**Impressions of Ordinary Time**

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

My grandparents bought their home in 1939. Although their house cost merely a few thousand dollars, times were tough for an immigrant auto mechanic and his family in the throes of the Great Depression.

Fortunately, however, their new home was in Flushing, New York. This then-country corner of Queens was on the verge of becoming much busier as it prepared to host the 1939 New York’s World’s Fair. This celebration of optimistic fraternity, held as storm clouds -- and worse -- engulfed the world, was held literally down the street from my grandparents’ new home.

So, to make ends meet, my grandmother took in tourists who were coming to the World’s Fair. Yes, she was an “Air Bnb” of her times!

In addition to their rooms, guests would enjoy my grandmother’s meals during their stay. My memories of my grandmother’s cooking are few and long ago. But, from what I can recall, her guests surely got their money’s worth in good Italian food from her kitchen – and fresh vegetables from my grandfather’s garden.

My grandmother also kept a notebook recording the names of her guests and the days they spent with her family.

So many decades later, I came across that notebook and leafed through it with my mother. Although so much time had passed, my mother recognized the names of so many with whom she had, ever so fleetingly, shared her childhood home.

She remembered those who came with children who were her own age and with whom she played during their stay. She remembered with special fondness more than one family who invited her to join them at the Fair. She remembered those who were from Italy who shared stories of “the old country” with her parents after dinner. She remembered those who remained long-time pen pals after they returned home. She remembered those who invited her family to visit their homes, and those who were good story-tellers. She remembered those who came to church with her family, and those who left gifts behind. She also remembered – with particular indignation – the fact that a few slipped away without paying her mother for their room and board.

I loved hearing my mother’s stories about this exciting chapter of her childhood. It also got me thinking...

All of these families that my mother remembered passed through her life very briefly. Nevertheless, she remembered them. In their words and deeds they made an impression – for better or worse. Then, as now, it is impossible to know the impression that we make on others, or the way that others shape our lives even if they are in it for the briefest of stays.

Often, it is easy to spend a lot of time and energy planning for, and worrying about, the “big” moments in life when we know what we do will have an impact on others. The weighty decisions and significant events in our lives get our attention, as they should, because we know that they will make an impression on the lives of others.

Yet, it is often the small, little things we do that can also change the lives of others – for better or worse. It is the everyday deeds of our days – the time it takes to listen to a child’s story, smile at an elderly neighbor, muster grace in the face of rudeness, extend a helping hand to a stranger in distress, refrain from a cruel snipe, or write a note of apology or gratitude – that can leave an impression on the heart of another.

Even in matters of faith, it is so often small things that strengthen hearts. When diners in a restaurant bow their heads to say grace before a meal, it is a reminder to be grateful in a world that can be churlish. When someone recounts a blessing in their lives and ends the account with a sincere “Thank God,” it calls to mind the goodness of God in a world grown weary. In times of mourning, a silent embrace and a whispered promise of prayer can strengthen a faltering, broken heart.

It is also sadly true that careless, cruel or cynical words and deeds casually said or done can hurt and harm so easily.

It is so often brief, seemingly forgettable, encounters that can impact others so deeply. I can think of several examples in my own life where things said to me in passing and good deeds done for me by those I knew only briefly truly changed the course of my life. Sometimes I wonder if I have ever done so for others – and whether that impression I left behind helped or harmed. I may never know on this side of eternity.

But, I do know two things. I know that families who moved briefly through a child’s life eighty years ago left impressions that lasted long beyond when they went home after the World’s Fair that brought them into her life. I also know that life is full of those chances to change the lives of those we meet, even briefly. These are the blessed encounters that so often make the deep impressions of ordinary time.

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