

Appreciate it!

Southerners are known for their hospitality, their laid-back attitude to life, their family bondedness, and their ability to turn strangers into friends. Popular phrases roll off our tongues: “Appreciate it!” “Come see us!” “Y’all come back.” Now, as we gather to celebrate Thanksgiving,” we may need to revisit the idea of gratefulness.

Stores commercialize Thanksgiving with their sales, products, foods and pre-Christmas rush which begins earlier and earlier each year. Airlines black out the days around Thanksgiving so that frequent flyers cannot avail of free flights. Instead, they dig deeper into people’s pocket books, knowing that Thanksgiving is a family time and that many families, in order to be together for Thanksgiving, have to travel.

Newspapers carry stories from children on how to prepare a Thanksgiving turkey. If one were to follow the children’s advice, one could end up in the emergency room with food poisoning.

The day after Thanksgiving is called “Black Friday” due to the insane rush of people with frayed nerves trying to get the early bird special scoop on their Christmas Shopping. The roads become a slow moving parking lot. Mall parking lots become a line of cars trying to inch as close as possible to the doors of their favorite store. Everyone doesn’t move fast enough. Car horns get a work out. Traffic lights don’t change quick enough. Police directing traffic are more a hindrance than a help to the harried driver.

In stores, the saga continues as courtesy become a foreign word; elbows become weapons of control; shoulders become blocking tackles to gain the best advantage. Inside the malls, some lonely men sit and wait, sit and wait and watch the mass of chaotic humanity rush by at a frenzied pace. These men are there for one purpose: to carry home the bargain gifts their families have bought.

I am amazed at the transformation that takes place from Thanksgiving Thursday to Black Friday, the next day. The transformation is not only in people’s girth but also in people’s attitude. We go from enjoying the best recipes to fighting for the best bargain. We go from a place where everyone is family to a place where everyone is an enemy and in the way. We go from enjoying each other’s company to detesting everyone who stands in our way. We go from being mild mannered and loving to being hostile and hateful. We go from Thanksgiving football games to a foot race to the nearest store.

Why this transformation? Is the transformation just a change for a day or is it more seasonal and lasting? Is Thanksgiving just a day or an attitude?

As a kid growing up in Ireland, when aunts or uncles, grandmother or neighbors gave us a gift, our mother reminded us of the obligation with the question she always asked us, “What do you say?” Obviously, we got the message. We were supposed to say “thank you.” Later on, as we grew older, the verbal message had to be reinforced, “Send them a “thank you” card.”

There seems to be several reasons why we find it difficult to say “thank you.” First of all, human beings, by nature, are egotistical. We are prideful and that seems to be part of our flawed humanity. Secondly, saying “thank you” requires a certain amount of humility which is often in short supply. Again, our pride and our egos get in the way of our need to be humble. Flippantly, we say things like, “When you are as important as I am, it is hard to be humble.” Thirdly, saying “thank you” is a recognition and an appreciation for the other. It is an effort on our part to acknowledge the “little extra” that someone did for us. Finally, we find it difficult to say “thank you” because we feel that what we received from someone is not a gift as such but something that we were owed. When we receive something that we feel we were owed, then there is no need for an acknowledgement. The nine out of ten lepers who didn’t bother to return and say “thank you,” allowed pride to cloud their humility, their expectation to cloud their appreciation and their egos to cloud their gift.

“Thank you” for taking the time to read this rambling reflection on the struggle to say “thank you.” We appreciate it!