Observing Thanksgiving Day

HAROLD I. HANSEN

President Oaks, my fellow colleagues, students of Brigham Young University, they say that confession is good for the soul. I don’t know what the state of my soul is, but I’m confessing that this frightens me. My students should gain some feeling of security that even the old man can get into trouble!

As I’ve been preparing to respond to this invitation to speak, finding it difficult to reach a decision about what I should say, I was reminded of some lines by the great East Indian poet Tagor. “I’ve spent my days stringing and unstringing my instrument while the song I came to sing remains unsung.” I hope for all our sakes that I will not be in that situation today.

History of Thanksgiving Day

The human family has always followed the practice of special days to acknowledge God’s goodness. So it was that the Plymouth colonists celebrated their second winter spent in the New World. The first dreadful winter in Massachusetts had killed nearly half of the members of the colony, but hope sprang anew the late summer of 1621. The corn harvest brought rejoicing, and the forests and streams were abundant with wild game and fish. The colonists understood the environment better the second season than they had the first. They found that they could harmonize their lives in this cold, bitter climate. Governor William Bradford decreed that December 13, 1621, be set aside as a day of feasting and prayer to demonstrate the gratitude the colonists felt toward God. The women of the colony spent days preparing for the feast. Foods were boiled, baked, and roasted. The children were kept very busy turning roasts on spits or iron rods in front of the open fires. More than eighty Indians attended the feast. The Indians brought wild turkeys and venison as their share. The tables were set outdoors, and all the people sat around the combined tables like one large family. Prayers, sermons, and songs of praise accompanied the feasting. Three days were devoted to the Thanksgiving, and then the Indians returned to the forests and the colonists to their toil.

Word of the Plymouth celebration traveled to other New England towns and colonies. Then Thanksgiving Day became a custom. Sporadic attempts were made to formulize a special day. In 1789 President George Washington was urged

Harold I. Hansen was professor of speech and dramatic arts at Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 25 November 1975.
by the Congress to proclaim a national holiday. 
I was struck forcibly by the content of his message, how aptly it suits today. May I read it:

Whereas, it is the duty of all Nations to 
acknowledge the Providence of Almighty God, to 
obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits and 
humbly to implore His protection and favor; and 
whereas, both Houses of Congress, have by their 
joint Committee requested me “to recommend to the 
people of the United States a day of public thanks-
giving and prayer,” to be observed by acknowledging 
with grateful hearts the many and signal favors 
of Almighty God, especially by affording them an 
opportunity peaceably to establish a form of govern-
ment for their safety and happiness.

Now, therefore, I do recommend and assign 
Thursday, the 26th day of November next to be 
dedicated by the people of these States to the service of 
that great & glorious Being who is the Author of all 
the good that was, that is, or that will be; that we 
then all unite in rendering unto Him our service 
and humble thanks for His kind care and protection 
of the People of this Country . . . ; for the signal and 
manifold mercies and the favorable interpositions of 
His Providence in the course and conclusion of the 
late war; for the great degree of tranquility; for the 
peaceable and rational manner in which we have 
been enabled to establish constitutions of govern-
ment for our safety and happiness. . . .

And also that we may then unite in most 
humbly offering our prayers and supplications to 
the great Lord & Ruler of Nations and beseech Him 
to pardon our National and other transgressions, to 
enable us all, whether in public or private stations, 
to perform our several & relative duties properly 
and punctually; to render our National 
Government a blessing to all the people by con-
stantly being a government of wise, just, & consti-
tutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed & 
obeyed; to protect & guide all sovereigns & nations 
and to bless them with good governments, Peace & 
Concord; to promote the knowledge & practice of 
true religion & virtue . . . ; & generally to grant 
unto all mankind such a degree of temporal 
Prosperity as He alone knows to be best.

It was a woman, Mrs. Sarah Hale, editor of 
Godey’s Ladies’ Book, who spent thirty years pro-
moting the setting of a legal Thanksgiving Day. 
She wrote and published repeated pleas to the 
general public and wrote letters to the various 
presidents. Finally, in 1863, President Lincoln 
issued a proclamation setting aside the last 
Thursday of November in that year as a day 
of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent 
Father. It was not until 1941 that Congress 
finally ruled Thanksgiving Day would be a 
legal holiday.

