

Every Person Gets Their Due – Especially on Christmas Eve:

Unforgettable Memories of a Father's Values

1 My father died recently. He was a gentle man who would talk to anyone. Once I saw him
chatting with a sulking, scruffy, reluctant biker – well reluctant at first, because in a short time
they were chatting like old friends. Before he died, dementia placed him in a senior's home;
but, even there, on his “centered” days he would move from room to room smiling and saying
5 hi and “working the hallway.”

My dad shipped out of Halifax in World War II – an under-aged young man fit to serve. I heard
that the Canadian Armed Forces found out about his age, but instead of sending him home
made him a medic where he served in the European theatre – a fact he never spoke about.
One time my mother told me that they were walking down a Toronto street when a siren went
10 off. My dad hit the ground behind a car. War can do that, I guess.

When I was young, I also found a box of his old armed forces “stuff” in the attic. It contained
some variety of medals, and a leather coat that looked like it would fit a boy. My father, at his
wettest, weighed about 140 pounds. Compared to my grandfather, my dad was quite small.

My grandfather was big in many ways. He was the patriarch of the family – an ethical, warm,
15 funny, big guy who without trying was the center of attention. He did magic tricks and played
practical jokes like whoopee cushions at dinner for the new pastor's wife: he was church
treasurer for his whole life and the union representative for the factory where he worked. He
would go on vacation and leave his house key in the mailbox so neighbors could come in and
watch TV – which he had almost before anyone else. He had books and taught me to love
20 sci-fi. He carried authority naturally and well and, to the best of my knowledge, he was loved
and never resented by my dad – who repeatedly came in a smaller second. My father spoke
well of my grandfather – always.

I was the oldest of five – four boys and a baby sister. Christmas was a big day, both religiously
and in a family sense. We were a strong and close family, who celebrated hard and often – all
25 without a hint of alcohol.

Christmas Eve was always spent at Grandpa's house, where we were lavished with gifts and
food. We would go early in the day to set up the tree and make and watch previous home

30 movies. Later that day, we would congregate again for supper and presents. We ate first and then opened gifts well into the night – one person at a time and seemingly going on for almost ever. Every gift was worthy of a comment – a “Hey, thanks. That was something I always wanted, but not very much.”

35 Christmas day was spent at Dad and Mom’s house, where the rest of the family landed late afternoon for a big Christmas dinner – of course, after all the presents had been opened early that morning. We were not a wealthy family, and both my dad and grandpa worked at a factory that made glass bottles; but, somehow Christmas was special and we celebrated it with food, family traditions, and joyful parties – it was great to be a kid.

40 My grandfather lived about two blocks away, in what seemed like a two-storied old house made larger one room at a time by expanding the main two-room pod of a kitchen and living room over a series of years. I suppose it seemed all that much bigger because of the smaller size of my own family’s house, where all of us four boys slept in one bedroom. But, small or large, it was warm and grand at Christmas.

45 Anyway, that is the context of this story that happened around 1958, to the best of my knowledge. On Christmas Eve, we drove my father’s car – as best I can recall by looking at pictures on the Internet, it was about a 1933 Ford – to my grandfather’s house and parked it in the one-lane driveway behind Grandpa’s car. During the course of that joyful evening, a soft, deep snow started to fall and by about midnight about eight inches of the quiet stuff had covered streets, cars, and everything. About 11 pm, someone looked out and saw the problem. Robert Frost or not, we had to do something.

50 When we realized that the snow had fallen so much and was still coming, Dad scrambled to get us home before we were completely snowed in. The idea of staying safely put at Grandpa’s house was never considered, because any smart boys aged 10, 8, 6, and 4 all knew that Santa could not come unless we were safely sleeping in our beds. That is what we had been told for many years, and we believed it. We had to get home for Christmas to work.

55 But there was another problem. The car was out of gas, and was blocking Grandpa’s car in the driveway. A phone call was made to the owner of the town’s Park Filling gas station, and Dad set out down the hill towards the center of town about two miles away in the deep snow carrying my Grandfather’s empty 5-gallon gas. Hours went by, and finally my father – all 140 pounds of him – appeared dragging the full gas can up the hill through the ever-deepening

60 snow. Gas was then emptied into the old Ford, which was shoved out and sent on its slow journey through the snowy streets home.

65 This story has often been told around the dinner table of my family at times of celebrations, and always my father looked a bit sheepish at its telling. Although the original tellers of this story have all now passed on, and I am the eldest surviving family member, in its day the story represented the mythology of our family. It was a landmark set of directions about how people should live.

The story is a story about responsibility, and my father accepted responsibility in many ways. First, he was responsible because he had not filled the car up with gas and, whether the gauge was working or not, his job was to rectify the situation.

70 Second, he was responsible to his kids. It would have been easier to reshape tradition for that one night and make up some story about Santa's reflexive abilities – but he did not. My dad walked through the snow to take care of his family's welfare.

75 Third, my dad was responsible to the person who left his own family on Christmas Eve night to open his gas station to fill a 5-gallon gas can so another father could take care of his own family's needs – this gas station owner is the unknown hero in this story. What is also interesting is that we called him and there was an expectation that he might actually trouble himself to help. Today, few of us would expect such service – and the story tells about the erosion of small town, community values or the expectations that friends and acquaintances dare to place upon each other.

80 Finally, the story tells of my Father's responsibility in deeper ways. It would have been practical to purchase only a little bit of gas, which would have been enough to get us home and to the gas station later that week. Certainly it would have been easier to carry a lighter gas can two miles up the hill in the deep snow. But that was not my Father's ethic – he was concerned that everyone he dealt with honestly got the best deal possible. If he was going to have to take someone else away from family on Christmas Eve, and if they were good enough to come, that person was going to get the best deal he could – that meant filling up the gas can.

All that said, my father could have acted pragmatically. He might have made the purchase and dumped some of the gas off the bridge on the way home. In those days, probably the gas

90 in total cost something like \$1 – when I Googled it, the average cost of gas in 1958 was 19.9 cents to 24.9 cents per gallon. But we were not a wealthy family and our family certainly didn't waste anything. Nope, every drop of that gas was going into that car. The struggle up the hill with the gas can was the price one paid to live well.

95 As the eldest of the family left alive, this family mythology lives in my bones and I hope in my actions. I still carry with me the values of that Christmas Eve night, sometimes as heavily as my father carried that gas up that hill in the deep snow. Thanks, Dad, for teaching me that every person we meet should be better off because of the meeting.