



## Let's give thanks for gifts disguised as challenges

**S**ometimes, Thanksgiving comes a little late. That's what my wife, Bridgid, and I learned after our second child was born on Dec. 27, 1995. Bridgid and I know all children are gifts from above, but it took us a while to *fully* appreciate just how special a gift our James Martin Whitford (aka Jamie) is.

For starters, Jamie is named after my father. Dad died at age 61 in 1989. I was 23, in the Navy and dating Bridgid. I used to regret that I never shared with Dad how serious Bridgid and I were — that the day after we first kissed, while lying in the grass with my head on Bridgid's tummy, I told her, "One day, our kids will be in here." I now know that Dad knew more than I thought.

Dad had his share of work and worries. A polio-survivor-turned-doctor, Dad raised 10 children with Mom, and helped put all of us through Catholic grade schools and high schools, as well as college. God called Dad home just days after my kid sister Moe, the last of us 10, left home to attend The Ohio State University.

Knowing Dad's spirit is alive and kicking in Jamie has been a great source of strength over the past 14 years. I don't doubt for a minute Dad's spirit helps Jamie be as bright and gentle as he is. Jamie, in turn, gives Dad's spirit (and all of us blessed to know Jamie) a glorious taste of a worry-free, love-filled life on Earth.

It was absolutely paralyzing and heart wrenching when the nurse, holding Jamie, first told us: "You have a beautiful baby boy, with lovely red hair. ... We have a strong suspicion he has Down syndrome."

We didn't even know this kid, and in a single moment he had turned our lives upside-down.

"We'll treat and love him just like we would any other," Bridgid and I reassured each other

Our son Jamie takes after his recently departed godfather, "Uncle Jim," — laughing, loving and living large.



during the wee hours of those first nights at the hospital, silently questioning what else the future would hold. Little did we know it would be Jamie who would teach us how to laugh, love and live large.

When we come home from work, a beaming Jamie rushes to us with open arms. Every day, it's like we're returning from a week-long business trip. In an instant, his huge hugs can wipe away any sadness or fear, and replace it with pure love.

Jamie is one of the wittiest kids we know. His teachers and our family and friends — and incident after incident (some of which I'll share next month) — confirm this. When combined with his contagious built-in laugh track, it's no wonder we go to bed with bellyaches most nights.

Just as important, Jamie's not afraid to cry. As a result, I'm slightly more open to occasionally suffering from leaky eyes. It took a special kid to teach this veteran that bottling up feelings doesn't make me more of a man.

I can't help but reflect on the many life-changing lessons Jamie has taught our family and so many others. During this time of year especially, let's look around our homes and workplaces and be grateful for other great gifts disguised as challenges.

Happy Thanksgiving, my friends!