

### Austerity Enhances Gratitude

One of my earliest childhood memories is about a Thanksgiving turkey. We were growing one turkey in anticipation of Thanksgiving on the farm in West Texas. Tom Turkey had become a handsome bird. But, one day we heard a commotion out at the pig pen. Running out to investigate, we found our turkey hopping and flopping around on the ground -- minus its head. OK, acting like a chicken with its head chopped off. It had been reaching through the cracks enjoying a meal with the pigs until one pig decided to enjoy his share of Thanksgiving turkey --- probably without offering thanks. So we enjoyed Thanksgiving before Thanksgiving.

We can schedule Thanksgiving Day, but we cannot program gratitude. It does not arrive according to plan. It can develop out of the disruptions, disappointments, and austerity of life. What seems oppressive and painful at the time can be cause for gratitude.

My first memory of a Thanksgiving Day was when I was in the first grade of school. We had no school that day, so my older sister, brother, and I had to pick cotton on that windy, chilling day. Not exactly a holiday of thanksgiving. That speaks of the austerity of life into which I was born 84 years ago this very day in Fort Worth, Texas thirteen days after the end of WWI. The family then moved back to virgin soil near Rochester from which Dad had grubbed the native mesquite less than ten years after the establishment of the town of Rochester. He, the son of an Swiss immigrant, still followed his heritage of austerity and hard work.

According to today's standards, we farm people were dreadfully impoverished . Our family of seven lived in an unpainted, single-walled house of three 14' x 14' rooms, with no closets, electricity, running water, bathroom, central heat, or refrigeration. All in the family had tasks to perform daily. We five siblings shared all housework, outside work, and farm labor. Our mother was chronically ill both physically and emotionally. Our teen years were during the Great Depression and Dust Bowl period. Family men would work from sun-till-sun for \$1.00 per day -- if they were fortunate enough to find a job. Luxuries and gifts were almost non-existent. My brother and I never owned a store-bought baseball or baseball glove. We made our own. Kids were not bored except by the drudgery of constant work. When freed from work assignments, we created our own fun and games.

I do not remember ever hearing anyone thanking God for their austerity and hardship, but they did offer thanks for the little they had. Although I would not wish that bleak and hopeless life on anyone, now I can look back with gratitude for the blessings enhanced by austerity.

We had a bonded family, a shack which housed a home, a haven of security and acceptance. We had two parents ever present with their five children, Emily, George,

Cecil, Elda, and Lois, all circling the same table for three meals each day --- after offering thanks. Constant drudgery and pain of work taught us industry, frugality, patience, cooperaton, and responsibility. Out of our poverty we shared with others who had less. We learned to bear with, and fill in for, the weak --- particularly our mother Austere parents -- overbearing, we thought -- kept us on the straight path of spirituality free from irreverence, drinking, cursing, profanity, vulgarity, and dishonesty. Mom drilled us in the demands of a rigid religion. We learned that fulfillment comes from relationships rather than material things. Lack of entertainment and store-bought toys brought out our creativity to make our own toys, devise our own games, and create our own humor and fun. We worked together and played together as a family. No radio, movies, television --- we made our own music, singing songs of faith and hope as we worked about the house and in the fields.

Austerity, hardship, and disappointment do not prevent gratitude but they can enhance it. The more dire the need, the more appreciation there is for any relief. Greater indulgence brings little gratitude in an already indulgent life.

My blessings are beyond counting, but it has taken me a while to list austerity as one of them. Now I can see the blessings of character it fostered in us five siblings (all are still living) who gained a college education and have all served as teachers, preachers, and missionaries.

Looking ahead, Thanksgiving Day is still scheduled. When this frail body soon falls to the foe lurking in life's pig pen, even that will be a day of thanksgiving --- the beginning of an unending Thanksgiving Day!

(Cecil Hook; November 24, 2002) []