

What Will You Be Remembered For?



Last weekend, my wife broke her ankle. I had only a vague idea how much she took care of until I had to start doing it. She may have the broken bone, but I'm the one who's utterly lame. A welcome bit of relief quickly came from a good friend — a gift card at our favorite Chinese restaurant.

So, last night we phoned in an order and, gift card in hand, my 15-year-old son and I drove to the neighboring town to pick it up. As we crossed the parking lot, I greeted a fellow I recognized from somewhere. He mumbled but didn't meet my eye. We followed him into the restaurant.

It hit me then. He was a contractor who had worked on our house a dozen years ago. He'd done good work, but three quarters of the way through what he'd agreed to do — and all the way through the payments I'd agreed to make — he stopped showing up. He had enough good references from people I know and trust that I'm certain he didn't set out to take me for a couple of grand. But that was the effect.

He probably underbid the job, but he stopped taking my calls, so I've never known for sure. If he'd been forthright enough to say he'd blown the quote and didn't have the money to finish, I might have worked with him. People make mistakes, and I would rather have coughed up more money than take time I didn't have to finish up his job. But he never had the courage to speak to me, and I got

stuck finishing his work. Because of that unforeseen delay, we had to move out of our rental house before this one was trimmed. And yes, you know the rest of that story.

Maybe I could have taken him to court, but the time and money that would have cost probably wouldn't have been worth what I might have recovered. I was angry but decided to drop it. Some things are just not healthy to hang on to.

And here we were, 12 years later, standing next to each other in the take-out line at the Chinese restaurant. I didn't say anything more, but he knew who I was. It was sort of fun to see the different ways he looked to avoid eye contact with me. The Germans call that *schadenfreude* — an unpronounceable word that means, loosely, to enjoy the suffering of others. I guess I'm not as good at letting things go as I ought to be.

You can bet that as my son and I drove away, I made sure he understood why his old man was staring at the stranger in the restaurant. While I'm vaguely embarrassed by the petty pleasure I took from that encounter, it wasn't so bad that I had to grab the Kung Pao chicken and hurry out with my tail between my legs. And I was able to pass along this lesson to my son: We will be remembered for the things we do.

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Editor

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