

WHAT THANKSGIVING MEANS TO ME

Well, Thanksgiving used to mean food, football and family; a time for the entire family to get together and enjoy a turkey dinner. Afterwards, the men would crowd together in the TV room for beer and football, while the ladies did dishes and caught up on family gossip.

When I was younger, Thanksgiving had a special meaning for me. In my family, Thanksgiving for a young man was like a rite of passage, a coming-of-age, a ritual. On Thanksgiving morning all the men in my family would be up before daybreak. They would have a hearty breakfast and then they would pile into the pickup trucks to go hunting. When I returned I would be mesmerized hanging onto every word of their hunting tales. Stories of crazy situations, wild close calls, and always the one that got away. How I envied them.

My most memorable Thanksgiving, and probably my father's also, was the Thanksgiving of 1977. I was seven years old and had reached the age to go hunting on with the men! This consisted of my father, my two uncles, and my four older brothers. Boy was I excited! I remembered waking up every Thanksgiving morning hoping that this would be the year I could go hunting with the men, only to be disappointed when my father would discuss it with my mother and then come to me and say, "Maybe next year little buddy, but not this year." But this was the year I was going hunting with the men. This year I was a MAN!

After eating we loaded everything into the trucks and left mom waving goodbye. I remember the visions I had in my head. I was going to bag me a 10 point buck, or a moose, or better yet, a grizzly bear! Now remember, I was only seven years old. All I knew was, "This was my year." I was going to shoot something big. My brothers always bagged rabbits, squirrels, geese, or sometimes a pheasant. I was going to do it better than them. I was going to nail something really big.

Once we got there we suited up and started loading guns. Boy was I excited! The anticipation was killing me. I was getting a gun! I was a man! I was going to shoot something! I had shot a million birds with my BB gun in the backyard, but this was different. This was hunting with the men on Thanksgiving. I was getting a .22 caliber rifle or maybe even a .410 shotgun. I was a man and I was in man heaven!

All was well until my stupid brothers started talking about safety. They didn't think it was wise to give me a real firearm before learning the rules of safe hunting. My stupid brothers always ruined everything for me. After a few minutes of discussion and a feeble argument from me, my dad decided that on the way into the woods, and for half of our hunting time I would carry a pellet gun. Once I showed him I knew the correct way to carry a rifle and used all safety measures I could carry the .22 rifle. "Okay," I thought, "that's fair enough." I'll show my stupid brothers. So Dad gave me the pellet gun and told me to put the safety on, which I did. He told me to keep the safety on until I had a target in my sites. Then we were off hunting.

Before long I spotted a dove high up in a tree. At last this was my moment to shine. I was so excited I had butterflies in my stomach! I raised my rifle and lined up my sites. The dove was perfect in my crosshairs. I pulled the trigger! "Click". The dove flew away. I forgot to switch the safety off. I felt like I had been robbed. That dove was mine. I should have had him. This was all my stupid brothers fault. Well this wasn't going to happen again, that's for sure. So off we went

looking for more pray. This time I was going to be one step ahead of by leaving the safety off. After a short walk we came across a tree that had fallen crosswise to the path. My father easily stepped over it. I, on the other hand, didn't step high enough because I was occupied gazing up into the branches searching for prey. I started falling face first toward the ground. I was carrying my rifle in the proper position pointed down at the ground, but as a natural reaction to break my fall, I started to bring my hands up which inadvertently brought my rifle up and pointing down the trail of head of me when I crashed to the ground. That is when I shot by big-game, my father! When I hit the ground my pellet gun went off and I shot my dad in the back. All that kept going through my mind, and I am sure my father's as well, was what if I had been carrying the .22 caliber rifle? Needless to say, it was many years until I was allowed to carry a real firearm when hunting on Thanksgiving day. It did prove to be a great topic for every Thanksgiving day dinner since.

Looking back at this incident in a more serious note I learned that I always had tunnel vision for what I wanted in life. Everything else came second, rules, safety, friends, even family. I was headed down the wrong road and I didn't see it. There was plenty of warning signs but I chose not to pay attention to them. I wouldn't listen to anyone. I was drinking every day, all day, and way too much. I made money the easiest way I could and then justified it with my twisted way of thinking. All that mattered was what I wanted and everything else came second. Besides, I knew better than everyone else, just like when I went hunting on that Thanksgiving morning in 1977. I thought I knew it all. I thought I knew best. All I knew is what "I wanted." I had tunnel vision.

I know this is going to sound crazy to a lot of people, but the one thing I am most thankful for this Thanksgiving is for being right here in Maryland Correctional Training Center. I truly belong here in prison. While I was on the street I was a runaway train. Nothing could stop me. I needed this time to sober up and get my mind straight, to take a good look at my life and to see where I was heading. I need this time to learn how to be a real man and a real father to my daughters, to learn how to live normal and decently. Since I've come to prison I've done a lot of soul-searching and I've come to realize a few things. One is happiness doesn't depend on where you are at or what you have. Happiness comes from within. Another thing I've come to realize is that we cannot control our circumstances of life. We don't know what is going to happen from day to day. What we can control is how we react to our circumstances. We can control whether a circumstance makes us a better person or a bitter person. It's all up to us and what we do with our time while here in prison.

To me this isn't a punishment but a time to better myself. This is all part of God's plan. God's plan for me is to become the man he created me to be and that plan starts here at MCTC. So yes, this year I am most thankful to be in prison!

Thank you and have a blessed Thanksgiving day. :-)

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