

A Best Gift Ever

It is a gift I remember well, a gift given during a difficult Christmas for my family.

My dad had been sick for a long time—too long. He had spent three months in the hospital already, and there were no promises he would make it home for Christmas. The doctor told my mom: “Maybe for a visit, but only for twenty-four hours.” Then the coming home would mean the going back, but we remained thankful for anything we were able to hope for that year, even if it wasn’t much.

That said, mom ordered a hospital bed and set it up in the living room next to the tree—just in case. Then all five of us kids took turns sleeping in it while we waited for dad to come home.

Lots of folks heard about my father living at the hospital and felt bad like we did. I remember many of those people showing up at our door to give my mom cookies, a fruit basket, a kettle of soup, a loaf of bread, or a casserole.

Even strangers came. One nameless woman knocked on our door one evening and said to my mom when she answered, “You don’t know me, but I work with your sister over at the Amity factory. She told me about your husband, and I just wanted to do something to help.”

Then she started crying, and my mom started crying, and I thought, “Gosh, what is going on? Why is everyone crying? Didn’t this lady just say that she didn’t even know my mom?”

I was stumped. The nameless woman I never saw before, and would never see again, was crying in my mother’s arms like I would have. It really made me think. It was a Christmas, in all truth, where a lot of things made me think—like what Mr. Skretny at the corner drug store did.

He spotted me standing in one of his aisles in front of bottles of men’s cologne.

“Something for your dad?” he asked. “I heard he’s coming home.”

Yes, dad was coming home and, yes, I needed a present, but, no, I was not going to be able to afford anything on those shelves. (That much I had figured out as I stared at the prices on Old Spice, dad’s favorite.)

“Maybe I’ll get him some Chapstick,” I mumbled, embarrassed that the money stuffed inside my red mitten, almost all change, wasn’t nearly enough for even the smallest bottle of any brand.

“Oh, your dad doesn’t like cologne?” asked Mr. Skretny as he walked toward me, knowing more of what was going on in my little mind than I could have realized.

I didn’t want to answer Mr. Skretny’s question, so I didn’t. I just wanted to get out of there, and I would have done just that had he not come over to stand beside me where, together, we looked at the bottles lined up neatly. Old Spice, Old Spice, Old Spice.

“How much do you have to spend?” asked the man who smelled like dad.

“Not enough,” I told him. It was a simple, matter-of-fact, right-to-the-point kind of answer that let him know that I was not only short, I was *way* short, which he probably knew already.

Then, a miracle. Mr. Skretny reached up and grabbed hold of a top-shelf item above the individual bottles and handed it to me. The ultimate gathering of Old Spice products was inside the box: cologne, aftershave, and soap-on-a-rope. *Wow! Dare I breathe? How could I afford such a present?*

The answer was that I couldn't. Mr. Skretny knew this when he brought the box down and placed it in my hands.

"Wrap this up for your father and tell him it's from you," he said, "and have yourself a nice Christmas."

I headed back home that afternoon with my mitten full of money, carrying a gift that was so much better than Chapstick.

"To: Daddy, From: Rochelle"—those were the words written on a tag attached to one of the best presents I have ever given.

Dad loved it, I knew he would, but I loved it more because of Mr. Skretny's generosity to me that afternoon down at the corner drug store. It was so unexpected, so thoughtful, and so needed that year when my family was struggling.

Dad and I both received a Christmas gift from Mr. Skretny—mine just wasn't wrapped.

"A Best Gift Ever" is from Pennington's book, *Christmas Gifts: Ten of the Greatest Ever Given*.

A Snowy Christmas Eve

I can still see him all these years later. It was Christmas Eve afternoon, 1970-something. Our high school youth program was participating in a Salvation Army fund drive as an outreach project. I stood outside a Wisconsin K-Mart, ringing a bell on the last shift of the season.

With closing time nearing, the throngs of shoppers had dwindled. The end couldn't come soon enough for me. I was freezing.

It was then that I heard the old clunker car pull into the parking lot, its windshield wipers slapping at the snow.

In a frustrated tone, I muttered under my breath, "It's the end of the day and this fellow still wants to come shopping?" My spirit of volunteerism suddenly blew away with the wind.

An old man got out of the car and shuffled toward me.

"Buying one last gift?" I asked, greeting him.

He seemed to consider my words. "Yes, one last gift," he softly replied as he approached the familiar red kettle. A very large hand, gnarled like tree roots, emerged from the warmth of his coat pocket, holding four coins. Pennies? No. What then?

Tipping his hand ever so slightly, the unidentified coins fell into the belly of the kettle.

"Merry Christmas," I acknowledged. "Thank you for helping."

His very blue eyes looked up and met mine. Nodding, he responded, "I couldn't not." Then he turned and left. Just like that.

I watched him, tracks trailing in the snow, and thought to myself: *That was strange. Really strange. An old guy comes out in bad weather, on bad roads, to give a few cents to charity?*

Well, his "few cents" turned out to be a few thousand dollars. A jubilant money-counter back at headquarters recognized the coins immediately: Krugerrands. South African in origin. Pure gold.

All these years later, the old man's words still ring with life within my memory: "I couldn't not."

His words have become, for me, a summary of the essence of generosity—the stirring within the human heart that compels one to help others for no reason other than the goodness of participating in a cause larger than oneself. These are the moments when our souls shine bright and beautiful and connect with the heart of God.

