



Friday Night [under the] Lights

2013

Happy Friday.

It seems really odd to type those words this week. It's hard to be "happy" when it seems like we're surrounded with all sorts of bad news.

This has been a tough and scary week. It started off with the explosions at the finish line of the Boston Marathon, followed by the reports of ricin-laced envelopes mailed to high-ranking elected officials, then a massive fertilizer plant explosion in central Texas and finally the tense and exhaustive manhunt for the terrorists responsible for the Boston bombing.

I think everyone in America shared some of the same emotions this week.

At the first word of the bombs at the finish line at the Marathon, I think we all felt those deep, painful, aching emotions we had on September 11, 2001. *What just happened? What's next? Who did this? What do I need to do?*

It was extremely unsettling.

And then the ricin. Most of us didn't know what ricin was until the mailings targeting elected officials started more than a decade ago. The thought of an almost unnoticeable powder on a piece of mail that was twice as deadly as cobra venom could kill us was really disturbing. I remember the seemingly never-ending 911 calls for a "suspicious white powder" that we built specialized HazMat alarms to respond with.

And then the fertilizer plant. Who didn't immediately think of the Murrah Federal Building explosion in Oklahoma City? As we watched the fire and constant reruns of video of the explosion at the West, Texas plant, I am sure we all had the same question – *On purpose, or accident?* And to make the pain even worse, we learned that many public safety colleagues lost their lives in the explosion (our worst fear)...

Finally, the massive manhunt in the suburbs of Boston all day today. I found myself thinking the event was even larger, the implications even greater when they announced they were closing all mass transit, everyone should stay home from work and school and people should not leave their house.

It was a week filled with tragedy. And the types of tragedy re-ignited deep fears that started when the first plane hit the tower on September 11, 2001. I sure felt it. I was fixated on the television coverage after the bombs went off at the finish line. I was looking for some indication that it was getting worse. It felt yuck.

It reminded all of us that we live in a different time. A time when we have to be much more cautious, much more alert and we have to expect the unthinkable. My daughter, Taylor, doesn't remember September 11, but she asked me this morning, "dad, is that close to us?" when she saw the manhunt on TV. I knew exactly what her fears were...

But as I look back at this past week, I was also struck tonight by something that, to date, I hadn't thought of.

While none of us ever wants any of this to happen to anyone, we (unfortunately) can't prevent those weirdos that are driven to hurt others or disrupt whole communities or cultures from trying to harm us. So, as we often teach students of public safety or medicine, "we live in a different time". Intentional harm and large scale attacks will happen.

Tonight, I had a slightly different perspective.

Just like all of medicine, we strive to prevent what we can and we do the best job we can managing what we couldn't prevent. So we identify and treat high blood pressure on a regular basis in order to prevent the potential complications, but we also aggressively treat acute ischemic disorders (heart attack & strokes) when they actually do happen.

There is a striking similarity in what we experienced this week...

We aim to prevent these types of events from occurring. That's why we have long TSA lines and can't take more than 3.0 ounces of liquid on a plane. That's why we have big, solid, locked cockpit doors and we can't congregate in the aisles near the flight deck. It's why we have state & federal inspection programs for high risk manufacturing, like fertilizer. It's why the state inspectors ask us where our disaster plans are. It's why law enforcement can talk to fire and EMS and understand one another, even when we're from different agencies or jurisdictions.

Think of all of these efforts (many of them an inconvenience or a frank hassle) as our immunization programs against catastrophe. While we can never expect the efforts to provide 100% protection, collectively they have a powerful impact on our safety & wellbeing. And, also like immunizations, the more individuals immunized, the less disease spreads. It's actually called herd immunity. Think of it - the more of us that participate in protecting ourselves, the better off we all are.

If that fails, we stand ready to jump in and manage the events if they do happen. We train & prepapre for the horrible things that unfortunately happened this week.

So, instead of letting this stuff get us down, take a minute to think about the good that lurked beneath the evil of the week...

- The responders in Boston had an organized, well designed plan “just in case” – I’m sure they felt the likelihood of any large scale event was miniscule. Did you see the vests of responders? The coordinated efforts of fire, EMS and law enforcement? *It worked*. The response, while I’m sure it wasn’t perfect, was one of the best I’ve seen.
- Several of the Boston EMS providers were interviewed on CNN and talked about how effectively everyone was able to work together. At one point, they were told to evacuate an area due to perceived risk. They chose to stay with their patients – The CNN Headline was “Boston EMTs unwilling to leave despite danger”. Take a look at the video report - http://www.cnn.com/video/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+rss%2Fcnn_freevideo+%28RSS%3A+Video%29#/video/us/2013/04/17/erin-dnt-harlow-emts-risked-their-lives-to-save-lives.cnn. While we all have mixed feelings about the risks we take given the profession we chose, the message to the community and to those patients was extraordinarily powerful. “Dear public, it is our job to protect and care for you, even when the stakes are high”.
- I would have never in a million years thought they would identify the bombers, find them and “neutralize” them (a law enforcement term). In less than 5 days, they did just that thanks to advances in investigative techniques and technology. “Dear future terrorist, we will get you”.
- Many of the treating physicians in the many hospitals that cared for the victims of the bombing, had combat surgery experience and applied that expertise in this unlikely civilian version of war. Those skills, while we all wish no one would ever have to have them, helped save lives and limbs after the initial attacks. Military battlefield experience translated into civilian care.
- A little more than an hour ago, I watched the videos of the capture of suspect #2 followed by the loud cheers, clapping and celebration of the folks in Watertown. They literally lined the streets cheering as scores of public safety personnel and vehicles left the scene. I stopped watching after 20 minutes and they were still cheering. It reminds us all how important what we do is to those we are privileged to look after. It reminds us of how scared they are and how critical it is for us to always be at our best. Always ready. Always prepared. Kelly Curry, one of our newest AMR Managers in Houston Texas, sent me a text this morning that simply said “Feels very odd not being involved in a disaster – hard to explain”. It’s that kind of desire to help when chaos strikes that makes this an amazing profession.

So, as hard as this week has been, let's not forget the good that hides under the bad. We are so much better off today than we were a decade ago. We are more skilled, more coordinated, more sophisticated and more integrated as a team. We understand the value of prevention and the power of response.

That's why I can say "Happy Friday", even when the week was filled with sadness and fear. I wish none of this happened at all. But, as my wonderful father the Minister would say when I told him I liked caring for the "high acuity" stuff in the ED – "Ed, of course you should never wish bad on anyone. But you certainly could say, 'if something bad has to happen, please make it happen while I'm on".

The talented, prepared, brave men & women that were "on" this week remind us why we like this club so much...

That's it from my world. *Happy Friday.* By the way, this week marks the one year anniversary of Friday Night under the Lights.

Thanks for letting me come into your World on these Fridays. *And thanks for always being "on".*

Ed

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