The Importance of Thanksgiving

 by: David Leonhardt Thanksgiving is the most important holiday of the year. Oh, sure, Christmas is grand, and I know it has many, many fans. I'm not knocking Christmas, but Thanksgiving is more important. And Easter has its fans, too. Rebirth is a wonderful thing, but I still say Thanksgiving is more important. Yes, the kids might put in a good word for Halloween. I am sure they enjoy the costumes and the sugar overdose, but Thanksgiving is more important. Why? Because the two most important words in the English language are "Thank You". This is true for business success, for social pleasure, even for self-actualization. For business success, a thank you tells a prospect or partner that you are appreciative of what she has just done. It shows you have a genuine interest in that person and the business relationship. For social interaction, expressing gratitude is equally important to show how you value the other person and the social relationship you have with him. Thank you is a bonding phrase. But thanksgiving is most important on a personal level for our own happiness. This is true for anybody who has ever lived, but it is even more true for us today. Consider how much we have. More than any of our ancestors, we live in the Land of Plenty. We have more than anybody who lived at any time before. And for those of us who live in the developed world, we have more than most people on our little planet even today. I'm not just talking about "stuff". Oh, sure, we have digital color televisions and computers that take us around the world faster than the speed of sound. And we have 31 flavors of ice cream waiting for us on every second street corner. And we throw out more "junk" than we ever needed to own in the first place. But we have so much more than just stuff. Consider the following: FREEDOM: More of the world lives in a democracy than ever before, and democracy is becoming more open or "democratic" with every year (perhaps in part due to the Internet). OPPORTUNITIES: With freedom and affluence comes opportunity. We have more opportunity to make more money, to earn it the way we wish, to choose our profession, our location, even our lifestyle. Women have just about reached equality with men in most of the developed world, and more people are able to flee oppressive regimes. KNOWLEDGE: Which came first, the chicken or the egg? With freedom, comes the ability to satisfy our curiosity: knowledge. And with knowledge comes a thirst for freedom. Let's face it, the idea of "the ignorant masses" has become an anachronism. Even the dumbest among us has more knowledge than most people who lived a couple centuries ago. (I said more "knowledge", not more "wisdom", but that's another topic.) HEALTH: Just surviving past childhood used to be a major accomplishment. Now we expect to live into our 80s or 90s. And we expect – no, we demand – to have exceptional health care all along the way (even those who are afraid to go to the doctor!). This list could keep growing, but I think these are the major benefits of living in the twenty-first century, especially in the developed world. What does that have to do with thanksgiving and happiness? Well, follow this train of thought. Whatever you have, you can either appreciate or not. If you appreciate it -- I mean really notice that you have it, that it is good, that you feel good about having it -- it will bring you happiness. However, if you get used to it, take it for granted, and focus on getting something you don't have, it won't bring you happiness. Appreciation is the key to happiness. Whatever you truly and proactively appreciate, whether "stuff" or education or a vacation, will bring you happiness. But in this fast-paced, dog-eat-dog, over-stimulated society how can we appreciate anything? Sadly, many of us who have the most to be grateful for express gratitude the least and feel the least appreciation. It seems the more we have the more we want. The more we want, the less we appreciate what we have. The less we appreciate, the less value there is to having anything, which may explain why we keep wanting more The secret to feeling that appreciation we often overlook is in expressing our gratitude vocally or in writing. How can we possibly fail to appreciate something when we say "Thank you" for it and focus our attention on the appreciation? I offer several ideas on how to express gratitude in the "Get Happy Workbook" and my book "Climb your Stairway to Heaven: the 9 habits of maximum happiness", including keeping a gratitude journal, saying grace, practicing "bolsterism", or just sending flowers, cards, or an appreciative e-mail message – to name just a few ideas. Perhaps the most useful of all ideas is to make Thanksgiving Day every day. Christmas is important. Easter is important. Halloween is important for the kids. But for our own personal happiness, there is nothing like a truly heartfelt Thanksgiving.

About the Author

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