

Editorial: ‘Celebrating’ Thanksgiving in a year like this

November 24, 2020

Can we really celebrate Thanksgiving in a year like this? Or will this Thanksgiving be an exercise in futility?

For many, this Thanksgiving feels like looking at train tracks disappearing over the horizon. Out there past the vanishing point, where the tracks converge and disappear, maybe there is hope. Maybe, at some point we can't see, we can celebrate. Maybe then we can be grateful.

But do we really have to wait until then?

Why celebration may be too much

Many were celebrating at the beginning of 2020. The economy looked good. Some were predicting the Roaring '20s all over again. But lightning doesn't strike the same place twice, does it?

We were hearing about a new virus way over there in China. We weren't concerned, because for us, things were looking up.

The virus started showing up along the West Coast of the United States. We started paying attention. By mid-March, we were doing more than paying attention. We were stripping shelves of toilet paper and were sheltering in place. Businesses were closed, churches went online, and students stayed on spring break.

But there was hope. This would only last a couple of weeks. Not more than a year like the last global pandemic.

A couple of weeks turned into a month turned into two months turned into a summer. Summer gave way to fall. Some businesses closed for good. Some churches still haven't met in person since mid-March. Some students still haven't returned to class in person.

More and more people became infected with COVID-19. More and more people died. The numbers reached the point where they weren't just numbers. They are people we know; they were people we knew.

For too many, celebration and gratitude seem out of place or too far off. What of Thanksgiving for them? Or maybe we're not talking about them; maybe we're talking about us.

With coronavirus infections and hospitalizations surging, a so-called "V-shaped recovery" bending into a "W-shaped" hope, and untested questions hanging over the presidential transition, many are too exhausted or numb to celebrate anything—much less Thanksgiving—right now.

Did I mention Thanksgiving is this week?

The turkey's in the oven—if we can afford it—but we're not sure there's any point coming to the table when it's time to eat.

How we can find hope during Thanksgiving

Yes, celebrating at a time like this may feel like a perspective drawing of train tracks on a piece of paper—a mind trick.

So, what if we don't celebrate Thanksgiving this year? What if we make like scientists and observe the day instead?

What if we pull air into our lungs, however well they may work, and marvel

at the invisible substance that keeps us alive?

What if we put some food on a plate, whatever it may be, and wonder that our bodies are able to do something meaningful with it?

What if, when we pray with those we can be with in person, we hold hands a little longer than usual, to feel the strength of human contact while we have it?

What if, when we call or video chat those we can't be with in person, we listen to the music of their voices, even when those voices are far away?

What if we let tears fall for who and what has been lost, accepting how drops of water communicate what words often can't? Tears often speak of gratitude more eloquently than words. Even tears of pain and sorrow.

In doing these things that are basic to life, we will not just be studying hope, we will be connecting with it. And once connected with hope, we will be carriers of it.

Observing turns into a different kind of celebrating

Sometimes, celebration distracts us from observation. We have a good time but leave emptier than when we arrived. More often, celebration becomes detached from the rest of life so that we take nothing with us from the party.

In a year like this, we need to pay attention, to marvel, to wonder, to connect, to listen and to comfort—and not just for ourselves. Our awareness of the power of these things in our own lives can make us aware of its absence in the lives of others. What we gain from observation can be what we give to those who need it.

And that will be giving thanks in deed.

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