Time for Gratitude

It’s now some 354 years since Governor 
Bradford decreed a Thanksgiving Day, and I 
want to ask, “How do we value and deserve 
and observe this day? Do we remember only 
the feasting?” I think not. One of the great 
human sins is ingratitude. Surely we have 
not grown so cynical that we cannot have the 
spiritual insight to observe the “prayer and 
praise” part of the day. Virginia Oliver says: 
“Thanksgiving is a time for remembering— 
remembering the good gifts of every day, the 
countless blessings that are ever ours; for 
remembering Thanksgiving Days that are past, 
the memories of families and friends, remember-
ing at each time this day draws near the 
hearts of mankind, joined in grateful praise.”

Did I forget to thank thee, Lord, 
For things that may seem small: 
A flower by the wayside, 
A wild bird’s lovely call,

For all the daily happenings 
That we call commonplace— 
For autumn and for sunsets 
And a neighbor’s smiling face?
For life is made of little things,
So let me not forget
To count my smallest blessings,
And before the sun is set,

To thank thee, Lord, for every one
That adds a note of cheer,
And our blessings will be multiplied
Before another year.

[Pauline Stone, “Little Things”]

The longer we live, the more we realize
the blessings that lie in everyday living. Just a few—the marvel of good health, the dearness
of home and loved ones, the little treasures that
money cannot buy, the wonder of the world of
nature, freedom under God, and the bounty
which we enjoy in this good land. Thanksgiving
is a time to celebrate these and many
other blessings. It is a way of life. Let us be
thankful that there still is sunshine, that we
still can glimpse the blue of the sky and, in our
onward way, continue to look up. One of the
great characters I remember with affection on
this campus when I arrived many years ago
was Herald R. Clark. We used to pass early
each morning just north of the Joseph Smith
Memorial Building. While he was still some
twenty yards away from me, he’d call out,
“Look up, H. I., look up!” And I’d look toward
the east. I’d get things that would fill my soul
for an entire day. But I learned something else,
that I had been carrying my head down with
burdens. He taught me to look up, and it made
life just a little sweeter. I want to be thankful
for friends with kind smiles, cheerful words.
This is a time for grateful thanksgiving.
Shakespeare sang, “O Lord, who lends me life,
le…nd me a heart replete with thankfulness.”

As I was looking through the discourses
of Brigham Young and noting his words about
complainers and grumblers, I thought that
maybe it would be appropriate, at least for me,
to listen to his challenge. He was speaking
about Zion’s Camp, en route to Missouri:

We had grumblers, . . . unruly and discontented
spirits. . . . Brother Joseph led, counseled and guided
the company, and contended against those unruly,
evil disposed persons. When we arrived in
Missouri, the Lord spoke to his servant Joseph and
said, “I have accepted your offering,” and we had
the privilege to return again. On my return many
friends asked me, . . . “Who has it benefited? . . .
If the Lord did command it to be done, what object
had he in view of doing so?” . . . I then learned that
those persons who asked me such questions were
weak in faith and, like a faulty column in an edifice,
could not bear up under the burden designed to rest
upon them. . . . I wish this fact to sink into your
hearts, that when men or women have doubts, they
also have fear; and when they have fear, they are in
danger of what? Of themselves. Want of confidence
is the parent of moral imbecility and intellectual
weakness. Hear it, ye Saints, that man or women
that is crowned with crowns of glory, immortality,
and eternal lives will never be heard to grumble or
complain. I told those brethren that I was well
paid—paid with heavy interest—yea that my mea-
sure was filled to overflowing with the knowledge
that I had received by travelling with the Prophet.
[Journal of Discourses, 10:20]

At this season I have much to be grateful for—
the little things, but also the larger gifts that I
live within the affection of a caring Church,
that that Church teaches me I am individual
and personal in the sight of God, and there is
opportunity for affection between me and my
Father in heaven, and that there is a living
prophet who can and will guide and will help
to lift the burden of the time. My friends, this is
my testimony to you this day, and I bear it in
the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.