

Introduction



In the rolling hills of north-central Illinois lies a small, unobtrusive town. It's so small and quiet that most of the world will never hear, or care, about its comings and goings. It is that most American of cities among a gaggle of American cities, towns, hamlets, and bergs. On an easy summer night the sounds of crickets and the pop of the corn growing in the nearby fields overwhelm the usual subdued symphony of small-town life.

Situated in a tree-lined valley near a meandering stream called the Leaf River, from which the town took its name, it boasts one road in and out in each of the four directions, one flashing light, one restaurant, three bars, a gas station, and about 450 souls. It's still one of the only towns in America with its own telephone company, much to the chagrin of the 450 townspeople.

The townspeople, today as much as in the 1970s of my youth, are a humble, hardy, and hardworking lot. In the winter you'll likely see

running cars outside the post office as people scamper in to get their daily mail. Until 1989, Leaf River had its own K–12 school district, which was both the heart and center of the town. When enrollment declined and the move to consolidate smaller districts gathered steam, they were annexed into the neighboring Forreston School District—again, much to the chagrin of the townspeople. The old school sits mostly dormant now, sold by the district back to the Village of Leaf River for \$1 some years ago. It houses the police department and city offices, with the biggest event of the year being the hosting of the Leaf River High School Old Timers’ Game the first weekend in March. Although the last graduates of Leaf River High School are in their forties, the alumni pack the old gym every year to see the girls play volleyball and the guys play basketball in glorified pickup games. The smell of Ben-Gay fills the gym.

Most people work in Rockford, twenty-five miles to the northeast or, in the case of the more aggressive commuters, in the Chicago suburbs to the tune of a two-hour drive each way. In Leaf River you can buy a nice, older home on an average lot for about \$60,000 and live in relative peace. If you try to get more than four blocks from a cornfield, you’ll be severely disappointed. You can’t. We’ve measured it.

Leaf River puts on one of the grandest parades in Illinois each June during its festival called “Leaf River Daze,” drawing five times its population from the surrounding area. The parade winds its way

through the oak-lined streets, which provide ample shade for floats, bands, and lawn chairs. Everybody stands when the American Legion and the American flag approach. Hands over heart. Hats off. Tradition, respect, and patriotism are a way of life.

The central feature of Leaf River is, appropriately, in the middle of town, just north of Route 72—the Bertolet Building Complex. A community center donated and funded by Charles D. Bertolet in the 1950s, it has been the scene of community groups, Boy Scouts, American Legion meetings, and countless other meetings and events. Next to the building, until the 1990s, was the town swimming pool—one of the few public swimming pools in the county. On the sweltering summer days of my youth, and that of anyone growing up in Leaf River in the '60s, '70s, and '80s, one could find eight hours of watery fun at the nice-sized pool complete with diving board and slide, for about a dollar. The pool is now filled in and sits as a quiet monument to decades of laughter and splashing.

The park is still spacious and offers toddlers a quick ride down the original 1950s-era slide, built of all metal and way too high for today's safety standards. Many a child has burned their rear end on the scorching slide on a summer's day. The three-person swing is also still there. The wooden slats of the bench and footrest are replaced every decade or so as they grow weary of the endless carving of initials, graduation years, and "Tommy loves Susie" inscriptions.

As you drive into town from the east on Route 72, very quickly you will see a large farm on your left. Not on the outskirts of town, but right smack dab in the middle of town. Horses still live in the barn and roam the small pastures and pens. I suppose the town was built up around this farm in the late 1800s. Just to the south, across 4th Street, was 402 Garfield Street, my boyhood home.

There on Garfield Street, on the double corner lot with the 60-foot walnut trees on the corner, in the two-story white house with detached garage, is where I first learned about gratitude and where I first felt the unmerited favor of grace.

When I was brought home from the hospital one sultry September afternoon in 1967, though, it wasn't to that house, although my parents already owned it. Rather, I was brought four blocks away to my grandparents' house, where my mom lived while my dad was in Vietnam, fighting with the 11th Armored Cavalry Division—the Black Horse Regiment. My grandparents' home was to be temporary lodging for my mom and me until my dad got out of the Army the next fall.

The letters back and forth between my parents while he was in the service were full of hope and gratitude. He was so appreciative that my mom and I had a place to stay, with the kind of support only grandparents can provide. Each letter closed with a countdown of

days until we could all be together. I would say “together again,” but my dad had left for Vietnam just three weeks before I was born. He had never gotten to hold his son. His son had not had the opportunity to grasp his big fingers or grab at his nose.

As the Army officers walked slowly up the steps to my grandparents’ house on a blustery January afternoon in 1968, my grandfather, a World War II combat veteran, knew immediately what was happening. Jerry was gone, and he was never coming back.

