

Giving Thanks When Thanksgiving Is Over

There wasn't a glistening turkey, fresh homemade rolls, dressing or even a pumpkin pie. The kitchen had no burning candle emitting the intoxicating fragrance of cinnamon spice or pomegranate. There wasn't one single fall decoration adorning the house. No bulging pumpkins on both sides of the front door, pictures of pilgrims made by the children hanging on the refrigerator or clusters of wheat wrapped in string. Extended family was not gathered around the table. By anyone's account Thanksgiving Day was nowhere close to sight or mind since we were still experiencing the scathing heat of late August. However, this day would be a day of thanksgiving carved into the most sacred places of my heart.

The year 2012 had already provided plenty of memories for which to be grateful. Like the protection provided one summer day when my 8-year-old son and I were walking in the country and narrowly missed the poisonous fangs of a five-foot rattlesnake; the pride felt when my oldest son received his High School diploma; and the awe-inspiring first trip with my youngest son to see the eagles soar over the majestic snowcaps of Alaska. In addition, I experienced a moment at the bedside of a lifelong friend as he spoke his last coherent words before angels escorted him to heaven. My list of blessings this year was long. Many of the memories were stored in photos but most have been forever filed in the bank of my memory. With this I was satisfied because they were the ones most unexpected and fulfilling.

All of these experiences and many others are worthy of gratitude but there is one apex of time that stands above them all. Eighteen months ago I was honored to sign a contract with a major publisher to write a book. It was the consummation of a lifelong dream. Of all the projects I have ever pursued,

none were more difficult or rewarding. When the book edits were finally completed, I anxiously waited to see it in print. Scheduled to release in September, I received the final copy as they were being shipped to the stores in late August. When I first saw it, I wanted to hurry home to show my wife and kids. All of them were home when I walked in the door except my oldest son. They were excited and gave hearty congratulations.

I once attended a conference for troubled marriages. While there, I was encouraged to write a letter to myself as though it were written from my son [he was my only child at the time]. The goal was to help define what you wanted to be for your family. I found it in a dusty old box stored in my mother's home in early July. One particular sentence I wrote struck me like lightning. It read, "Dad, I am so proud of you and the man you are."

Like most men, I don't like to admit how much I crave to be admired by those whom I love but this desire within me is undeniable. As I read my own words, words written 13 years ago, I felt a pang that my ears had never heard my son actually say such things. He has often told me he loved me and voiced other terms of endearment but he had never said he was proud of me. Was it something he never felt toward me? Was I unworthy of the comment? I could only guess the answer to the riddle as I read the long-lost letter.

Two hours after I had walked in the back door to reveal my new book, my son arrived home. I was standing in the kitchen when I heard him come through the front door. I had the book sitting on the middle of the counter but he didn't immediately notice it. I motioned toward the book, and he picked it up and perused the front cover before flipping it over to study the back. Thirty or so seconds passed without him saying a word. I stood watching. He was still not looking my direction but slightly nodding his head up and down as if he emphatically approved. He then turned my direction, raised both eyebrows,

smiled and spoke in a tone that seemed borrowed. "Dad..... I'm *really* proud of you. It's awesome!"

I replied with a simple thank you but as I reached to hug him I noted, "Wow, this is the first time you have ever said anything like that before and it made my day." I quickly turned away and said I needed to step outside to take out the garbage.

The garbage didn't need to go out at that precise moment but I felt emotion about to seep out. I went in the garage astonished and blessed by words that were 18 years in the making. I thought to myself, "If the book was a total failure and never sold one single copy, it was worth every one of the countless hours invested just to hear those confirming words."

Few individuals will have difficulty understanding why the words, "I'm *really* proud of you," spoken by a loved one, brought me to tears. It is human nature to want to feel the approval of those closest to us. But respect is not something that can be commanded by our families; it is something that must be given. To me, on that day, it was the best gift my son has ever granted me.

This year I have personally experienced sorrow, pain, failure and accomplishment. Life lessons, both good and bad are often best understood under the panorama of reflection. As I meditate over the past 12 months, I understand the power affirmation holds when given or received. I feel determination to pour it upon others even when they seem unworthy of praise. I understand life's greatest moments are seldom scripted, providing hope and expectation of a better tomorrow. I'm reminded that faith, family and friends are my most precious commodity and should provide the fuel for a grateful heart all year long – not just on the fourth Thursday of November.

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