that we are a divided nation. It's when practical means, always subject to compromise, become an end in themselves that strife erupts.

Thanksgiving Day, along with the Fourth of July and Memorial Day, unify us as a nation by reminding us of who we are and it is only We the People who make America.

Happy Thanksgiving to all.

John F. Gilligan, Ph.D. is a clinical psychologist and president emeritus of Fayette Companies/Human Service Center. He lives in Groveland. He can be reached by email at jfgilligan@hotmail.com.