

# A Childhood Memory to Be Thankful For



*Note: This column originally ran in my local paper, the Greeley Tribune, back in November of 2013. I'm asked about it from time to time, so I figured I'd re-post it here, in the spirit of Thanksgiving. Enjoy!*

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The old proverb “it takes a village to raise a child” is a bit controversial these days. Somewhere along the line, it became infused with political philosophy and the role of government in our society, but I believe its true meaning has little to do with such things.

To me, the phrase advocates for a general sense of community and the benefits it lends to families. Under that interpretation, I don't think many would argue against the idea that while parents are ultimately responsible for raising their kids, there are indeed significant advantages that come with living in a society that is invested in the betterment of all of our children.

Again, I'm not talking about the part that politicians and legislation play. I'm talking about the role that us ordinary citizens play, of our own free will, in our everyday lives.

A few weeks ago, I was involved in a book study at my church. My pastor was leading the weekly discussion, and he asked

those participating if they had ever received a “blessing” from someone outside of a church setting.

The question was certainly subjective because a blessing can come in many forms, but I was caught slightly off-guard by the memory that immediately popped to the forefront of my mind. It was from over 30 years ago, and though I had never spoken nor written about it until that very moment, it’s one that has lingered in my consciousness ever since.

I believe I was in the fourth or fifth grade at the time. It was a cold winter day. Snow was on the ground. I was walking home from school by myself, and when I reached the top of the block where I lived, a garbage truck pulled up to a house I was about to stroll past.

Hanging off the back of the truck was a man who was probably in his late twenties. Like many “trash men” I remember from back then, his clothes were filthy and he was bundled up with gloves and a stocking cap to keep himself warm. He was an African American which was sort of a rarity to see in the predominantly white Green Mountain area of Lakewood, Colorado back in the early 1980’s. He had large, yellow headphones clamped to his ears with music playing so loudly from a Walkman hidden somewhere in his coat that I could nearly make out which song it was. He was really into the music too, thrusting his head back and forth wildly to the beat, and shouting out a few, sporadic lyrics.

He didn’t see me at first, and I was so taken back by how lost in the music he was that I couldn’t help but form a smile and even laugh a little. I stopped walking for a moment, knowing he was about to leap from the truck, down to the sidewalk in front of me to empty a pair of trashcans.

When he did, he noticed me chuckling at his performance. He smiled back, and turned even more animated for my benefit, busting a couple of quick dance moves to try and broaden my

smile (which he did). He quickly emptied the trashcans, returned them to the sidewalk, and then jumped back on to the truck.

Before the truck's driver stepped on the gas to move down to the next house on their route, the man on the back abruptly ended his music routine, removed his earphones, and said to me, "Stay in school. Stay in school so you don't have to do what I do when you grow up."

He kept his eyes trained on mine for a moment, making certain that I'd heard him. I nodded to let him know I had.

He smiled and said, "Good." The truck then took off down the street and I never saw him again.

For me, the moment really was nothing less than a blessing. This was a complete stranger who didn't know a thing about me. We likely had very little in common. Yet, he took the opportunity during our chance, brief encounter to use the knowledge he had learned, from what he clearly perceived as a mistake in his own life, to urge me in a better direction. This black man, during an era that was far more racially-tense than today's, looked at this white kid as someone who had their entire life left to live, and he selflessly took the time to inspire me to succeed in that life.

It had a profound impact on me, and though I don't attribute the education I worked hard to acquire solely to this man, he certainly played a part in it.



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My parents, from a very early age, instilled in me the importance of a good education. But as is probably the case with many kids, the things my parents told me didn't always seem valuable at the time. We have a tendency in our youth to sometimes diminish our parents' expressed wisdom as being redundant and rhetorical. After all, did any of us truly ever understand (until we were older) the significance of being told that we should eat all of the food on our plates because children in third-world countries were starving to death? I know I didn't get it.

It sometimes takes that same message coming from someone else – an outsider who speaks from personal experience and has nothing to gain – before it really sinks in.

I don't think many of us realize how easy it can be for an individual to make a difference in a child's life. I don't think many of us understand that a random act of kindness can embed itself in a child's mind and heart for the rest of their existence, and help shape the person they ultimately become.

If we all *did* realize this, and recognized that we can give

everyday, meaningful blessings to children, just imagine all of the amazing adults our villages would produce.

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Happy Thanksgiving everyone! Best wishes to you and your families.