

Dependence in Ordinary Time

(Column 58, July 5, 2021)

By Lucia A. Silecchia

Independence has been on my mind.

I celebrate our nation's birthday under the title "Independence Day," recalling that time in "the course of human events" when, 245 years ago, our founders deemed it "necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another."

I spent time with young people I had not seen for a long time, and marveled at how much they had grown in their abilities to do for themselves what their parents did for them a mere blink of an eye ago.

I caught up with former students who are full-fledged professionals, staking out careers with weighty responsibilities even though it seems like just yesterday that they were students in an introductory class of mine.

In all of these things, the blessing of independence is well worth celebrating!

In my own life too, I pride myself on my own independence – the ability to do the things I have learned how to do and the freedom to do those things.

And yet I wonder if, sometimes, I value independence a little too much, without keeping in mind all the ways in which I am so very dependent on others, whether I notice it or not.

I depend on my family for that unconditional love that is the strength and the joy of life.

I depend on my friends for their companionship in the good times and the hard times along the path of life.

I depend on all the words of wisdom and good example my parents left behind as a guide to good living.

I depend on the pilots who fly planes, the drivers who zip down the highway, the mechanics who fix the subway and the people who provide the food I eat and the water I drink to do their work responsibly, knowing that lives are in their hands.

I depend on doctors and nurses to care for me and my loved ones in time of illness – and to do so with wisdom and compassion.

I depend on those with whom I work – professionally and personally – to do their fair share, to tell the truth, and to do what is right and just.

I depend on all those we hailed this year as "essential workers" to deliver mail, stock supermarkets, move trains and buses, and keep the gas and electricity flowing. I depend on plumbers, electricians, carpenters, bricklayers and roofers who know how to do all

those critically important things I will never attempt (to the great relief of many), and I depend on musicians, poets, artists and performers to make the world a more beautiful place with their insights into the human condition.

I depend on my teachers, past, present and future, to share with me their knowledge of the world. I am fully aware of how little I can learn in my short time on this earth and, thus, how dependent I am on the wisdom of those who lived in the ages before me.

I depend on my pastors for the great gifts of the sacraments they celebrate, for good example, for wise counsel, and for encouragement, challenge, and friendship as they walk this path of life with my sisters and brothers and me.

This list goes on. There are many more on whom I depend from the time I wake up in the morning in a home I did not build, until the time I go to sleep under a blanket I did not weave.

I suppose it is when I am most inclined to rejoice in independence that it does me good to pray with gratitude for all those on whom I depend.

Right now, I live at the peak of my own independence. Yet, I am also a split second away from the illness or accident that could snatch that all from me. Living with this sense of vulnerability is, I think, a good thing.

It is also a way of reminding myself that independence is not a constant or even a norm of life. When I dwelled within my mother, I was dependent on her to care for me. In the time of my infancy, I depended on those around me to know my needs even when I could not express them. In my childhood, I depended on others to make decisions for me because I knew so little (and my judgement was not the best!). I know that days may come when I will become more dependent, perhaps completely dependent, on others yet again.

All too often, I have seen those who depend on others for any reason be thought less of, looked down on, treated with disrespect, and discarded in the many ways we can discard each other. Taking stock of my own dependence is but one small way to remind myself that all of us are so dependent on each other – and that healthy and necessary dependence is nothing to scorn or fear.

More importantly, as I reflect on the ways in which I rely on others, I am reminded once again of how much I depend on God for everything great and small. I ask Him often for my “daily bread,” without always remembering how dependent I am on the fact that He does, in fact, provide it. The people on whom I depend teach me what it means to be bound to others, who give in generosity and love. It is this that helps lead me to the peace that comes only from depending on God for the needs of ordinary time.

Lucia A. Silecchia is a Professor of Law at the Columbus School of Law at the Catholic University of America. "On Ordinary Times" is a biweekly column reflecting on the ways to find the sacred in the simple. Email her at silecchia@cua.edu.