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Some perspective on what we have to be thankful for

By Marian L. Tupy
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An ordinary person today lives better than most kings of yesteryear, so happy Thanksgiving. Humans tend to overlook our spectacular rise from grinding poverty to previously unimaginable abundance.

Of the original 102 Pilgrims who arrived in North America aboard the Mayflower in the fall of 1620, only about half survived to celebrate the first Thanksgiving, in November 1621. The rest perished through starvation and lack of shelter. The survivors gave thanks to God for a plentiful harvest. And good local harvests were vital, for in a world without global commodity markets or effective transport and communications, food shortages often meant starvation.

Today, most Americans are concerned with eating too much rather than too little. That fact is all the more remarkable considering that between 1600 and 2013 the population of what would later become the United States rose 21,000%, while the proportion of Americans employed in agriculture decreased at least 98%.

Contemporary Americans live longer, healthier, richer and safer lives than at any other period in history. In fact, an ordinary person today lives better than most kings of yesteryear.

To appreciate the astonishing improvements in the standards of living of ordinary people, consider the life of the 17th century's grandest figure, Louis XIV. The Sun King ruled France and Navarre between 1643 and 1715. During his life, Louis became synonymous with wealth and power. His Versailles palace had 2,000 windows, 700 rooms, 1,250 chimneys and 67 staircases and cost, at a minimum, \$3.2 billion in today's dollars.

Yet here was a man who almost died of smallpox when he was 9 years old and lost nearly all of his legitimate heirs — his son, a grandson and a great-grandson — along with his younger brother, another grandson and a great-grandson, to smallpox. Eventually, he was succeeded by his second great-grandson, who became Louis XV and died (you guessed it) of smallpox.

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In America, smallpox is usually associated with the decimation of Native Americans, but Europeans were not immune to the disease. As late as the 18th century, for example, smallpox killed about 400,000 Europeans annually. The overall mortality rate was 20% to 60%. Among infants, it was more than 80% and was one of the reasons for the low overall life expectancy of 20 to 30 years. The disease was eradicated in 1980. Today, we don't think of smallpox any more than we think of the bubonic plague, which, in five short years, killed almost one-third of all Europeans in the 14th century.

One outcome of that epidemic was to make the Europeans suspicious of bathing. According to some medical experts of the day, "once heat and water created openings (pores) through the skin, the plague could easily invade the entire body." As such, hygiene got progressively worse. Queen Elizabeth I, for example, who ruled over England and Ireland between 1558 and 1603, supposedly said that she bathed once a month, "whether she needed it or not." Her successor, James I, however, only washed his fingers.

The "journal de la santé," which was kept for Louis XIV by his doctors from infancy until 1711, describes the king's daily life in microscopic detail, but mentions bathing only once. According to the journal, the king was often sick and wore extravagant wigs not only to hide his hair loss, but also to keep him warm. Rightly so, for according to one contemporary account, "people froze in those vast salons of marble and gold.... The wife of the Duke of Orleans wrote, 'It is so cold here [Versailles] that at the king's table wine as well as water froze in the glasses.'"

The palace also was ill equipped to deal with human waste. People relieved themselves wherever they could. Thus, shortly before Louis XIV died, an ordinance decreed that feces be removed from the corridors of Versailles once a week. All that filth meant that disease-spreading parasites were rife. Before the 19th century, people had no idea about the germ theory of disease, and doctors often caused more harm than good.

If this was the life of Europe's richest and most powerful man, imagine what ordinary people's lives must have been like. People lacked basic medicines and died relatively young. They had no painkillers, and people with ailments spent much of their lives in agonizing pain. Entire families lived in bug-infested dwellings that offered neither comfort nor privacy. They worked in the fields from sunrise to sunset, yet hunger and famines were commonplace. Transportation was primitive, and most people never traveled beyond their native villages or nearest towns. Ignorance and illiteracy were rife.

More often than not, we tend to overlook our truly spectacular rise from grinding poverty to previously unimaginable abundance. And so, during this Thanksgiving holiday, let us give thanks for accountable government, market economy and scientific progress that make a king out of each of us.

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