

We all rely on others' 'unmerited care'

By Patricia Schoelles, SSJ
Courier columnist

Some friends and I were returning July 4 from a visit to the Finger Lakes when our car "died" in a rural area just a few miles from home, leaving us stranded at a fairly remote intersection.

This seemed at first to be a sure "disaster" in terms of our arriving home in a timely manner. We envisioned walking miles to reach a telephone and more delay in securing help to get the car moving. In other words, we imagined an evening of inconvenience and general frustration.

What actually occurred, however, was far different. Instead of inconvenience and frustration, our evening turned out to be one of amazement and gratitude.

The first stroke of good fortune came in the form of nearby neighbors, who interrupted their own backyard fun to fill up and carry a gasoline container from their own supply out to our car. When this did not help, these same people loaned us their portable telephone to place calls for assistance.

Then, as we waited for help, people passing by the intersection — all strangers to us and obviously traveling home to conclude their own holiday weekends — stopped to ask whether they could be of any help.



THE MORAL LIFE

I found myself surprised at this willingness of so many people to inconvenience themselves to aid total strangers at a rural intersection. Of the cars passing by that corner, far more stopped to offer help than continued to drive by.

Added to this show of generosity was the competence and helpfulness of the mechanic who arrived to service the car. He quickly analyzed the situation, identified the problem and restarted the car. Then he gave us advice about how to go about having the problem repaired the following day.

All these people came to our aid. As

I reflected later on this event, I was reminded of an observation a teacher of mine used to make quite frequently. In the course of our instruction of character and the kinds of societies we ought to be forming, Stanley Hauerwas would often repeat the notion that we all rely on "unmerited care from others." He reminded us that any society will fail if it does not include people who have been formed to render care even for those who have no claim on us, who don't deserve it, and who have not earned it.

In the course of my ordinary activities I often forget about the need I have for "unmerited care from others." I am usually thinking about how much I accomplish and how self-sufficient I am in fulfilling my responsibilities and taking care of my own needs.

This simple "car event" at an intersection July 4 made me begin to realize again how dependent I am — and we all are — on "unmerited care from others." Later that same week I had far greater reason to appreciate this same reality.

I am left now with a new appreciation for how much we actually do rely on one another's generosity, competence and willingness to be inconvenienced in order to care for someone else's needs. I am also sure that the phrase "thank you" is a far more pro-

found utterance than I have often taken it to be.

Since this is a column dealing with "the moral life," some may expect me now to offer counsel about how we should all be willing to stop and help travelers in distress, or offer some "unmerited help" to another — whether through the roles we play in society or on a voluntary basis.

Those are important moral notions, but for me the more important insight is recognizing and appreciating how much we rely on one another's goodness. The fundamental moral act is acknowledging what we receive from others, and of course from the God of the universe through all these people. The basic moral act is probably just saying "thank you."

If I were a sacramental theologian, I might now make some enormous claims about the Christian life's central act being the celebration of the Eucharist — itself meaning "thanksgiving." But I'm not a sacramental theologian, so I won't do that. I will, however, end with a moralist's "hunch" that the moral life pretty much begins and ends in "Eucharist."

Maybe a sacramental theologian would be moved to comment on this sometime. If not, let it remain a "moralist's hunch" — but a pretty important one at that.

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