

Lessons My Father Taught Me About Being Thankful

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By Daniel Krauthammer

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Thirty-three years ago today, my father published a column that explored the meaning of Thanksgiving—beyond cranberry sauce, pumpkin pie and pigskin.

Reading that column, which is featured in his forthcoming posthumous book, “The Point of It All,” prompted me to contemplate some of the most important ideas he introduced into my life, which now occupy my heart and my mind on this holiday.

Thanksgiving is a religious occasion, my father wrote, but not one belonging to “Protestantism or Judaism or any other particularist faith.” Rather, it belongs to all Americans as part of “what has been called the American Civil Religion.”

This religion’s “Supreme Being,” my father wrote, “is Jefferson’s rights-giving Creator, Washington’s First Author, Lincoln’s Judge—an American Providence.”

The only orthodoxy it demands is belief in the core principles laid out in its foundational holy texts: Most important, “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

And “That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

It is important to recognize that we are speaking here about belief. Not proof, but faith.

Our founding documents declare “these truths to be self-evident.” But are they? What, exactly, is so “self-evident” about them?

One cannot empirically prove that “all men are created equal” or that the purpose of government is to protect individual rights and human liberty. These are moral and metaphysical assertions that operate on a separate plane from scientific inquiry.

They are self-evident, ultimately, because we believe that they are. Or because we believe in a God—whether biblical or not, literal or metaphorical

or perhaps, like Jefferson's or Einstein's God, one and the same with the laws of nature—who decrees that they are.

And, ultimately, this is a distinction without a difference. Either way, what lies at the foundation of the American experiment, our democracy, our very way of life, is an article of faith.

It is by no means the only possible political faith. For most of human history, no one believed in these propositions. Indeed, no one had even conceived of them. We forget how revolutionary these principles were at the time of the American founding, and even for centuries afterward.

Until the late 20th century, liberal democracy was an exceedingly rare (and usually short-lived) phenomenon. For millennia, it appeared "self-evident" to most of humanity that the legitimacy of governments flowed from the divine right of kings, or the inherent superiority of a feudal aristocracy, or the enlightened wisdom of a theocratic priesthood.

In the last century, totalitarian ideologies of left and right built regimes whose claims to legitimacy rested on the complete sublimation of individual worth to the deified class or race collective.

And still today, authoritarians around the world bolster their support by championing the power of national and ethnic groups above the rights of the citizen.

In our own politics, no force prevents our leaders or our electorate from choosing to believe that the "self-evident" and highest purpose of our government should be, say, to "make America great again" or to achieve "social justice."

That is not to say those goals are unworthy (depending on how they are defined). But if our system is to endure, they must remain subordinate to the primary principles of democratic self-government.

The alternative ideologies all offer a predefined and unifying cause that serves a purpose greater than the self. At each of their cores lies a quasi-religious belief in the absolute and unquestioned rightness of that cause, whether it be the glory of king or country or the righteous struggle of one collective tribal identity against another.

In contrast, democracy is not a natural unifier. It allows—indeed, it requires—individuals to choose their own destinies.

"Democracy," my father wrote, "is designed at its core to be spiritually empty," for "it mandates means (elections, parliaments, markets) but not ends. Democracy leaves the goals of life entirely up to the individual. Where[as] the totalitarian state decrees life's purposes."

As a result, democracy is at once "the most free, most humane, most decent political system ever invented by man," and also "the most banal. Dying for it is far more ennobling than living it." And paradoxically, my father argued, this is exactly the point: "the glories yielded by such a successful politics lie

outside itself. Its deepest purpose is to create the conditions for the cultivation of the finer things.”

Democracy’s extraordinary gift—freedom—is therefore also a burden.

It is not easy to define and pursue one’s own path and purpose in life, especially if we feel alone in that endeavor. We need social bonds that unite us in common cause while maintaining the political structures that guarantee our liberty.

This is the vital role served by America’s civil religion. Its traditions, its ceremonies, its symbols and even its holidays give physical form, emotional weight and devotional object to a set of ideas that could otherwise remain coldly theoretical and inaccessible to the spiritual heart of our human nature.

Its practice, my father wrote, was meant “to infuse communal life with a religious dimension . . . Its purpose was to make of the social contract not merely a convention but a faith.”

For a political creed built on the sanctity of the individual, the kind of fellowship and connection forged through these traditions of communal devotion is crucial.

And what better symbol for communal devotion could there be than the Thanksgiving table?

It was Abraham Lincoln who established Thanksgiving as an annual national holiday. And it was he, of all our presidents, who most powerfully imbued our politics with a higher spiritual purpose: He urged that “to the support of the Declaration of Independence, so to the support of the Constitution and Laws, let every American pledge his life, his property, and his sacred honor In short, let it become the political religion of the nation.”

On this day, we give thanks for our country’s natural bounty—but even more, for its moral and philosophical bounty, of which we are history’s lucky inheritors.

Our gratitude should prompt us to accept the responsibility for safeguarding it and passing it down to the next generation so that they may continue to enjoy its blessings. On this day, I am thankful to my father for passing it down to me.