

A Thanksgiving To Remember

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I just had moved into a new apartment, checked into a new command, and found myself caught up in the holiday excitement of Thanksgiving. Everyone seemed to be rushing to get out of town. I was leaving, too, but I was taking a different tack. I planned to get a good night’s sleep and leave Thanksgiving Day.

My destination was only 320 miles away. With excellent highways and interstates to travel, I expected an easy five-to-six-hour journey. I had absolutely no reason to rush.

When morning dawned, I arose from a sound sleep, ate a good breakfast, and made some last-minute adjustments to my stuff while waiting for a phone call from my friends. That call would be my signal to leave. My friends lived farther from our destination, so I still expected to arrive before them.

When the call came, I picked up my luggage and headed out the door for a great, long weekend. The trip started flawlessly—no trouble getting gas, and the roads seemed moderately empty. Because of some strong, gusting wind, I drove conservatively through the hills, while more harried drivers whizzed by me. I was taking to heart the message from a safety stand-down I just had completed Monday, “Look inside the other cars. People are in there, and we all have a tendency to forget that fact. There’s no need to rush.”

Soon, however, the tone of the day started to change. Three traffic jams had extended my journey. At one point, it took me three hours to travel 20 miles. I kept reminding myself of the stand-down message to the point it had begun feeling like a new-age mantra. Despite my delays, I arrived at the destination within minutes of my friends. We got checked into our rooms and looked forward to a good night of visiting and going out on the town. My patience had paid off, and I wasn’t about to let anything ruin the evening—or, so I thought.

Remember

After a great meal, we returned to our rooms and were getting ready for the evening out when I received a disturbing phone call from the hotel's security officer. He told me someone had smashed a window and broken into my vehicle. As I made my way to the front desk to meet with the security folks, my thoughts were that my vehicle probably was a total mess. I figured all my equipment and supplies for the planned camping probably were gone.

As the security officer escorted me to my vehicle, I saw that my loss wasn't as much as expected. The intruder had shattered a minor window and had left some screwdriver scars while trying to remove my stereo from the dashboard, but everything else appeared to be OK. Security officers had watched the culprit on a surveillance camera but couldn't take any action until he had committed the actual crime. Then, they were on the scene within seconds.

I locked up my vehicle as best I could, and the security officers assured me they would keep an eye on it until I could move the car into another, more

secure parking lot. My next bout of tedium just was starting.

To file a meaningful report against the captured crook, I had to be present for an interview by the local police and to write my statement. I spent the next three hours, waiting for the police to arrive. What helped me to keep my sanity during that time was the fact no one had gotten hurt, and my vehicle had been damaged only moderately. The police assured me the culprit would be charged with a felony. With the paperwork filled out, the witness identified, and the interview complete, I returned to my friends to continue the waning holiday.

We were supposed to get an early start on our trip to a national park (one close to some awesome camping and hiking) the next morning, but I had to wait for a glass company to repair my window. Finally, we were off and, for the next two and a half days, hiked in some of the most beautiful wilderness country available anywhere.

The drive back home was easy. I pulled into the apartment complex, grabbed some equipment, and headed for my place. When I got there, I saw a light on in one room, which didn't surprise me because I usually leave a light on somewhere when I'm gone. Once everything was inside, I went to my bedroom, where I found all the lights and the TV on. My first thought was, "Who has been here; why is all this stuff on?" A closer look, though, revealed that nothing had been disturbed—I hadn't had any "unwelcome visitors." With a sigh of relief, I started unpacking until I saw something that really made my heart stop.

Kneeling in front of my dresser, I found a dried puddle of red wax that had soaked into the carpet. Wax from a candle on the dresser top had dripped all the way to the floor. Besides leaving the lights and TV on, I had left a 4-inch candle burning when I departed three days earlier. I still had goofed, even though I had planned my trip and had tried not to rush or to be impatient. My thoughts raced to all those stories I've read about people who returned home to find firemen putting out blazes that had started because someone left a candle burning or a stove or oven going.

I had an extra special Thanksgiving this year, and I also learned a couple of things. It always pays to prepare as much as you can. Always maintain a positive mental attitude; it may not solve the problem, but it will make the circumstances easier to handle. Sometimes, no matter how careful you are, you still make mistakes, and luck does affect the outcome. The red stain in the carpet is a cheap reminder of how lucky I was and that I need to be vigilant at all times. **S**