The Mayor of St. Pete

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If you hear my brother, David, say "Oops," you know that an inanimate object has met with an untimely end. Maybe his size 13 shoe found its way into the cable bundle of his already well-dented computer, thereby rendering it, once and for all, silent. Or his beefy shoulder might have knocked a speaker onto the glass table at an angle a diamond cutter would admire for its shattering impact. Just a few minutes ago, the "Oops" signified that he had accidentally spilled a bag of coins down the garbage disposal. It will take me forever to fish them out. I'd get to it right away but I first have to patch a hole in the wall, the byproduct of another "Oops" moment.

If the value of a person's life were judged by physical agility, David would be on death row. He's the human embodiment of one of those Battle Bots you see on TV with the menacing, spiked metal arm that beats down mercilessly on an opponent caught in the saw rising from the floor. When he visits, we all know to David-proof the house; family heirlooms are hidden away. All other articles that might not withstand a sudden blow are similarly protected. It's just what you do when David's near.

And yet, I do not know anyone more beloved than my brother, David. No one. Anywhere. At least no one I know personally. Even the many who still limp from being on the wrong side of his shoe. Even those victims who still can't breathe deeply without feeling the ill effects of one of David's enthusiastic bear hugs. Even those of us who no longer can wear our favorite golf shirt or blouse because David inadvertently changed the garment's original color scheme with a coffee spill or a pizza sauce bombardment. None of these frequent lapses in competent coordination diminish the joys of the David Experience.

If you met David, you'd take him into your heart. It wouldn't make any difference if you were a loving soul or not. You could be otherwise insensitive, impatient, or disinterested in the human condition. You might normally be uncomfortable with a person who is less than perfect in how he talked or walked or interacted. Wouldn't make any difference. A few minutes being with David and you'd feel drawn to him somehow. You wouldn't know why, necessarily, but you'd be changed.

I know this to be true from 40 years of observing him with others. What I haven't actually seen with my own eyes I've heard told through countless anecdotes supplied freely by the many who have known him. He's just the sort of fellow who has an impact, sometimes physically and painfully, but always interpersonally and with gusto.

You must think my description of David's nature is shamefully overstated. I would if I were in your shoes. I'd figure someone who rhapsodized so about his brother had some agenda or a need to glorify a family member, perhaps as a way of boosting his own stock. I wouldn't blame you in the least. It just so happens that in this instance you'd be wrong.

I've been visiting with David at his home on the gulf coast of Florida. He lives in a one-bedroom condo convenient to acres of shopping malls, chain restaurants, and department stores. It's also within a three-minute walk from where he works as a bag boy at a Publix Supermarket. He's taken two days off for us to be together. We've been organizing his life, cleaning out years of clutter, replacing damaged possessions, and visiting with some of his many friends.

Although we've always been close, I'd never actually stayed in his condo because we'd meet at our parents' home 50 miles south. But our father, who was David's keeper, recently passed away. With both of our parents now gone, it has fallen to my older brother and me (and mainly me because of a natural division of labors) to keep an eye on David. All of a sudden I have the responsibilities my father shouldered for so many years. Nothing has brought the finality of Dad's passing more closely home than that I'm now in David's condo working on his bookkeeping, arranging for contractors to remodel his bathroom, and trying to explain the basics of insurance reimbursement. It's a sad marker of a generation's end.

Accomplishing tasks with David is a slow process. Molasses slow because he generally operates at a slower speed than the rest of us. He thinks slowly, decides slowly, plans slowly, organizes slowly, moves slowly, reacts slowly, and retrieves information slowly. Whatever happened to his brain at 14 months of age when encephalitis invaded left him operating in first gear. Not that he's unable to manage a rich and full life. It's amazing how well he handles his affairs. It's only that he handles them at his own dawdling pace.

Another reason getting things done with David is slow work is that you can't walk ten feet down a store aisle, into a restaurant, or across a street without bumping into someone who adores him. And St. Petersburg is a good-sized city. Just as an example: a few hours ago we went to Best Buy to purchase a new computer for him. We didn't even make it into the car before a neighbor stopped us so she could say hello to David. We chatted for a while, mainly about how much this elderly woman thought that David was terrific at his job and how much she enjoyed running into him at the mailbox.

