Some Thanksgiving ruminations, from where I am here and now.

I love holidays. Not everyone does. When I was younger that was always a mystery to me – what’s not to like? But as I get older (and older and older), I get it. Or at least part of it. So many people hate the holidays and the suffering they bring. Bitter and wrenching loneliness when all those around them are enjoying good times with family and friends and they ... are not. Or awful memories of holidays past – ugly family blow-ups or ill-timed tragedies.

Some of us are among the lucky ones: these are not problems. But that itself is a problem. Why should we have such a self-congratulatory happy, restful, fulfilling time when others...? Also, as I’ve gotten older, I’ve realized just how fraught just about all our holidays actually are, how, often invisibly, they are so closely connected not with things to celebrate but with real human trauma and tragedy.

**The Fourth of July.** The fireworks are supposed to remind us of our victories in war: bombs, killing, maiming, wounding. My personal view is that we would be flipping crazy not to be deeply and eternally grateful for the freedoms we have in this country won in hard-fought wars. But it does mean we killed more of them than they killed of us, or at least beat them into submission. So it’s not an uncomplicated good.

**Christmas.** I’ve always flat-out loved it, except the rank materialism which I completely and utterly detest; though I understand, it helps keep the economy afloat which means more people work, and have money, and can eat and live and enjoy life, so that’s good. But really. There should be a better way than celebrate the Christmas message through raw capitalist greed. Anyway... I’ve always loved it and what it stands for, even though I’m not a Christian. But it’s also true that the message of love, hope, and salvation the season is meant to bring also has the flip side. Nowhere is that seen more clearly than in the Biblical story itself: the massacre of innocent children in Bethlehem and the unimaginable agony that created. It’s great that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus got away – but what about the others? Guiltless infants and destroyed lives of their parents? (You shouldn’t say it’s not God’s fault but Herod’s; God planned the whole thing and worked other miracles throughout the story. Why not save innocent lives at the same time?)

**Thanksgiving.** Here we are, Thanksgiving. My very favorite holiday. For me it’s the least problematic of them all. We are thankful for the good things we have. No religious connotations or commitments necessary. No national boundaries involved. No politics. I love the whole thing. Family, friends, football. Turkey. Masses to eat. And drink. And conversation and love to go around. A time to relax and enjoy. I love it.

But I realize how problematic it is. It’s easy for me. I have a great life. Not everyone does.

On the other hand, I too have had some very bad times in my life. When I had no money. No job prospects. Death in the family. Relationships torn apart. Loneliness. Wrenching anxiety about my own future and the future of my children. Health concerns. And on and on. I have never ever suffered in extremis. I have never starved. I have never been maimed. I have never yet had an incurable disease. But like everyone else on the planet, I have had some very hard times.

And yet I’ve always been thankful. I think some of us are just made that way. It’s not a virtue. It’s a gift given to us. Not, in my opinion, by a divine being who loves us. If we said *that* we’d have to admit that he had given it to us, the fortunate ones, and told all the others: tough luck! That makes zero sense to me. We have been given our good lives
largely by a freak chance combination of genetics, upbringing, and inherited social worlds. It is lucky us. And we would indeed be crazy not to be thankful for it.

The problem with the concept of “thankfulness,” though, is that it does suggest there is someone responsible that we are to thank. Of course, there are indeed lots and lots of people I myself am thankful to. My loving parents, one of whom is still with us. My amazing wife. My amazing two kids. My other family members. My teachers. My friends. And on and on.

On the other hand, a lot of things I’m thankful for I have no person to thank. So when I’m “thankful” for the circumstances I was born into in the mid 50s in America, for excellent health, for a positive disposition, for talents I inherited, for good intelligence — Whom do I thank?

Just recently I’ve started thinking that (for me) it’s less a matter of thankfulness than for gratefulness. You may want to thank somebody, but you don’t actually have anyone to grate. Gratefulness is just an attitude of feeling appreciative for whatever good things you have. Some of us have lots of good things. Some around the world have, frankly, zero. Still, almost everyone reading this will have *some* good things, and the point of this holiday is to get our minds off the bad things – God knows there are enough of them — and think about the good ones. At least for a couple of days.

Over the past few years I have developed a meditation practice, and I find this significantly helps develop my sense of gratefulness. It makes me more thoughtful, reflective, open, and at peace. And I’ve come to be grateful for very deep things: not just things connected with my relationships, work, and environment, but the very fact of my existence. I reflect a lot on just what it means to be alive.

We are here for far less than the blink of an eye in our 13.8-billion-year-old universe. But we are here now. We have life. And, most amazing, we have consciousness. We are sentient, thinking, conscious beings in a universe that is 99.99% dead; what virtually everything else (that we know of) that is alive is not self-aware. We are. It’s a miracle. And worth reflecting on.

This year I’m grateful not only for the many good things I have, but the fact that I am. For a brief moment, I exist. And I will always be grateful that I have existed, until I do no more.

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