Of Weddings and Baseball

Weddings can make you think in unusual ways. Last month this father of the bride was flooded with a variety of emotions as he and his wife walked their firstborn down the aisle. Memories flew past at supersonic speeds, and there was a sharpening of the senses that made every second more intense and memorable. And right in the middle of all those images and emotions were thoughts of Minnie Minoso and Ernie Banks.

Even in spirit these great Chicago baseball legends had no business being at my daughter’s wedding, but nonetheless there they were, and they just would not leave. Minnie Minoso, a Cuban immigrant who began playing baseball on sugar plantations, became fodder for parody and derision when he said, “Baseball has been very, very good to me.” Minoso’s heartfelt remarks—both the content and the accent—have been mocked time and again. Minoso came from poverty to fame and financial security while playing a game that gave him pleasure. As the first dark-skinned Hispanic in the major leagues, he understood the nature of gratitude, whereas those who mocked him showed that they knew little of struggle, and even less of thankfulness.

At my daughter’s wedding, I felt an overwhelming sense of appreciation that I knew Minnie would understand. As we walked down the aisle, I noticed the beauty of the room we had rented, the simple eloquence of the flowers on either side of the minister, and the glow of the faces of all those in attendance. I thought briefly of the crowded apartments of my youth and of a father who worked no less than 10 hours a day. Love and appreciation are heady emotions, and when they mix their potency is magnified. The surrealistic memory of Minnie reminded me of the nature of gratitude. I said to myself, “Physical therapy has been very good to me,” not only because it has allowed me to earn an income to support a family and pay for a wedding, but because it has fed my soul.

In my family, my colleagues are family. At the wedding there were former students from every school at which I have taught; members of this Journal’s Editorial Board; and people with whom my wife, my daughters, and I have shared our wonderful journey through life. I rarely speak at a state meeting without seeing a former student who reminds me of the days when they or their roommate babysat our daughters. But colleagues and students aren’t the only ones who have enriched my soul. There are my patients and the manner in which they teach me about life and values. Physical therapists indeed are very lucky. This one in particular.

Where does Ernie Banks come in? Ernie Banks was and still is “Mr Cub,” a most extraordinary appellation. The Cubs are to baseball what George McGovern is to presidential politics: Each have received passionate support despite an almost immeasurably small chance of success. The Cubs define losing and probably should never have abandoned their previous name, “The Chicago Orphans.” (In Chicago, the biggest problem about Y2K is that it moves us closer to 2008, which will mark a century since the Cubs last won a World Series.) As a veteran of the Negro leagues and as one of the greatest players never to make it to a championship game, Ernie Banks could have talked about what might have been, but he did not. His enthusiasm for the game is epitomized in the legendary story of how, following a doubleheader, he allegedly said, “Let’s play three.” Despite season after season of failure, Banks played every game as though it was his first, and he never stopped enjoying what he did.
The hero of Chicago’s south side, Minnie Minoso, reminded me to be grateful; the legend of the north side, Ernie Banks, reminded me how blessed we are when we can be joyous even when we fail—even when we consistently fail. For Mr Cub the triumph is in the trying. These ghosts of living men came to the wedding to remind me to be grateful and joyous not just for the things that we expect at weddings, but also for membership in a profession that has enriched my family and myself both materially and spiritually.

As the excitement of my daughter’s wedding passes, I reflect on this profession and how it has been so good to me, and I wonder about how good I have been to it. I also wonder about where we will go, and whether others will remember their debt to our profession. One of our founders, Mary McMillan, carried forward a deep and passionate love for our profession, but she knew that, without action, such passion meant little. In her lifetime she helped found our Association, but more importantly she provided service during World War II, service that led to her capture and internment in a Japanese prison camp. I think of Mary McMillan and know that I have much to repay.

Some educational institutions survive off tuition from our education programs, and whereas PhDs in most fields are desperate for employment, in our profession they are courted by scores of education programs. So physical therapy has been and continues to be very good to many of us. But have we been as good to it? With our profession under attack, are there people who will change their personal agendas to serve the profession that nurtured them? For example, Mary McMillan left her secure world to care for soldiers. She made a choice. How many of us are deferring our personal needs so that we might better serve our profession? I don’t know, but I do know that we need to stop thinking just about ourselves and our own careers and more about our collective efforts.

That night at the wedding there were Ernie, Minnie, and me, but there also were Mary Mac and lots of other folk in spirit rather than in body. They were uninvited but welcome. In the shining faces of a newly married daughter, the tears of a mother, and the twinkling eyes of a new son, I saw all that I needed to see to understand the meaning of gratitude, the need for commitment, and the value of joy. Physical therapy and life have been very, very good to me, and I can only hope that when all is said and done, I have been equally good to it.

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