

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
Friday, November 12, 2010
"Artificial Nothing"
Word Count: 750

The flamingo sits in a place of prominence. The figurine is ceramic, liable to chip or break if dropped. Important things tend to be fragile. The name 'Florida' is written in black script across its base. Under its pink breast, a round thermometer records the temperature.

My ceramic flamingo is tacky, gaudy, and wonderful. It's even more wonderful because it was a present given me by a friend. We weren't "hangin' out" buddies, but we worked together on a few projects in town. We invariably bumped into each other at the bank or the recycling center. We shared many an aluminum bench together watching our kids play High School sports. I miss Gene. He died last month.

Gene traveled often for business. He had a habit of eyeing some trinket and saying, "Gee, so-and-so would like that. So, he'd buy it, bring it home, and drop it off. Besides the flamingo, he also gave me a bobble-head soccer player, a Chick-fil-A beanie baby, and a tile fresco of Hick's Peaceable Kingdom. I bet there are dozens of folks out there with comparable gifts from Gene. You know, I don't think I ever gave him anything in return.

There was a reason his heart gave out despite him being too young. It could be because his was a very large and very sincere heart. It could also be because he kept giving his heart away so unconditionally to others. Gene was like that. Important things tend to be fragile.

Gene's obituary stated that contributions are welcome to help replace the track at the High School stadium. How appropriate, given the footprints his three children left on that track. Maybe this is how I can say thank you to Gene for my ceramic flamingo. One condition however: I hope I can contribute toward replacing the track without a cent of my donation going toward the proposal to replace the sport stadium's grass field with fake turf. The track really needs it. Replacing the stadium's real grass with artificial is a dreadful idea.

Hershey Stadium, for example, with its fake grass is the pits. It's terrible for soccer -- way too fast. Unless you want to play billiards, keep it real dirt and grass. Mud is fun. Artificial turf also is notorious for destroying knees, especially girls' knees. What are the other detriments to fake fields? Bacteria build up. Toxins. Heat is collected. Nasty skin burns. Plus, once you convert beautiful dirt and grass to rubber, there's no going back, at least without humongous expense. Once the fake field is installed, you're stuck with the disaster forever.

If fake fields are so great, how come they still use real grass at Old Trafford?
How come when they built Citizen's Bank Park for the Phillies they planted
100,000 square feet of 100% Kentucky blue grass?

If you track the arguments citing the disadvantages of fake fields, you will note how fake fields harm the players. If you note the arguments in favor of artificial turf, they talk about the field itself. They chant the mantra of our pathetic modern age: efficiency, convenience and (supposedly) savings. These arguments basically mean, therefore, that the field is more important than the players. I join baseball player Richie Allen who said, "If a horse can't eat it, then I don't want to play on it."

Besides, there's just way too much these days that is synthetic. Too much that's fake.

What else is more fun genuine than artificial? Let see. Sugar? Insemination?
Real people answering the phone? Intelligence?

How about sincere friendships rather than fake ones? Or promises? Or smiles? Or holidays?

We have two biggies coming up fast, with Thanksgiving around the corner and Christmas a shopping list away. I think about those who really need authentic holidays in the midst of the fuss and bother, the pretense and noise. I especially am thinking about those who will gather at the table or sit on the family sofa, but this year there is a place empty at the table or there is no one leaning against you on the sofa to keep you warm.

Fake doesn't cut it. What does? Someone you can hold and someone to hold you. A memory to share, a tear to spare, time to care. It isn't the trinkets that matter but the heart that gives what only a heart can give.

Who among us needs to be remembered with a card, a meal, a visit? Who out there needs an invitation?