

Today we will gather to break bread together. And in another week or so, many of us will gather again for Thanksgiving Day with our families and friends.

We'll feast again, and perhaps watch some football, or go for a hike.

Yet most of us will have never actually harvested an ear of corn, or plucked green beans from the vine, or had a personal relationship with the turkey that graces so many tables this time of year.

Other hands will have done the harvesting. A vast network of machines and processes and businesses will have placed that harvest within the easy reach of those who can afford it.

The season is surrounded by the symbols and stories of our civic mythos – the corn shocks and the cornucopia, the pumpkins and the pilgrims – all pressed into the service of yet another annual marketing opportunity.

It's pumpkin spice time again! Don't miss out!

I don't seek to denigrate the production part of this. It is pretty marvelous, even with all its flaws. And it is flawed. A lot of food goes to waste. People go hungry in the midst of plenty. Affordable food is often the least nutritious and the most harmful to bodies and minds.

We have found ways to preserve and store food, to deliver it across thousands of miles, so that a bad harvest is no longer life or death for us. We seem to have placed ourselves above and outside the old cycles of nature.

And though we are far removed from the harvest, we still gather to give thanks at harvest time.

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How many of you know about Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs?

I knew of it from my college days, but I thought it would be worth revisiting the subject for my topic today. And like so many things I thought I knew, it turned out that I knew less than I imagined.

The hierarchy of needs is usually presented as a pyramid of five levels. Our most basic need is for physical survival, and this will be the first thing that motivates our behavior.

We start with our physiological needs - the biological requirements for human survival like air, food, drink, shelter, clothing, warmth, sex, and sleep. If these needs are not satisfied the human body and mind can't function well. Maslow considered physiological needs the most important, and all the other needs become secondary until these needs are met.

Then come our needs for safety - protection from the elements, security, order, law, stability, freedom from fear.

After physiological and safety needs have been fulfilled, the third level of human needs is social and involves our feelings of belongingness. We need friendship, intimacy, trust, and acceptance, and the receiving and giving of affection and love. We need to be part of a family, a community, a team, a tribe.

The fourth level consists of esteem needs - which Maslow classified into two categories - first, esteem for oneself (dignity, achievement, mastery, independence) and second, the desire for reputation or respect from others - status, prestige, recognition.

Finally, we have what Maslow called self-actualization needs - realizing personal potential, self-fulfillment, seeking personal growth and peak experiences. A desire "to become everything one is capable of becoming."

The pyramid image suggests that one can address the needs of a higher level only when the ones below it have been met.

*To quote Maslow: "It is quite true that man lives by bread alone — when there is no bread. But what happens to man's desires when there is plenty of bread and when his belly is chronically filled? At once other (and "higher") needs emerge and these, rather than physiological hungers, dominate the organism. And when these in turn are satisfied, again new (and still "higher") needs emerge and so on."*

But he noted later that the order of needs is actually very flexible - based on external circumstances or individual differences, and our behavior is multi-motivated, that is, simultaneously determined by more than one need.

After he first published his theory in 1943, he continued to refine and expand it, and ultimately ended up with eight levels instead of five.

His fifth level split into four, so that after the esteem level, we have:

Cognitive needs for knowledge and understanding, of curiosity, exploration, and the need for meaning.

Followed by aesthetic needs - appreciation and search for beauty, balance, form, harmony to eye and ear.

Then we have self-actualization needs - realizing our personal potential, self-fulfillment, seeking personal growth and peak experiences.

And then we come to our need for transcendence - motivation by values which transcend beyond the personal self – mystical experiences and certain experiences with nature, aesthetic experiences, service to others, the pursuit of science, religious faith, and so on.

The first four levels he referred to as deficiency needs – if any of those are unfilled, you will be discontented, disturbed, or in physical or emotional pain – and you will do something about that.

The next four he described as being or growth needs, the desire to be more than just a contented animal, and to ultimately transcend the self and be part of something bigger.

It's important to remember that this is a theory of motivation. We are all motivated by our needs and desires, in which more basic needs must be more or less met (rather than all or none) prior to higher needs. And the "higher" needs may or may not emerge once lower needs are satisfied. Many are content with their basic needs fulfilled.

Maslow believed that there are certain conditions that must be fulfilled in order for the basic needs to be satisfied. For example, freedom of speech, freedom to express oneself, and freedom to seek new information are a few of the prerequisites. Any blockages of these freedoms could prevent the satisfaction of the basic needs.

These freedoms are cognitive and social, and they illustrate an important point.

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As a psychologist, Maslow focused on individuals.

But what is blindingly obvious is that we can't fulfill any of these needs by ourselves.

A single human can't fulfill basic physiological needs by themselves. We depend on the killing, harvesting, and eating of other beings – plant and animal. Clean water and air require vast chemical and biological processes without which our survival would not be possible.

We depend on other humans for our safety and security, for love and belonging. Even our esteem needs are tightly woven into our relationships with others and the world.

None of our needs can be met without social connection.

And human needs are not hierarchical. Life is messier than that. Needs are, like most other things in nature, an interactive, dynamic system, but they are anchored in our ability to make social connections.

Without connection and collaboration, there is no survival. Connection is a prerequisite for survival, physically and emotionally, and for the fulfillment of our needs for growth and transcendence.

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*To quote Wendell Berry: I believe that the community - in the fullest sense: a place and all its creatures - is the smallest unit of health and that to speak of the health of an isolated individual is a contradiction in terms.*

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What happens when we begin to think of these needs in terms of community? When we frame them in that way?

When we say that the community needs air, food, drink, shelter, clothing, warmth, sex, sleep?  
And that if these needs are not satisfied the community cannot function optimally.

When we say that the community needs protection from the elements, security, order, law, stability, and freedom from fear?

When we say that the community too has needs for love and belonging and affection? For community esteem and good reputation?

When we say that the community has needs for self-actualization? What would that actualization show up as?

And what about transcendence for all?

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As we ask these questions, we shift the center of our attention away from the self and onto the communities we are part of. We can begin to discern whether our laws and institutions and processes are meeting the needs of both individuals and the communities they serve, and how they may have lost their way.

There are deficiencies everywhere, with the resulting suffering, discontent and resentment. And correcting those deficits is one of the major tasks of our time.

As I noted earlier, there is no imperative that higher motivations will emerge in an individual – or a community - even if all our basic needs are met. Unless those motivations are nurtured and promoted, they may never emerge.

This nurturing is the work of our faith. We aren't the only ones doing it. There are many in other faiths and in secular institutions doing that work.

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I like to think of it all as an ecology, something wild, not something tamed and ordered. The first two levels are the soil in which the seeds of our humanity are planted, providing nutrition and protection. The seeds need the light and warmth of love and belonging, the water of connection, the sense of purpose and meaning hidden in their hearts.

From that soil there may grow a rich diversity that might flower into actualization and transcendence.

THAT is the harvest we seek.

And while we can nurture and promote, we cannot dictate, nor impose. We can't control the outcome. The spirit of life flows through us and around us, weaving all things together, and we are its servants and instruments, not its masters.

It requires humility of us, patience, courage. And love.

This makes us better humans, and I think that's something to be thankful for.