

Chapel Talk  
Louisa Zendt  
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Thoughts on Thanksgiving

It is my favorite holiday, though I do find Thanksgiving completely overwhelming. We host thanksgiving dinner at our house every year. About 40 people come, mostly immediate family, starting at noon, and many spend the night. First, there is way too much food—and, of course, I freely indulge and I completely overeat. Second, there are way too many people—and, of course, I've invited every one of them. Actually, I invite more each year; the kids have college friends with nowhere to go, maybe a new boyfriend or a girlfriend, and there are distant cousins, who know they are always welcome. They may decide randomly that this is the year they will do Thanksgiving at the Zendts. This year two more distant relatives are coming from Bermuda. Then there are friends from our days of living in Oregon, who come to visit their college kids on the east coast, and decide they should join us for Thanksgiving as well, and they, too, know they are always welcome. So it is overwhelming, and yet I love every minute of it.

But the thing that is most overwhelming to me on Thanksgiving is when I stop for a moment and realize that there is just way too much to be thankful for. When I finally sit down, at the last place at the last table, I look all around me and can hardly contain my emotion—even with all of our individual challenges and heartbreaks, we all have just so much to be thankful for.

For starters, I argue we are the wealthiest and maybe the best educated country in the world with a growing material culture that is so pervasive that it is driving the most sophisticated of personal communication devices, and entertainment gadgets, and the most useless of material goods, from our would be nice-to-have list to our must-have list.

Consider the school packing list that Ms. Pala posted online, earlier this fall—a page from the School archives of the 1940s. A much more simplistic and less fettered life is suggested in this list. No need to bring anything extra, the carefully numbered pairs of socks and trousers and undergarments would do. Today, only a suggested packing list is offered, and cars arrive on opening day overflowing with the many things we believe we need. In addition to the clothes that make up your interpretation of the dresscode, you need a cell phone, a laptop, seniors need a mini fridge, your iPod, a bike, a Nintendo, a Game Boy or another of the latest video gaming tools, cases of water-bottles, cases of Ramen Noodles—all of this and more to sustain you from opening day 'til Parents Weekend, when you can refuel. I am overwhelmed by all of the stuff that we have and I can imagine that you too might be feeling overwhelmed.

Yet, make no mistake, I love my stuff, and I think I need all of it, too. I go to Costco with my short list of what I need, and you would not believe what I come home with. The same goes for the trips made to Target or Wal-Mart. Are we full yet? It is overwhelming.

We know this, and we talk about it often, articulating our concerns and sharing new ideas on how to simplify, but it's not easy. Recently, I've read about a group who are taking extreme measures to cut back—they call themselves “Freegans”. (Find the Oct. 6<sup>th</sup> issue of Newsweek if you are interested.) Freegans are vegans who go a few steps further to help eliminate waste and overproduction. They not only stick to a vegan diet, but they also commit to only eating leftover, found, cast aside, or essentially, what they consider wasted foods. There is enough waste to feed a nation—they claim—restaurant waste and waste from grocery stores that must dispose of day old bakery items and produce that has lost color and no longer has market value. They also extend their concern for our material world by not buying anything newly produced. They buy 2<sup>nd</sup> hand clothing, shoes and furniture from thrift stores, wanting to reuse all that is available, to diminish the footprint, the negative impact we are having on the environment.

The “Freegan” movement really intrigues me and yet it also worries me. In fact, I hid the article from my husband for a week—I am afraid he could easily become a Freegan! He abhors waste and groans when I replace his worn out shoes or when I suggest that a piece of furniture needs replacing—and deep down, I know that I sort of agree with him. But I do think the Freegans have taken “waste not, want not” a little too far. I am not interested in “dumpster diving” as the Freegans are known to do (also a known tradition of the faculty kids, after you all dispose of so many treasures at the end of the school year) and I hope I can keep my husband from such drastic efforts to reuse and reduce!

But this does bring to mind a crazy Zendt tradition, having to do with reducing trash and reusing. At the little beach town where we like to go on vacation, there is Bulk Trash Day. Two times a year I cringe as Harvey, Becca, Christy and Peter Zendt celebrate this May and September event of curbside, bulk trash, pick-up. Here's how it works. Over a week's time, people take advantage of the township offer of curbside service, picking up all the bulk items you don't want and that you don't know quite what to do with. This includes old TV's, deck furniture, rugs, appliances, bikes and so much more. You just place these items on the curb, during this designated time, and they will disappear--you never have to travel to see the landfill. At the same time, many people, delight in cruising this nice little beach town to claim some of these great castaways. People come in pick-up trucks, or they cruise the streets on bikes, as my family does. In the long run, I suppose this is great—many things are getting reused. Actually, I both cringe and delight in what my family members find and we have fun thinking of creative ways to reuse certain interesting items. I think most of our deck furniture comes from bulk trash days. I do have veto power, though, and some items are brought home

and then go back out to the curb almost instantaneously, and yes, now and again I can also convince Mr. Zendt to unload a few of our things—last summer we were able to get rid of three old bikes and a huge lobster pot from our cluttered garage. The reuse is great, yet its sad to see how easily we dispose of so many barely used items.

