Happy Wary Vigilance Day!
PZ Myers

Sorry, I don’t believe in Thanksgiving Day.

This whole notion that one should have vague and aimless feelings of gratitude for the nature of one’s existence is just too weird, and the bow-your-head-at-the-table and radiate-blessings-at-the-cosmos tradition is pointless and silly. Don’t get me wrong: I can be appropriately and happily grateful to people who have gone out of their way to do good for me—Mom will get a phone call, and my wife will get a hug, and they really are appreciated—but for the most part, our existence is not the product of selfless altruism, and there is nothing out there that can be aware of just how glad you are to be alive, no matter how fawning and fulsome you may be.

The universe is cold and uncaring. You may be grateful that you weren’t vaporized by a meteor falling out of the sky this year, but there’s no agent out there who will feel pleased that you noticed, and the fact of your general relief that your existence continues will not be a factor in the motion of space rocks in the next year. I am happy that the microbes didn’t turn me into a pile of putrefying goo yet, but it wasn’t an act of thoughtful kindness on their part, since the little bastards are doing their best to get past my defenses all the time, and all that’s keeping them at bay is my constant expenditure of energy to keep my immune system at readiness. And they’ll also get me one day, for sure … unless that meteor vaporizes me into a cloud of inorganic molecules with minimal nutritional value first.

We’re all doomed. We are currently survivors by luck, sustained by selfish processes, and I don’t thank luck, because she (if she were an autonomous self-aware agent, and she isn’t) will turn for me or against me without concern for my feelings. Nature is not appeasable, get over it.

That poor bird that most of you will have on your dining room table is a perfect metaphor. It went through its life dumb and mostly content, getting its feed shoveled in front of its face every day, and then last week the machineries of profit began to move, and it found itself trussed on an assembly line. Then a gang of people who were mostly concerned with trudging through another day and making a living wage decapitated it, gouged out its guts, stripped off its feathers, and wrapped it in plastic so you could thoughtlessly stuff fragments of its carcass into your hungry maw. The universe did not rotate about that bird, and neither does it spin about you.

If you’re eating tofurkey, you aren’t off the hook, either. Think of the soybeans!

So don’t sit at your table and think you’re being good by warmly thanking an indifferent universe for whatever. It doesn’t care. Don’t beam happy thoughts at the farmers who stocked your larder—they can’t hear you, and they did it for their own personal profit anyway. Above all, don’t be hypocritical and radiate gratitude at the corpse of the turkey, since it’s dead and during its brief life would rather you hadn’t fueled the market forces that led to its execution.

It would be far wiser to sit at that table and contemplate the threats to your existence, and scheme about how you’re going to get them first.

Oh, and you probably do have people who have done good things for you, at personal cost, and without carrying out the calculus of profit. If you want to have a day of thankfulness, thank them personally. None of this nonsense of bland, undirected, unfocused, smug gratitude. Share human feelings with other human beings.

Also, gods don’t exist, so they haven’t done squat for you. Don’t waste your time praying to them, either.

If you’re feeling this strange sensation of being grateful for existence or for good fortune, though, I wonder … would you be resentful of nonexistence, or place blame for random bad luck?