I know, for I have seen this shining in the blue eyes of an old man one Christmas Eve. "A Snowy Christmas Eve" is from Pennington's book, *Highlighted in Yellow*.

Good King Wenceslas Bears the Gift of Love

Do you have a favorite Christmas carol? I do. It's "Good King Wenceslas." The carol is a bit unusual because it has nothing to do with Christmas. Rather, it tells the true story, in poetic lyrics, of an event that happened one winter's eve long, long ago.

King Wenceslas, immortalized in the words of the carol, ruled the European country of Bohemia from 928 to 935 A.D. He was loved by the subjects of his kingdom because his heart was full of mercy for those in need.

One night, as the carol recounts, the king was looking out his castle window on December 26th when he spotted a peasant trying to gather wood for a fire. The kindly monarch was deeply moved by the sight because the weather was snowy and bitter cold, and the poor soul wandering in desperation was surely freezing.

Taking pity on the man, King Wenceslas shouted for his servant to come to the window.

"Who is that man?" he asked, pointing at the peasant. "Do you know where he lives?"

"Yes, sire," responded the servant, recognizing the man. "He lives a long way from here. His cottage is on the other side of the mountain near St. Agnes' fountain."

The king now knew who the peasant was and where he lived. Quickly, he gave orders for provisions to be loaded so they could be delivered to the poor man's dwelling. Food, wine, and logs were made ready. Then, into the harsh winter's night, the king himself went forth with his faithful servant beside him. The howling wind beat against the men and the servant soon collapsed, unable to go on. Helping the man to his feet, the ruler said to him, "Stand behind me as we walk. My body will block the wind and shield you."

What happened next is recorded as "The Miracle of Wenceslas." Stepping behind the king who led onward, the weakened page saw a light shining forth from the monarch's body. Grass then sprung up from beneath the king with every step he took, melting the snow. The love and warmth of King Wenceslas' generous heart was radiating around him, and both men were now engulfed in a protective barrier of light as they traveled the remaining distance to the other side of the mountain to deliver the gifts they came bearing—food, wine, logs, and love. Love, it is a beautiful gift.

I suppose it could be said that the carol has nothing to do with Christmas, or I suppose it could be said that it has everything to do with Christmas. Why? Because the kind king's mission was an example of the message that a Baby born in Bethlehem came to teach us, and that message was this: "Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and serve one

another in love. And do unto others, because it is more blessed to give than it is to receive.” That is what the Life born in the hay had come to say.

The carol hits the soft spot in my heart every year because I, too, once looked upon a starving man in the snow at Christmas, but unlike the peasant in the good king’s story, the man I speak of now did not live happily ever after. Why? Because no one remembered the Babe’s message. Everyone was just too busy celebrating Christmas for all of the wrong reasons.

I was a young woman at the time. A few friends and I decided to see a live performance of “A Christmas Carol” at the Pabst Theater in Milwaukee. We heard about the elegant theater and couldn’t wait to attend. The experience was everything we thought it would be, and more. Then we left, and that is when I saw him. A ragged man was lying against a brick building on the frozen ground like a bag of garbage.

We all saw him, even those of us who pretended not to. Then we walked right past him, every single one of us.

A stranger beside me mumbled, “Why doesn’t the city do something to expand those overflowing shelters so we don’t have to look at that?”

The homeless man annoyed the beautiful woman. To her, he was not a him, he was a that. It was a cold word, an icy word—cold, like the night.

Life is tough for too many people in this world, people who have to swallow hard as they wait for the next blow to hit them, and it does—again and again. Where is the help these people hope for? The help is inside of you, and it’s inside of me. The Baby told us.

I wish I could return to the nameless man I saw lying in the darkness and do something kind and good for him. If I could return, I would, but all the wishing in the world cannot take me to that place. The wish cannot be granted.

Life is fleeting, and its moments for us to be miracles pass quickly. Then they are gone forever.

Let us go forth in this season of “goodwill toward men” and search for the face of need. It is everywhere. It is on the hungry, and it is on the heartbroken.

Then, when we find it, let us ask ourselves if we will be an answer to this person’s prayer. Will we be their miracle?

The strength of humanity lies in the willingness of each of us to leave the walls of our own lives and connect with the lives of others.

Lead on.

Rochelle Pennington

“The heart generous and kind most resembles God.”

Robert Burns

“On the street I saw a small girl shivering in a thin dress, with little hope of a decent meal. I became angry and said to God, ‘Why do You permit this? Why don’t You do something about it?’ And God replied, ‘I certainly did do something about it. I made you.’”

Mary Rose McGready

“God does not comfort us to make us comfortable, but to make us comforters.”

J. H. Lovett

“When I ask, ‘What can I do?’ I’ve found the answer by rearranging the words: ‘Do what I can.’”

Ted Menten

“The cure for all the ills and wrongs, the cares, the sorrows, and the crimes of humanity, all lie in that one word: love. It is the divine vitality that everywhere produces and restores life. To each and every one of us it gives the power of working miracles...if we will.”

Lydia Maria Child

“Someday, after we have mastered the winds, the waves, the tides, and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love. Then, for the second time in world history, we will have discovered fire.”

Tielhard de Chardin