After we arrived at the store, we hardly made it past the greeter before we heard a hearty "Hello, David!" from a man whose name I soon learned was Sid, a fellow David knew from one of the four synagogues he attends regularly. Sid was obviously delighted to see David, gave him a big hug, and joked around with him about the rat they had recently discovered in the temple's kitchen.

Somehow we found a David-naive salesperson who helped us select a computer in reasonably short order. The checkout girl also had no history with him, although she was remarkably patient about the length of time it took for him to write out the

check. When she saw my discomfort with how slowly he was moving (in part because he kept commenting that he never wrote a check for so much money in his whole entire life), she told him, "You take your time, baby, and get it right. Don't worry 'bout nothin'." She turned back toward me with the sort of look you'd give someone who knocked over an old lady crossing the street.

Because this store requires you to take any new computer to the service area to undergo a checkout, we lumbered over to that line and waited as a somber-faced technician helped a customer with a ravaged hard drive. When our turn came, the technician looked up from his log and, seeing David, broke into a wide smile. "Hi, David! How's it goin', buddy?" He recognized David because they are fellow spectators at the minor league games. So the computer whiz engages David in a conversation about the ball team, tells me I shouldn't worry, that they'll make sure David's computer is in perfect shape, and hands David his card so that, if a problem arises, he should call him personally.

That's how it goes when you're in public with David. Forget about going into the mall unless it's a dire necessity. You can't make it past the first kiosk before he becomes the honey to every ant in the complex. Workers at the food stands bring him cookies and pretzels. Store clerks leave the register to greet him. You've never seen anything like it unless you regularly follow celebrities or presidential candidates. If you didn't know better, you'd swear he was the wildly popular Mayor of St. Pete.

Several years ago we took a family cruise that began in Istanbul. On the day before we were to board ship we all decided to venture down the Bosphorus on one of those ferries that regularly zigzags along the shores. We're standing in line at the Eminonu terminus, chatting away, when we suddenly hear a "Hi, David" from across the dense crowd. We are almost six thousand miles from the state of Florida at the moment, but sure enough here come a woman and her husband with arms outstretched and wide smiles. David's nonchalant, because for him it's just another day in the life of a friendly guy. When we asked him who they were, he said matter-of-factly, "Oh, customers from the store."

David's circle of friends and acquaintances grew to equatorial proportions because he has a nature that abhors a social vacuum. Human contact is David's cocaine, heroin and morphine all rolled into one. He loves to be around people, always has. Don't bother calling him at home after 8 in the morning or before 11 at night, because the statistical probability of his being in residence approaches zero. Mind you, he's not wandering aimlessly about like a puppy searching for a scratch behind the ears.

Aside from his 34 hours at Publix, he volunteers both at the VA and a nearby nursing home. If he's not logging another few hours of prayer, he's keeping score for one of the softball teams or serving as first base coach for a little league team or attending choir practice (synagogue #2). He might have heard about a store's grand opening (he'll attend if there's free food) or head downtown to check out a new mall. He may be a bit plodding as he works his way through his world, but the man never rests until he sleeps. And when he sleeps, he sleeps soundly.

I confess to spending entirely too much time tearing up when I'm in public with David. It might be at his bank when the teller shouts a hearty hello and then ever so kindly suggests that David recount the cash he wants to deposit (his math skills aren't the best). Or at Quizno's when the manager reminds him that he's due a special discount because he works nearby. Or when another neighbor stops by the condo to offer a surplus chair David might enjoy. Or when he checked his phone messages while our father was failing and five people (including managers at his store and favorite restaurant) had called that afternoon to see how David was doing. Or when I saw the foot-high stack of condolence cards on the kitchen table or the VA Volunteer of the Month award certificate on the wall. Or when our cousin called to arrange for his annual visit to her family in Cleveland. Or when one of the women from synagogue #1 phoned to see if he needed a ride to morning services. Or when he dons a vintage watch that a customer gave him for being so friendly. Or when every single waitress, waiter, and cook in his neighborhood bar/restaurant makes it a point to stop by our table to wish him well.

