

Opportunities for Gratitude



In recent years, I've made it a practice to take a break from political writing (and pretty much politics in general) during the week of Thanksgiving. It's a time best spent on reflection, gratitude, and family – all better uses of one's efforts than arguing online about the daily governmental drama coming out of D.C. and elsewhere.

In fact, just about every year around this time, I'm reminded (in some significant way) of how truly fortunate I am. Two years ago, it was the resounding success of my son's major spine surgery following a long, hard bout with scoliosis. Last year, it was the early detection and subsequent successful treatment of my wife's breast cancer.

This year...was no exception. I don't write a lot of personal columns, so I hope you'll indulge me in regard to this one.

My kids' school always shuts down for the entire week of Thanksgiving. But rather than sleeping in last Monday, my 15-year-old son was up early and looking forward to checking off one of his school's unique requirements for graduation: job

shadow #1.

Each high school student is required to spend three half-days observing three different career professionals (from different occupations) as they perform their job duties. The objective is to gain an understanding of a profession and the overview of a workplace.

Personally, I think it's a great idea. And truth be told, I was probably every bit as excited for this particular job-shadow opportunity as my son. He was to spend the morning at *Distortions Unlimited*, a local company with international notoriety that makes high-end Halloween masks, costumes, props, and even animatronics. Their customers include everyone from seasonal "Haunted House" operators to pop-culture icons like rock star Alice Cooper, who uses Distortions props in his concert stage-shows.

As we sat in our car at a red light, on our way to the Distortions warehouse, my son and I were talking about what type of elaborate monsters and aliens he might see on the assembly line that day. That's when, without warning, a speeding vehicle slammed into us from behind.

Of course, that was only apparent a second or two later, once our senses had caught up with our bodies. Before that, all we recognized was the violent jolt that whipped through our bones, the piercing loudness of warping metal and shattering glass, and the confused vision of deploying airbags. Worst of all was the sight of my son's wrenched face when I turned to him. I was sure it came from pain, and all I could think about at that moment was the state of his metal-infused spine.

But even before I realized we had been launched to the other side of the intersection, and were still rolling forward, my son insisted to me that he was okay. I wasn't sure I believed him, but with the engine still running, I managed to steer us to the side of the street, and put the car in park. As we both

crawled out through my son's door, I noticed that just about every unbolted item that *had* been at the front of the car, was now somewhere in the caved-in back (including the cap I'd been wearing).

When we got outside to the curb, we gazed back at the intersection where the sedan that had hit us was completely demolished and unrecognizable. Construction workers, who'd been working nearby, were attending to the driver with an urgency in their movements that made clear that she was in much worse shape than we were. And when emergency vehicles quickly arrived, nearly all efforts remained on her. She was soon stretchered off in ambulance.

We haven't received word of her condition, nor do we have any understanding of what she was thinking at the time she hit us. The roads weren't icy or even wet. There was no sound of screeching brakes, which suggests she didn't even attempt to stop or slow down. Best case scenario, it stemmed from a health condition. Worst case, she was drunk, high, or fiddling around with her cell phone at the time.

Regardless, by the grace of God, the injuries my son and I suffered were very minor: essential just arm-bruising from the deployment of the side airbags. We didn't even wake up sore the next morning, which was nothing short of miraculous being that our car was totaled.

It's hard not to feel incredibly thankful when something like that happens – thankful that we weren't shoved into adjacent traffic, thankful that none of our family members (or dogs) were riding in the back seat, and thankful that we were able to walk away from it all. I was also grateful for how calm and mature my son remained throughout the ordeal. A lot of kids his age would have come away emotionally shaken, but he's as eager as ever to work on getting his driver's license.

Gratitude is something that we as a society don't really talk

a lot about these days. Part of the reason is that advancements in (and increased access to) technology, medicine, and other comforts have, in a sense, spoiled us. A lot of us tend to take for granted the blessings in our lives, because we're used to them just being there.

Another contributor to gratitude's tough sell comes back to the beginning of this column (and the reason for why an occasional political detox is so very important). We've been increasingly conditioned by political figures (who use the tools of fear, grievance, and resentment) to subscribe to the notion that society is continually wronging us, and that we must turn to them – the politicians – for the virtue we so richly deserve.

Unfortunately, if you place your faith in politicians instead of something of higher meaning, you're always going to come away feeling unfulfilled.

Anyway, with the quickly approaching holidays comes another strong opportunity to reflect on the things that truly matter (it's not as if you need a health scare or car accident to get the ball rolling). If you haven't taken a lot of time this year to recognize and be thankful for the blessings in your life, I highly recommend you use this time to do just that.

Believe me, you won't be sorry.