That moment defined my life, pointing it in a different direction than it otherwise would have gone. What did I know as a four-month-old? Obviously, nothing. I couldn’t comprehend anything of this magnitude. From this time on, however, people watched out for me, dreamed for me, pushed me, challenged me to be more, to be better. The dreams that were shattered that awful day were resurrected in the not-so-tiny four-month-old sleeping in the back bedroom.

So, that’s where I started. That’s where the direction of my life began. Was it a good direction in general? Nobody knew at the time. I’m sure it felt like pure chaos and unadulterated torture for those who had to deal with my father’s death. But there I was. The day before, I had a life yet unblemished. After the horrible message was received, I was the only child to a single mother who

had no job and no money, other than the military death benefits and my dad's social security. In terms of statistics, I was pretty likely to end up poor and poorly educated, with little chance of long-term success in my future. Many Americans start like this. Some succeed, but some do not.

For you to assume that I am someone you might want to listen to would take at least a modicum of proof that, now, forty-plus years later, I am somebody's definition of success. Am I successful? Depends on who's asking.

In the world's eyes, perhaps so, as I achieved a college education, a master's degree in business, have traveled all over the country with my career and have lived in four different parts of the country. But that doesn't define success for me.

In the world's eyes, I'm probably part of the higher percentages in terms of income and wealth. But that doesn't define success for me.

I have a wife who earned a Ph.D., among numerous degrees, and two great kids who get their education at one of the largest and best school systems in the state. But that doesn't define success for me.

The most fitting measure of success, for me at least, is contentment: Being content with my place in the world. Content in my

relationships. Content with my conscience. But most of all, grateful and appreciative to those who got me to where I am today.

Everybody in my life knows how I feel about them, and I know how they feel about me. I'm comfortable in my own skin, and I believe—and hope—the outside of me that people see every day matches how I see myself on the inside. How did I get to be this content, this happy?

Sure, I did some heavy lifting at times, taking risks, working hard. But in the end, I am the sum of all the parts of the people who invested in me over the years.

This book is a compilation of short stories about those people. Some are from Leaf River and my childhood, some from later in my life. These people invested in me, taught me, held me accountable, and helped me become the man I am today. Some are people who inspire me and teach me things through their example to this day. I'm still a broken, sinful, "Why did I just do that?" man, but I have been redeemed and continue to be redeemed every day I breathe in and out on this earthly journey.

I was fortunate to have encouragers and supporters, as well as the circumstances that led me to learn gratitude and understand the definition of grace: *unmerited favor*.

But it all started with my grandfather, Emerson Baker.

My grandfather was a wise man. Most grandfathers are. I guess if you live long enough, you just figure out things that work and things that don't. Whether by simple trial and error or some other magical formula, grandfathers are usually a fount of knowledge and wisdom. And stories. Lots of stories.

One of the qualities I admired most about my grandfather was the way he accumulated friends and acquaintances. He had so many friends from the various stages of his life. Vacations for him were not getaways to some tourist destination; they were times for visiting friends in other states. During the summers of my youth, we would often all pile into Grandpa's car and take a long ride to see someone. Grandpa was always at ease with these longtime friends and relatives. What I observed in him in these settings was contentment. He was content with who he was and with his relationships. Content with his place in the world. I have wondered many times over the years since his passing, "What was the 'give and take' of his central relationships?" In other words, what did he give and what did he get that made him such a good giver and receiver of friendship? And I've come to the conclusion that he merely paid attention. He listened. He observed. He absorbed. The relationships he cultivated and the impact those people had on him

made him what he was. He was a good man—a man I aspired, and still aspire, to be.

As I made my way through college, Grandpa and I would often sit on his porch and talk about everything under the sun. Sometimes the conversation was light and humorous, sometimes serious as a heart attack. As I took more and more steps toward adulthood, the “heart attack” conversations became more prevalent. For example, when I told him I was thinking of proposing marriage, he looked me straight in the eye and said, “You’d better be sure, Mike. Marriage is forever. Are you sure?” I was. And I was thankful for the challenge.

One of the most impactful pieces of wisdom he bestowed upon me had its roots in a conversation we had about friends and my astonishment at how he had amassed so many good people in his life. I don’t know where he got this bit of wisdom; I never asked. Maybe he made it up on the spot. But his promise is as true today as it was over twenty-five years ago. He said, “Mike, I’ll make you this promise: There are two things that will influence who you will be in the future—the people you meet and the books you read.” It didn’t really register with me then, but over the years I have come home to that promise on a regular basis. One person’s entire direction in life can be summed up by the people one lets into their life and, secondly, by

the knowledge they amass by reading what other people have thought about and put down on paper. Certainly there are other factors, but the people who shaped my life truly *are* who I am, whether I have always been aware of it or not.

These are the people I met and the people who, in small ways or very substantial ways have influenced my life. I hope as you read these stories, you will be encouraged to be cognizant of and thankful for the people who help you, and that you will be led, in turn, to help others.