Ethics Newsline™ Commentary
November 24, 2003

Critical Thanksgiving
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"In a culture proud of its ability to be critical -- to see life whole, warts and all -- Thanksgiving yanks us back from *warts* to *all*. It reminds us to express gratitude for the context of good that surrounds the bad."

My wife and I spent last weekend readying the house for Thanksgiving. As the U.S. Senate knotted itself into agonies over the energy bill and Medicare legislation, I was washing skylights. While Eduard Shevardnadze resigned as president of the former Soviet republic of Georgia, I was cleaning the gutters. And despite a drumbeat of deadly news from Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Middle East, I carefully cleaned out a paint brush.

Working on into the waning Maine sunlight, I found myself pondering this disconnect. Here was I, enjoying the simple and intimate pleasures of home life, while so many millions were unable to do so. And here were our world leaders, groping to put in place new policies and programs. Would they make a difference? Was the world moving forward on the right moral track? If I believed it wasn't, was it ethical to wile away a weekend doing ordinary things? Isn't there every temptation, these days, to abandon normalcy and writhe with anguish?

That got me thinking about what Thanksgiving means -- and realizing that, when it seems that the world is coming unstuck, it's easy to overlook the giving of thanks for whatever is still together. I sometimes worry that in our Western culture, we're perilously close to forgetting how to be thankful. I'm not just talking about the forgotten etiquette of penning thank-you notes or bringing hostess gifts. I'm talking about something deeper: Ours is a culture of edgy nay-saying, dominated by some low-grade, unexamined assumptions that all things are in tumult. We're not very good at seeing goodness coming together -- and thanking one another for it. Too often there's a polarity in our public discourse. We too easily make decisions by finding out what's wrong with a person, a policy, or a product so that, by default, we can choose the alternative. We're more willing to assign blame than to credit noble motivation.

To balance that, I suspect, is one of the great purposes of Thanksgiving. In a culture proud of its ability to be critical -- to see life whole, warts and all -- Thanksgiving yanks us back from *warts* to *all*. It reminds us to express gratitude for the context of good that surrounds the bad.

But how do we do that? How do we express gratitude in a dangerous world without sounding hypocritical or naïve -- and without descending into the pablum of platitude or the sap of sentimentality? After all, if gratitude has behind it no more philosophical depth than the greeting-card aisle at Wal-Mart, why take it seriously? If being grateful requires us to ignore evil in our determination to praise good, how can we justify the giving of thanks?

What's needed is an ability to be thankful without losing our keen critical edge. But think about what critical means. It's not just carping and censorious faultfinding. To criticize means to assess merits and demerits fairly and make an appropriate judgment. Think about literary or art criticism, requiring reasoned interpretation and discerning appreciation. Think about critical care, which refers to the help given at a potential turning point where a patient's change can be abrupt and decisive. Critical also means significant, decisive, and essential.

For Thanksgiving 2003, we need to develop critical gratitude. We need the ability to give thanks decisively, even at a turning point with outcomes still unsure. We need to set aside our fascination with the problematic long enough to assess all that's settled, calm, and valuable. We don't have to abandon our sharp scrutiny of the world. And we certainly don't have to be lulled into a false and hypnotic tranquility. But we do need to see life whole. We need to recognize the things that still work right.

Which brings me back to normalcy. One of the simplest ways to express gratitude is not by saying but by doing. There's a place, in our troubled world, for the values that sustain the ordinary acts of kindness. There's a reason to delight in the unexceptional. In the end, that's the kind of life so much of the world is longing for. It's not only about food and shelter and peace. It's about the smaller pleasures that can only flourish when these are in place -- pleasures as simple as a washed window or a clean brush.