

HOW RICH AND BEAUTIFUL IS THE BOUNTY November 24, 2002

Have you ever had a really difficult Thanksgiving? You know, one of those times when it seemed hard to find something to celebrate... Maybe you were sick, or lost a job, or worried about a loved one. Maybe someone you loved died recently, or the dog was lost, or you were really angry with a family member, and the prospect of smiling across a festive table seemed impossible.

I've had a few like that, and I think they come to everyone sooner or later. There was the Thanksgiving in the midst of packing boxes, because we were moving the next week. If you think you sometimes have trouble getting rid of left-overs, you should try doing so in the midst of a move!

Perhaps the most difficult was the Thanksgiving following the death of John F. Kennedy. My mother-in-law was visit-ing, which was not conducive to peace and happiness in my mind. And my infant son was scheduled for surgery to repair a hernia the following Monday. So, in addition to the grief and mourning that enveloped the nation, my family had additional stress.

It was hard to celebrate that year. And yet, we did. For celebrations are necessary. As I sat down at the table, after all the many preparations, I looked at my family, increased this year by my troublesome mother-in-law, and I gave thanks—sincere thanks that they were all there, including the mother-in-law.

I surveyed the ample table, emblem of a successful harvest, grown by others, and sent to our table by a series of businesses, and I gave thanks. We were warm, would soon be well fed, and the baby was asleep so I could eat at least part of the meal in peace.

Our lives need celebratory moments to enrich them, build memories, and provide punctuation points. How rich and beautiful is the bounty from which we choose our feast!

Anxiety seems to define the American consciousness at this moment in our history. We are anxious about our economy, which seesaws between signs of recovery and evidences of decline. Here in West Michigan companies are still downsizing and the number of people we feed at Supper House shows a gradual increase. Most of us know at least one person who has been adversely affected by recent economic activity.

The reasons for the decline are complex, but one of them is corporate malfeasance. Although the media features pictures of CEOs and CFOs doing the "perp walk", basic changes in the structures that made possible such malfeasance have been resisted. There is significant evidence that many members

of the upper echelon of corporations have rejected the idea that they have a moral duty to uphold good business ethics. We have lost trust in the corporations that increasingly control our nation, indeed the world.

Terrorism still stalks the world and Osama bin Laden surfaced again to threaten every friend and ally of the United States. Every time we travel we are reminded of the lasting effects of September 11, 2001. Meanwhile, the administration turned their attention to a small country whose children die in increasing numbers every week. They project a war with Iraq that will kill more children – to save them from a dictator whose actions threaten not only the lives of every person in his immediate area, but our supply of oil. It is difficult to be non-anxious under such circumstances.

How can we lift our eyes from newspaper headlines and television exposés and take time to celebrate? And—what do we celebrate in the midst of such anxiety?

“The fruitful earth has fulfilled the promise of spring”, says Percival Chubb, in our responsive reading. ... “How rich and beautiful is the bounty gathered: The golden grain and clustered corn, the grapes of purple and green, the crimson apples and yellow pears, and all the colors of orchard and garden, vineyard and field.”

And indeed it is so. If you question the wisdom of celebrating the harvest, take a quick trip to the Farmers Market. Michigan apples come in reds and pinks and golds and greens. Their taste ranges from very sweet to tangy. Although I knew that winter squash had many varieties, it was not until I saw the overflowing bins at the Farmer’s Market that I realized the great variety available right here in West Michigan. Winter greens are still available, their dark green providing the perfect contrast to the mellow squash.

In addition, we Americans have the benefit of a world-wide distribution system that offers us produce from Chili as well as California, wines from France and Italy as well as Michigan, and real cheeses from Vermont, Wisconsin, Greece, Holland, as well as Kraft Cheez Whiz. I encourage you to think about the consequences of the choices you make from this cornucopia.

This autumn we American Mid-Westerners have ample food, as is our wont. This autumn, like most autumns we can remember, our harvest is plentiful. This was not always the case. Few of us now alive remember a time when it was difficult to find sufficient food for our needs. Those of us who lived during World War II remember food rationing. Families were given coupons for meat, sugar, butter, and other necessities. One could not purchase more than the coupons.

My father always had a garden, which provided fresh vegetables. My mother canned and froze quarts of tomatoes, beans, peas and corn. My father also raised chickens under lights in the basement, which provided us with eggs and

meat. Thanksgiving during the war years featured roast chicken instead of turkey.

However, now we have no such concerns. There are, we know, hungry people in other parts of the world, in other areas of the country, in other parts of West Michigan—but we here, we fortunate members of the great middle class, have unprecedented access to whatever foods we choose. Let us celebrate that fact.

