

Sunday, August 24, 2003

I may be the world's luckiest man. I sure feel like it.

I woke up yesterday morning with an unshakeable feeling that it was going to be my lucky day. I literally felt it in my bones, and it refused to go away.

Late in the morning I checked to see that the lottery ticket I'd bought earlier in the week was good for the evening's drawing.

Indeed it was.

After running a few errands early Saturday afternoon my wife Esperanza and I stopped by St. Luke's Hospital to visit our friend Raúl, who'd had quintuple bypass surgery earlier in the week. We'd spent the Saturday afternoon just 2 weeks before together with him and his family, picnicking and swimming at Rock Lake. He was recuperating nicely from the surgery, and it was good to see him. I told him how lucky he was, "*gracias a Dios.*" I also shared with Raúl how grateful my entire family feels for the continuing good health of my father, who'd been through similar major bypass surgery just a year ago. I assured Raúl that, like my dad, he'd be fine and we'd soon make another visit to the lake.

I'd purchased some tickets for the Mexican Fiesta, a weekend-long lakefront festival here in Milwaukee that celebrates the Mexican and Latino cultures. When we finished our visit with Raúl, Esperanza and I left the hospital and drove directly to the festival grounds. On the way there we detoured around a very messy automobile accident that involved several serious injuries. I remarked again how lucky we were, because just a month ago Esperanza had been a passenger in a friend's car when they were hit from behind while turning into our driveway. While both Espe and María made trips to the emergency room, neither had suffered any permanent injuries.

Most mornings on my way to work I first drop Esperanza off at her job with a community based organization that serves a largely Latino population on Milwaukee's south side. This past Friday morning had been a horrible morning for traffic, and I'd gone so far as to call "9-1-1" from my cell phone to report a suspected drunken driver who'd passed me and at least a dozen other drivers --- on the right, in the parking lane --- at 50-60 m.p.h. on Greenfield Avenue, a 30 m.p.h. city street. It was lucky that no one was killed by this lunatic.

That afternoon, Esperanza called me to tell me that she and María were going shopping after work. On their way home that evening they passed a very serious automobile accident involving several injuries. And so here we were on Saturday afternoon, witnessing the aftermath of yet another horrible accident.

Our tickets to Mexican Fiesta each included an entry into a raffle for a new Pontiac Sunfire, a cute little car. I made sure that I filled them out correctly and I dutifully deposited them in the box when we entered the festival grounds. All day long I'd been feeling mighty lucky, and the feeling persisted. Something wonderful was going to happen for us that day. I told Esperanza that I figured we were going to either win the lottery that night, or we'd win the car.

We had a fun time at Mexican Fiesta watching a Latin dance contest and sampling a bunch of different foods. Throughout the evening we enjoyed a variety of music including a traditional

Mariachi band, a local Tex-Mex band, an El Salvadoran “girl band,” and finally a show band called “*Milagro y sus Profesantes.*” We were seated close to the stage and near the end of their set there were a lot of people on their feet and dancing to the hot rhythm of the music. Espe likes to dance, but I have two lead feet (and a lead butt, too, I’m afraid to say.) The truth is, I’m a lousy dancer and an embarrassment on the dance floor. At about 11:00 the band’s final number for the night was a fast paced “*cumbia,*” and Espe told me that she wanted to dance. I begged off, not wanting to embarrass myself. On our way back to our car my lovely wife was upset with me over my refusal to dance with her. Feeling a bit defensive (after all, *wasn’t I the one who’d look the fool?*) I rather haughtily told her that life is too short to get upset over something so minor, and that she needed to get over it. In stony silence, we climbed in our car and drove away.

Carefully leaving the festival grounds on city streets, I guided the car to an intersection just a couple of blocks from the freeway on-ramp, and saw that the traffic lights had switched to flashing-red for all four directions of the two 30 m.p.h. streets. It was all a little bit confusing, but everyone seemed to be making it through the intersection OK. As I approached the light, the driver on my left seemed confused, and waited through his rightful turn. I waved him through the intersection just as a group of four “crotch rockets” --- racing-style motorcycles --- approached from directly opposite me. I’d glanced to my right a couple of times and was aware that another car was approaching the controlled intersection. The motorcycles were preparing to turn in front of me, but it was my turn and I had the legal right of way. I pressed gently on the accelerator pedal and eased our car to the middle of the intersection, but I suddenly realized that the car I’d seen approaching from the right was going a lot faster than I’d anticipated, and it wasn’t going to stop. Esperanza had seen it too, and shouted “*Sweetie!!!*”

I slammed on the brakes, and felt the ABS system pulsate as our car struggled to a stop. Without so much as tapping his brake pedal, the driver of a little red “tuner” blew through the red light at about 60 m.p.h., narrowly missing our car by no more than two feet.

If I hadn’t seen the car when I did and reacted immediately, it would have broadsided our passenger side door at 60 m.p.h.. My sweet wife Esperanza almost certainly would have lost her life, and I might have been killed as well. Although we always wear our seat belts, at the very least we would each have suffered life-threatening injuries. Stunned, I stared across the front seat of the car at my beloved wife and I realized how close I had come to losing her, in less than the blink of an eye.

Through our open car windows we heard the four motorcycle riders cheering the near-collision. Evidently they’d had more than a little too much “rocket fuel” that evening, and they found the whole incident rather amusing. The irony is that if they’d cut in front of me as they’d intended to do, the motorcyclists would have been undoubtedly been killed when the driver ran the red light. I let out a string of filthy, nasty expletives, and drove on.

When we arrived home, I took a minute and silently thanked God for blessing us with such good fortune that evening. I didn’t win the lottery, and I didn’t win the raffle for the car, but it had indeed been my *very* lucky day. My wife and I are both alive and well after a very close call, and for that I am very grateful.

As I climbed into bed I gave my lovely Esperanza a hug and promised her that the next time she asks me to dance, I will --- even with my lead feet (and butt.) Life *is* way too short and *way too fragile* to miss an opportunity to celebrate its joys and riches. And if I’m not the world’s luckiest man, I sure do feel like it, “*gracias a Dios.*”