In Cleveland, you have to want to be thankful. In a town where the economy is badly damaged, jobs are drying up, the population is shrinking and the sports teams haven't delivered a major league professional title in 45 years, it's incredibly easy to focus on the ways in which we're the gum on the bottom of fate's shoe, and far too easy to look down the road and see a Cleveland in which LeBron James has left and is winning championships elsewhere. In a Thanksgiving piece for us, Erik Cassano goes the other route and tells us why he is thankful to be a Clevelander.

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It's way too easy to look to the heavens and ask, "What have you done for me lately?"

That's why we need the holiday season in this town.

Not the retail-driven, hyper-commercialized, big-box retailer, buy-the-perfect-present holidays. The holidays of quiet reflection, looking back on the past year and taking stock of your life.

It's fitting that Thanksgiving kicks off the season. Because before you can look to the spoils of Christmas morning and the hopeful promise of a new year, you need to remember what you have right now. Even if you need to search the folds of your brain for your source of gratitude, it's worth the time. You might even learn something about yourself in the process.

Need some encouragment? Let me set the example. Here are some of the things, great and small, that I'm thankful for this holiday season:

In Cleveland, I can make it across town in 35 minutes

When you get right down to it, Cleveland is just the right size. Big enough to be a substantial metropolitan area, but not so big that commuting becomes a migraine-inducing struggle. In most cities, major traffic jams are a fact of life and urban commuting is a part-time job that you hold in addition to your full-time job.

It's been driven home to me the past couple of years, ever since my girlfriend (now fiancee and wife by next September) moved here from the Toledo area. I live on the west side. My fiancee lives in Lake County. We often drive back and forth to see each other during the week, despite the fact that our apartment complexes are separated by 27 miles.

In Cleveland, it's possible. In Atlanta, for instance, it would be a lot more difficult. Atlanta's outerbelt is often choked with traffic by mid-afternoon. Their rush hour commonly lasts 3-4 hours, and their non-rush hour daytime traffic is like Cleveland's rush hour volume.

Three successful 5Ks

I've been running on a fairly regular schedule for almost two years. But it wasn't until this past summer when I decided to start taking running more seriously.

I always hated running growing up. It made my sides hurt and my lungs burn. But I decided to, in small increments, fight through my body's temper tantrums and get myself to the point where I could run a sustained 3.1 miles. In October, I ran my first 5K and won the second place award for my age group. I ran two other races in October and November.

Am I fast? not by a long shot. I run 5Ks in about half an hour. But I ran them, I

didn't sustain any injuries and I can officially say I've taken a path in life that I thought I'd never take. It leads to a finish line at the end of a road race.

I'm looking forward to more 5Ks, and maybe 10Ks, in 2010.

Sunsets over Lake Erie

One of the great advantages of spending time in Lake County is that the Lake Erie shoreline starts to veer sharply to the northeast. As a result, each summer you get a front-row view for some of the best water sunsets east of California.

Sometimes, you can kind of forget that Cleveland is, at its heart, a marine city. A drive up the Lake Erie coast at sunset puts you back in touch with your inland sea roots.

Melt Bar and Grilled

Only about five miles from my apartment. A nationally-recognized sandwich paradise worth the trip -- when you can get a table, that is.

Every Cavs game I've seen in person since 2003

No matter what happens after this season, I've seen LeBron James play in person dozens of times. I've seen him bring 20,000 people to their feet with a mind-blowing dunk, an emphatic block, a physics-bending pass. I've been in the vortex of sound. I've seen with my own eyes what he is capable of.

And now, I can also say that I've seen Shaquille O'Neal in person. Time is running out for that.

Jim Tressel's continued dominance of Michigan

I'm marrying into a family of Michigan and Detroit fans. The benefits are immeasurable .

Three ballparks within easy driving distance

So the Indians aren't winning? Don't find the atmosphere at The Prog to be all that fulfilling? There is always the Lake County Captains at Classic Ballpark, and the

Lake Erie Crushers at one of the hidden gems of the Cleveland area, All-Pro Freight Stadium in Avon. I frequent all three parks in the summer, but the Crushers' digs are quickly becoming a favorite.

Oberin College's campus

I first visited the campus in 2006. You might have your opinions about the college or the town, but the square at the center of campus is a great, and picturesque, relaxing place. I try to get out to Oberlin just to walk around and snap photos at least once or twice a year.