Let us be grateful that we have access to the bountiful harvest of our West Michigan farmlands and vineyards, and let us be grateful that we can choose among the foods of the world as we prepare our feast.

Let us also be grateful for the family and friends that surround us on this holiday. Some of us will have them present in spirit only because of the distances we must travel to be with one another. “Over the hills and through the woods” is often not sufficient to get to Grandmother’s house in November 2002. Long distances on the interstate or in the air may not be possible every Thanksgiving. However, the miracle of modern telephones, be they cell or cable, allow us to make contact with our absent loved ones. Celebrate the connections, however they are made.

And—many of us can gather at food-laden tables with extended families. Celebrate the gathering! Celebrate the reappearance of Aunt Isabel’s famous sweet potato dish, or Grandmother’s pumpkin pie, or Cousin Alice’s green bean and mushroom casserole topped with crispy onions. Celebrate the varieties of cranberry sauce, whether classic jellied cranberry or Susan Stanberg’s mother-in-law’s concoction. (I’ve never had the nerve to try it myself.)

However, celebrate even more being together. There will be families that gather this Thanksgiving who are missing a beloved member who died this last year. Remember him or her, and celebrate the holiday.

There will be families who gather with tension in the air. Perhaps there was a quarrel, or a divorce, or an unwanted pregnancy during the last year. Please—try to patch up the quarrel, speak the loss of divorce, and honor the decision made by the young woman—whatever it may be.

Thanksgiving gives you the opportunity to heal wounds, to build and cross bridges, and to practice loving forgiveness. Celebrate with honesty and charity that you may truly be thankful for the gift of family.

Let us also celebrate the gift of life itself. David Rankin tells us that: “Our Thanksgiving is too small! Too human! Too earth-bound! Too selfish.” He calls us to remember that we are marvelous creations of the Universe—that “We belong to the stars, the infinity of space, the eternity of time.”

When I read his words I am struck by two opposing feelings: humility and pride. I am humble when I think of the ungraspable hugeness of space, in which we live and move and have our being. I think of we humans, the current species in charge on planet Earth, tied to a small star, “in a solar system of the edge of nowhere,” and I am staggered by our relative tinyness. I think of “a universe of infinite galaxies, in a Milky Way of 100 billion stars” and I want to sink to my knees in wonder. We are a mere speck in the infinity of space.

And yet, here we are citizens of a beautiful blue planet—life brought to consciousness, to learn, to grow, to wonder. I think of all we have learned, of how we have developed, and I feel pride. We were gifted with an opposable thumb, but we figured out what to do with it. It was an advantage when plucking fruits and picking grains in our early years of development, which gave us an evolutionary advantage. But how we have learned since then! We can throw—spears and boomerangs to bring down game, and tools from person to person, and balls both round and oval. We can hold tools and build. We can type and communicate. We can make a fist to threaten, and open our hands as a gesture of peace.

We were gifted with big brains, but we developed them further with our thought and actions. We learned to communicate with each other, developed languages ever more complex, and methods of talking together across distances and time. We developed music and art and dance to communicate feelings and express our spiritual needs.

Not all our brain power was used for peaceful purposes. We also developed weapons—simple, then more complex. Now we have “weapons of mass destruction” that can kill or injure hundreds, even thousands of people at once. However, our powerful brains also allow us to think of ways to oppose using these weapons and to heal the injured.

Our large brains and skill with languages give us the capacity to teach and persuade and support people we believe will make good leaders. And our hearts, another gift from Creation, move us to relate to other people, other beings, to Creation itself. We feel the pain and hunger of other people, and are moved to feed them. We see a turtle in the middle of the road, and we stop to move him. We see the degradation of a stream or lake, and we take steps to stop the pollution, and clean up the water.

We are a remarkable species. We do not know if there is another similar being in the entire Universe. I feel proud to be a human on planet Earth—and humble at the same time.

“LIFE, ISNESS, BEING, BREATH, CONSCIOUSNESS—that’s the astonishing thing!” says David Rankin. He’s right—it is astonishing.

“Whatever the appearance of things, we’re not lonely, isolated, fragmented, or mechanistic objects; and we’re more than juiced-up, turkey-filled, gravy-saturated, gas-producing holiday revelers.” (D.R).

We are humans who belong to the stars and the earth, to hawks and fish and snakes, and to all else on this planet and the cosmos. We are wondrous beings, who make mistakes, but also grow and learn.

Let us celebrate this Thanksgiving, not only the rich and beautiful bounty, but also, our relationships with others, and with the Universe. I close with Rankin’s words: “we’ll only have a safe, clean and peaceful world when humans celebrate a larger Thanksgiving—a deeper, more inclusive vision of reality.

Amen.

Blessed Be.

Shalom.