

Thanksgiving

ATLE HETLAND

EN ROUTE

When we begin to notice the autumn chill, the leaves turn yellow and red, and the days become shorter and the clouds draw in, maybe with some rain or snow in store, then we know that it is time for all human beings and nature to take a rest. The farmers, the millions of women and men who till the land, can look ahead to a quieter season. In Pakistan, although in the Northern hemisphere, the change from summer to autumn and winter may not be quite as distinct as further north, and we can still harvest some produce from the fields and the orchards.

Where I grew up, in the far north of Europe, near the North Pole, as we used to say, the four seasons are even more distinct than in Pakistan. Autumn begins in September, and like in Canada, Russia, Japan and North Korea, the Scandinavians too must get all harvests inside their barns and store houses by the end of October, a before a single frost night can destroy it all. Unlike in Pakistan, no oranges can grow that far north, but apples do; plums and cherries, too, and much more.

In October and early November, I remember from my childhood in Norway, that we felt very lucky if we could spot flocks of migratory birds on the sky on their way to warmer lands, Canada geese, for example, flying in impressive snow plough formations. We wondered about all God's creations and the wide, wide world. We posed more questions than the adults could answer, parents, teachers, neighbours, and whoever we thought might know. We noticed that adults too lived in wonder, respect and appreciation for the environment around us, yes, the whole universe – recalling, too that this was the time of the space explorations, with the American Apollo programme and the Russian Sputniks, with the dog Pluto sent on a test trip never to return, and the first men to step on the moon in 1969.

Today, 27 November 2014, is Thanksgiving Thursday, the beginning of a long and festive weekend. It is observed in many countries and especially in the United States of America. Everyone must go home for Thanksgiving, to where their parents and relatives live, to the places they come from or feel is ultimately 'home'. Old parents may be there, siblings who did not move away to the big cities for work and fortune, and neighbours and friends who live where they grew up, out of necessity or choice, along with newcomers who have migrated in from other towns or lands.

Thanksgiving is a beautiful holiday; it has all the spiritual ingredients for people who live their lives in reliance of each other and in trust of God. In many ways, Thanksgiving is an old-fashioned holiday, as the great religious and secular holidays are, deep-rooted in people's hearts.

Thanksgiving is American; it is one of the many great things which that land has given us. I would like to stress that because I am often critical of America in my columns; I don't like many of the superpower's capitalist and imperialistic ways, its behavior of policeman and military power of the world. Yet, the values of Americans at home, in their own land till this day, are often as decent and upright as they get, with real concern for neighbours, family, friends, and the less fortunate. In America, religion, mostly Christianity but also Judaism, Islam, and other faiths, still plays a central role in local communities and in the lives of modern, fast-moving people.

All this forms part of the American Thanksgiving weekend. And then, from Thanksgiving to Christmas on 25 December, there are many similarities in social life to the holy month of Ramadan in Islam. People gather at all kinds of parties, at work, for lunch, in the afternoon, in the evening, and certainly during the weekend. It is

all building up to Christmas, which nowadays is also referred to as the ‘Holiday Season’, recognizing that America is a secular state and a multi-cultural and multi-religious land.

Perhaps America is one of the world’s most tolerant lands as for people of different faiths, creeds and cultures, social backgrounds and other differences? I think so, even after 9/11, and even though there are conflicts and frictions in the land. African-Americans are not yet quite equal citizens yet. That we see today when there is ongoing unrest in the town of Ferguson, Missouri, after a young black boy was shot dead by a white policeman some months ago, and no charges made against him.

But America is a big, diverse and impressive land, mostly built by immigrants. I don’t want to gloss over the shortcomings and broken institutions, and I remain critical to many American government policies and ideological foundations, especially as experienced abroad. Yet, I also admire the ‘American way of life’, and the people’s practical ways of looking at problems and finding solutions.

At Thanksgiving and other celebratory occasions, Americans, like Pakistanis, Europeans and others, wonder about how we human beings have often ‘gone astray’; we have become more selfish and individualistic, it seems. People question the way we use and overuse the environment; the way we pollute and use resources that cannot be renewed, causing climate change and global warming – in direct contradiction to the age-old culture of the indigenous Americans, the red Indians, who lived more in harmony with nature.

When we in Pakistan reflect on current issues this year, and when we, too, say our Thanksgiving prayers, we will realize that we all, or most of us, have a lot to be thankful for. Many things in politics, secular and religious life, could have gone much worse. The way the dragged-out *dharna* protests have been handled must be seen as a mature way of letting popular critique take place. I believe the protesters went over the top, and that in future, we need to find better ‘traffic rules’ for how to organize non-parliamentary opposition. But then, after all, Pakistan is a young democracy ‘en route’ to shape its institutions and political culture.

At Thanksgiving, we reflect on and pray for the have-nots, and there are many in Pakistan. They need our sympathy and support, and the politicians must find better ways of distributing wealth and include all men and women at a level playing field. That is the most important future political field, even more important than improving economic growth. We must always remember that every person has an equal share in the land – and a right to reap the fruits of what God has given Pakistan in abundance.

I wish you a Happy Thanksgiving – Pakistanis and foreigners alike.

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from university, diplomacy and development aid.
