

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

July, 2014. Just back from a wonderful trip to Yellowstone National Park and then a quick turnaround to return to our beloved MDI.

It was all kind of a blur. I vaguely recall that the Cornmans came to dinner and then the following morning Claudine took me down to the clinic in Southwest Harbor. I ended up at Eastern Maine Medical in Bangor after a brief stay at MDI Hospital and a helicopter ride. I don't remember that or, for that matter, anything that happened over the next six weeks.

Just as well.

I almost died on a couple of occasions, but pulled through. In retrospect, I am amazed that I was so calm and accepting about the very real possibility of departing this mortal coil. But that is a story for another time, perhaps.

All my kids and Claudine's kids came. Claudine was understandably a wreck. Thank God for our children – especially Claudine's daughter Christine who was the personification of calm strength.

As I began to heal and come out of my fog, visitors started to arrive. Claudine came every day and never missed a day until I was released in late September. A 3 ½ hour round trip from Bass Harbor! Every day!

Not always alone, though. Far from it! Friends, neighbors and people we hardly knew rose to the occasion and gave Claudine rides – many more than once or twice. Invited her to dinner. Fed the cats. Casseroles. Called. Wrote. Emails and cards. Jane came at least 5 times and the entire Horvath family arrived one evening to sing the song they performed at Nellie's fundraising party.

I felt really guilty that Claudine and all the others were making such a fuss over me. And then I recalled an event that occurred more than 50 years ago.

I had taken a young lady to dinner at a very nice restaurant in New York to celebrate her birthday. We were seated next to an elderly gentleman who had also just arrived. We started to talk and, after a few minutes, he asked us if we would do him a favor.

He explained that he used to bring his wife to this restaurant every year to celebrate their anniversary and that they would always order a great wine with their dinner. Today was their anniversary but his wife had died two years earlier.

They had drunk a particular wine on their 50th anniversary and there was only one bottle left in the restaurant's cellar. Would we permit him to buy it and share it with us?

Of course!

After dinner, we thanked him profusely and wondered how we could possibly repay him for his kindness and generosity.

As best I can recall, he responded thus: "If not now, at some point you will truly understand that the pleasure I derive from sharing this wine with you is infinitely greater than the pleasure you derive from drinking it."

A life lesson to be sure. No more guilt. You can't repay it – you can only pay it forward and that's a lot of fun.

Since my recovery, I have become much more involved in two organizations in particular, Hancock Hospice and Island Connections - the common denominator being that I am able to work with people one on one.

In addition to helping people, the back stories are fascinating.

The WW II vet who enlisted after his first semester at Harvard and then returned four years later to get his degree. In philosophy! After killing people! He has since died but we talked about this often and how it haunted him. Amazing man and a true friend.

The young woman who contracted a disabling disease that now prevents her from working, and her struggles with pride and survival.

The widower who truly knows how to run the world if the world would only let him, and who makes sure to buy three large pepperoni pizzas and a gallon of bourbon before I take him home.

Where would you ever experience people like this unless you drive for Island Connections?

The caregiver in Texas (I am also a hospice volunteer in Houston during the winter) whose comatose husband can no longer communicate with her but who needs almost constant attention. Her friends have drifted inexorably away, her stepchildren don't trust her, and she tells me that her two hospice volunteers are the only people with whom she can be completely honest – a common theme, by the way.

The son who would not leave his comatose mother's side. He was even nervous about leaving her to get the newspaper from the mailbox 50 feet from the house. We would talk for four or five hours once a week. I was his only company other than occasional nurses. During one visit six months after first starting with him, his mother died. He remains convinced that she waited until I was there to comfort him. Who am I to disagree and why on earth should I?

My near death experience almost three years ago was truly a blessing in disguise. It opened my eyes to the innate generosity of the human spirit and my survival permitted me to truly experience that for myself. I am grateful for unintended consequences.

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