

Perfection

I was taken to the orphanage on Christmas night. We started off for supper at Aunt Sue's over snow covered roads. Dad drove us through the dark, the tires making a crunching sound as the old Ford slowly pushed its headlight beams ahead of us into a swirl of falling gray flakes.

My ten year old big brother was in the front seat and I was in the back, the normal arrangement to keep us separated when we got tired and grouchy toward the end of a long day. I kept asking Dad what was under the large blanket in the box beside me, but he ignored me. As we neared Aunt Sue's home, Dad took a detour and turned up a long driveway. We arrived outside a tall old building. Lights shone from dozens of windows, lit up against a black sky holding a billion stars. Before I could say, "Where are we?" my father hopped out of the car, reached in back, grabbed the box and, laughing, threw the blanket over my head. I pulled it off just in time to see a box full of gaily wrapped Christmas presents carried up the steps to St. Joseph's Orphanage. I admit being disappointed I wasn't getting one more present on this festive day. Selfishly, I felt that way every year afterward when we made the delivery. I suppose I should have been happy each time to not be dropped off with the gifts.

My father had a big heart. In addition to the city's orphanages, he had a life-long devotion to the St. Vincent de Paul store for the needy in Utica. My brothers and I would joke, "Hide it, or Dad will give it away to St. Vincent's!" As teens, we cornered him and made him promise he'd check with us before taking anything down to the store. Sometimes, he made assumptions about what we boys no longer needed. He was the tidy sort, unlike his sons. I have to say my Dad was a pretty selfless guy. He was grateful for everything the world provided him, working all his life, scrimping and not saving much, preferring to give it away.

More than just money, my father often gave his time and his help. At the newspaper, he worked with a young fellow named Don, whose wife suffered from post partum depression after the birth of twin girls. One afternoon, at wits end, she put the babies down for a nap and wrote a note saying it was either her or the babies. She didn't want to kill them, so she killed herself. Her young husband couldn't imagine how he would care for two girls and had thoughts of following after his wife. My Dad spent each evening with him over the space of a few weeks, helping with the infants. He'd sit and listen to Don cry it out as the man slowly got some courage back. Years later, Don told me my father saved his life.

As Dad got older, he began to show a few flaws in his character. The man I thought was perfect turned out to be human. As I gained in years, feeling splendidly faultless myself, I noticed his shortcomings more than mine ... until I survived my own children's adolescent behaviors. Anyone who raises teenagers and still feels above reproach suffers a grave mental disturbance.

I wish my heart was a big as Dad's, but I seldom compare myself to him. We're two different people, and besides, I'd lose.

When he was older and more philosophical, I asked him, "Where did your sense of giving come from?" I thought he would deny it or, if not, he'd mention his religion or maybe a mentor from long ago who had influenced him.

"My father," he said. "He was a very generous man." This surprised me. From what I knew of Grandpa, the guy was a wastrel, and some said worse.

I take some comfort from knowing that even my grandfather could inspire my father's generosity. It assures me that I don't have to be perfect to set an example, which I hope I have done a few times in my life. Those who live with me have seen my warts. So did my Dad, but he laughed and threw a blanket of love over them.

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