



*My now 82-year-old next door neighbor, Shirley, was recently moved to a nursing home. I have been reflecting on how much I've earned from Shirley. It brought to mind a reflection I wrote several years ago and I have included it below:*

I like to think of myself as a good person. I try to cover all the bases. I try to be nice to people. I try not to be judgmental. I pray and I go to Church. I was reminded in a recent homily that God does not want us to be content and self-satisfied, so He puts challenges in front of us – opportunities for us to be affirmed as good people or perhaps for us to realize we have a long way to go on our journey.

Shirley is my next-door neighbor. She is 75-years-old and lives alone. My sons and I have helped her out the last several years with cutting grass, raking leaves, trimming bushes, and taking her trash to the end of her driveway.

I have also provided her an ear. She is a talker. Once she gets going, I can count on a 45-minute monologue. But she is lonely and very appreciative of the help we provide, so I listen. Perhaps Shirley is one of the challenges God has put in front of me – to affirm me as a good person.

A couple of Sundays ago, unfortunately a few days before the aforementioned homily, God presented me with another Shirley challenge. I was right in the middle of something when Carol came in the front door and said, "Rick, Shirley needs you!" She explained that Shirley had fallen on her driveway while going out to get her mail and appeared to be in pain. Carol had tried to help her, but Shirley had insisted that she needed *me*. I was irritated but begrudgingly put down what I was doing. I put on my shoes and got my coat. The whole time I was thinking what an inconvenience this was and that this was going to end up being a long ordeal. I was going to have to hear about how she fell because of her infected toe, or her trick knee, or because her medicine makes her a little light-headed, or about any one of a number of her often-discussed ailments. Let's just say I did not exactly leave my house with a loving heart.

I got to Shirley and found that she was indeed in pain – real pain. I tried to help her up, but she could not put any pressure on her right leg at all. I picked her up in my arms and carried her into her house. She cried out in pain with every step I took. Don't get me wrong, she was still being Shirley – talking a mile a minute between cries of pain. And not just talking about her current pain, but about her messy house, about her bird in the back room that "will *not* shut up," and my favorite: "Do you know how to call 9-1-1?" She talked non-stop to me and the EMT's right up until they closed the ambulance doors.

Shirley had broken her hip. I called her that night at the hospital to check on her, knowing that she was nervous about the surgery scheduled for the next day. I was on the phone for over an hour and got a full description of the hospital room, the bad food, and how many times she had already used the call button to get the nurse. She made sure that I had locked up her house and fed "that stupid bird." I felt like I should tell her that I was sorry and that I felt terrible about how I had acted when I heard she needed me. Shirley wouldn't have stopped talking long enough for me to say it, but I sure felt it. And as if I didn't feel bad enough, the dagger came from Shirley just before she hung up the phone: "You're such a good person. You know I love you, right?"

God put a challenge in front of me and I failed miserably. My initial response to Shirley's need did not come from a place of love, but from one of obligation. It was a chore. But picking up that 75-year-old woman from the ground and hearing her cries of pain were not-too-subtle reminders that I have a long way to go on my journey. As guilty as I felt and as poorly as I handled God's challenge, I thank Him for giving me the opportunity to stumble, seek forgiveness, and continue on in hope of doing better next time.

We need to be alert to these challenges God is placing before us. We don't need to look very far to find others in need of someone to hug them, to sit with them, or to listen to them. They are walking the halls of our school, sitting in pews next to us on Sundays, and standing behind us in line at the grocery.

Respond to *your* Shirley with an open and loving heart.