

Giving Thanks 2020

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What are we doing when we “Give Thanks” at Thanksgiving time in America?

The most common use of the word “thanks” is as a statement to someone who has given us something or done something to benefit us. In short, we recognize socially that we individually or as a group have received something of value from some known source outside of ourselves. And most often, this recognition includes the notion that this known outside source was not obliged/required to make this contribution to us. In short, the offer is mostly voluntary. So, “thanks” is a bridge between the “Me” [what I get] perspective and the “We” [what I give] perspective – between the self-centered/personal and the communal/social points of view in circumstances where this “bridge” is most often not required in either the giving by the one party or the getting by the other party. There is a kind of ethical purity in offering thanks which results in a reward for both parties.

A statement of “Thanks” is our initial way to fulfill our commitment to the social principle of reciprocity. At some later point, we may well return the “favor” in some way, completing the ever ongoing cycle of “informal” giving and getting in reciprocal social relations.

Of course, offering thanks is not restricted to recognizing the underlying principle of reciprocity in quality social relations. We can offer thanks to any source of perceived benefit – natural, ecological, cosmic, spiritual, theological – especially in those cases where the identified source is understood as providing an ongoing or constant benefit to our well-being. Thus, beyond our social relations, we may well offer thanks for all sources of our food, warmth, pleasure, security – to the extent we are aware and appreciative of them. As such, we can offer thanks “for” and not just thanks “to.” And if we anthropomorphize these various forces/sources, we can create gods out of them and express our thanks in the form of worship in the hope of sustaining the benefits they provide. In this way, religion can become an integral part of the act of offering thanks. Whether religious or not, saying grace before an everyday meal is a form of expressing thanks for received benefits at the limited familial level. The annual event of Thanksgiving greatly expands this act to recognize national sources of benefit.

Giving thanks involves all or some of the above elements, but it begins in the awareness that we have received significant social and/or other benefits that deserve to be recognized/celebrated. Thanksgiving in America is our national “Thank You” ritual focused on food security and other society wide benefits.