God, Life, and Everything
Plus/Minus

Wouldn't it be great if life had a plus/minus?

What is a plus/minus, you ask?

It is a hockey term I learned when I was playing in an adult league hockey for a few years. I really like the plus/minus.

Still unclear? Well, basically, a plus/minus measures how well the team does while you are on the ice. If a goal is scored for your team while you're on the ice - even if you never touch the puck - you get a +1. Even if you screwed up big time on a play, you still get the +1. Conversely, if you're on the ice when a goal is scored against your team - even if you've been playing brilliantly, and it's not your fault - you get a -1.

Got the idea?

This statistic is kept not only for games but for entire seasons. Look at NHL statistics for individual players, and you see guys with a +23, a +5, or maybe a -6. That means in all the time they were on the ice that season, the team scored, for example 23 goals more than were scored against the team.

Why is this important?

Because it measures the unmeasurable. It's an attempt to recognize that sometimes your contributions aren't counted in number of goals scored or assists, or even hits you get on another player.

Sometimes, the team is just better when you're there.

As I say, I always liked the plus/minus because I'm a lousy player. I scored one goal in two seasons. Not one goal each season - one goal between them. I might have gotten three or four assists over that period of time, but I could be deluding myself.

However, my plus/minus was generally in positive territory. I like to think that my "hustle" helped the team even when my skills were lacking. And that made me feel that I contributed enough to want to keep playing.

We live in a world that constantly measures our performance, constantly tells us what we are worth by the salary we earn, by the positions we hold, by the numbers of awards we've received, by the number of FaceBook friends we have. We are constantly trying to quantify our lives, to determine how valuable we have been.

Pretty sad, isn't it?

And also pretty egotistical. We focus on what we've done to figure out what we're worth.

Wouldn't it be much nicer if we could focus on our plus/minus? That is, if we could focus on whether or not the world, our community, is better while we're here? I know, that's a hard thing to figure out - it's not like we can count the scores for or against our team while we're on earth, especially since our team is pretty much the world.

On the other hand, I bet we can figure out a way to look at the people around us and ask ourselves, "Are they better off for me being here?"

Almost invariably, the answer will be "Yes" even if we've made huge screw-ups of our lives. There was a news report in Georgia about a woman on Death Row for killing her husband. Her execution was delayed earlier this month on a technicality.

What is interesting about her, however, is that in her seventeen years in prison, she is said to have been a positive influence on many of the other inmates, encouraging them to graduate high school, comforting them in times of greater stress than normal (given the setting), and in general, being a person who made life better for the people around her despite the difficult circumstances.

I wondered what her plus/minus would be. A life with one huge, major screw-up and years of helping others.

Like I said, I don't really know how to measure the plus/minus on life, but I have a feeling we would be better off if we started to think about it. If nothing else, it wouldn't hurt for each of us to look at our own lives and figure out what a plus/minus for us might look like.

I like that statistic because it doesn't count on my being particularly good at what I do - just in there, hustling away at the game of life and trying to do what I can.

What's your plus/minus?