I've heard that nations can be judged by how they treat their most humble citizens. No doubt the same can be said of whole communities or extended families. It's the simple, every day kindnesses people show that strike me as most holy. You know what I mean: you notice a stranger stopping to help an enfeebled woman place a bag of sugar in her cart. Or when someone comes over to soothe a distraught mother who was too vigorously spanking her little boy. Or when an older man stops to help the cart boy with Down's syndrome who's getting frustrated when the train of carts turns stubborn. These tiny, righteous acts reveal the grander side of our nature, I'm quite sure.

You have to understand, though, that people aren't just good to David out of easy charity. They respond to him because he's thoughtful and sweet to them. In the two days I've spent with him, he's called the cleaning lady to inquire about her sick mother, one of the waiters at "his" restaurant to congratulate him on getting engaged, and another cousin to wish one of his boys a happy birthday (David calls everyone he knows on his or her birthday; he's also been known to call on half and quarter birthdays). We spent ages at a Hallmark store so he could pick out cards for a slew of upcoming events. He also ran up to the VA because he hadn't seen his main charge, 104-year old Frankie, in a few days. He wanted to make sure Frankie was doing fine.

People also treat him with a dignity that's hard for a family member to emulate. The store manager doesn't baby him in the least; the expectations for him are precisely the same as for others. His elderly congregant Elaine told me she always makes sure David pays for his part of the bill when they go out for lunch because she wants him to be on an adult footing as much as possible. Even Laurie, the intrepid cleaning woman who every Thursday bravely tackles the muddle that is his condo, has an eye on his dignity. In her notes to him she won't write (as his family might), "For the love of God, David, at least put your dirty clothes within a zip code of your hamper." Nor does she excuse his sloppiness and just pick up the clothes herself. No, she writes, "David, it would make it easier for me to do my job if you put your clothes in the hamper before I arrive to work. Thanks. Love, Laurie." Like the rest of David's minions, she's good about not cutting him more slack than necessary.

For our family (and I'm sure like most families with a David), finding the balance between doing enough but not too much is a perennial struggle. We're more apt to swoop in when a problem arises or a challenge confronts him. Your impulse is to insulate a David from stress or the pain of sad news, even knowing that he's always come through like a trooper when the pressure's been on. You'll too quickly assume that he won't handle a debit card responsibly or figure out how to locate a repairman for his air conditioner. You have to discipline yourself so that he can have the same opportunity to succeed or fail as anyone else.

It's not lost on me that many of my friends and colleagues have a David in their lives. I'm not sure if a fellow traveler phenomenon's operating here or just simple coincidence. It could be that prevalence percentages accumulate such that many of us, by dint of statistics, will be related to someone with special needs. Then I've wondered whether people who have had a David Experience are drawn to the mental health professions. If so, then I'd be more likely to run into them.

It wouldn't surprise me. You're more exposed than most to the helping professions, how they can actually help but also how they can hurt. You see the power of compassion and the ill effects of lassitude. You've watched teachers whose caring transforms and teachers whose apathy diminishes hope. You work with psychologists who see your brother as more than an IQ profile and psychologists who are too caught up in their data to see life in its infinite complexity. You've seen the wonderfully clever and the painfully dull. You've taken a whiff of family desperation, of helplessness in the face of limited options, of anger at those who could lend aid but won't, of chronic fears, of the gnawing apprehension parents feel when contemplating a David's life after their own death.

You perhaps also come to share certain enduring perspectives: that a good life can come to a person who orbits outside the Good Life; that maximizing a person's sense of joy and well-being stands as a loftier goal than the eking out every last drop of academic or occupational attainment; that schools should help the truly impaired, not the slightly imperfect; that having limitations never predestines a person to a life limited of dignity and meaning; that goodness can flow from all who care.

David and I have settled into a comfortable pattern, one that please god will last. Now I can reflect on how these decades have left us. I can sit here, plaster trowel in hand, wondering what it must be like for families who don't have our family's resources, whose Davids are far less good-natured than ours, whose communities run the other way. And I work my way toward feeling much better about the prospect of digging coins out of a sink disposal, painting the battered wall, and otherwise serving as aide-de-camp to the Mayor of St. Pete.