Thanksgiving is a time to think of our many blessings and the great bounty that has been bestowed upon us. We have family and friends, we have opportunities and we have great abilities. We have safety, shelter, and warmth, and we have plenty to eat—so much to be thankful for.

Which brings to mind my final thought—and that is taking the necessary time to give thanks: to give prayers of thanks, to exchange words of thanks and, yes, to write notes of thanks.

As a child, a thank you note was right up there on the list with eating carrots and brushing your teeth. The consequences were clear—no carrots, loss of eyesight and no curly hair, no toothpaste, well, eventually no teeth, and no thank you note meant no gift from that giver next year. It was all directly related, we thought. Worse, if you did not write a thank you note it was a direct reflection of our mother's character and her parenting—if her children did not crank out the notes soon after Christmas or Birthdays, she was simply a bad mother.

Today, I cringe when my kids forget to write a note of appreciation, and I love being on the receiving end. How did this happen?

Well, it happened because I've come to believe that it does matter! If you can slow down and say thank you, or even take a little more effort and produce a note, you can make a significant difference and an impact. Yes, saying thank you counts, it counts a lot, and it is a reflection of your character. A great thank you note also gives the receiver the inspiration to keep on doing something well—the something that you appreciated and took the time for which to thank them.

Consider these notes (PowerPoint slides): First, a note from Mr. Roach, though I can't read it, our busy headmaster took a moment to write a hand-written thank you note for the admission work of Open House—I think it says thank you in there somewhere. Yes, even though I really can't read it, the fact that he appreciated, whatever I did, enough to say thank you makes me feel greatly appreciated and wanting to continue to give my best effort.

This second note is this artsy thank you note. The time taken to illustrate this note, color in real life, and note the lengthy details in the tightly packed hand-written sentences, this is really heartfelt and moving. This thank you note came from two alums after they spent the night at our house during homecoming weekend. They expressed thanks for the wonderful place that St. Andrew's is—and what it means to them as young adults.

This note is written to Mr. Scoville—it is a thank you note from a young admission guest. Even though he wrote to the wrong school, big mistake, he still got the message across that he is a polite kid

and he appreciated Mr. Scoville's time and effort and he knows that nice matters. I am not sure if he thanked Lawrenceville in the same way that he thanked us, but he still gets points for writing a thank you note!

Finally, a note from a student passing by my office—its a scribbled little note of thanks for a minor favor. This little note tells me that she gets it, she has empathy and she appreciated whatever it was that I did for her and I feel hugely paid back by her little note of thanks and kindness. This cheery little note has been under my desk blotter for two years, a great reminder of thanks.

There are many great examples of classic thank you note writers in the St. Andrew's community. Mr. Colburn—distinctive, easy to read, perfect handwriting, always writing on fine note cards or a postcard. Mr. Roach, though always illegible, writes many thanks you notes, to teachers, students, parents, and alumni, and they have a big impact on the receiver. Dr. McLean is the "green" thank you note writer. He always sends me an email, short and to the point ... "well done Louisa"... He writes after a visit back day or an open house. That's a really nice vote of confidence from a peer! I relish these notes—people like to be, no, I believe people need to be appreciated.

So here I am on the eve of Thanksgiving vacation, thinking about our overwhelming bounty—all that we have to be thankful for—especially at St. Andrew's. The many good people who care so much for you; your parents, your guardians, your closest friends, your classmates and dorm mates, your teachers, and the staff. Several people made it possible for you to be here. Many more give you great support while you are here, and others simply make your time here really nice. I am thinking now that a thank you note to someone you appreciate could be great. So, in closing, I would like to ask you to take a moment to think deeply about someone who you truly appreciate. In your mind, create that thank you note that you could send, the note that not only does the job of letting them know you are a thoughtful compassionate person filled with gratitude, but also a thank you note that empowers them to continue to do the great things that they do, that inspired you to take the time to write the note. In fact, to encourage you to really engage in this act of thankfulness, I have placed a basket filled with postcards and envelopes, all recycled St. Andrew's stationary, in the back of the chapel. Please help yourself, as you leave tonight, take a few cards, and please take them and use them to celebrate your overwhelming feeling of thanks and appreciation.

Let us pray: Lord God, maker of all things bright and beautiful, of all creatures great and small, we give you thanks and praise and ask that you guide us into this week of Thanksgiving and help us to take the time to appreciate all that we have and all that we are capable of giving.

Thank you and Happy Thanksgiving.