

Christmas Eve Eve
By James L. Holly, MD
Your Life Your Heath
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Christmas gifts are often simply fun and are soon forgotten, but sometimes they can reflect the values of the giver and the importance of the recipient to the giver, while teaching a lesson. I started school in September, 1949, at five years of age. When I was in the first grade at Tioga, Louisiana, the school bus only brought my brother and me to within three miles of our home. Everyday, my mother picked us up to take us home. I wish I could say that I walked those three miles, in the snow, bare-footed, up-hill, both ways, but I have a wonderful mother who was there every day I came home from school from the first grade through the twelfth.

I remember Christmas of 1949, but I only remember one thing about it. When mother picked us up the day Christmas vacation started, she said we had a surprise at home; our family's Christmas present had been delivered early. As only a six-year old could, I exclaimed, "I'll tear the house down to find it." My mother was a serious person and let me know quickly that such behavior would not be tolerated.

Part of our excitement was that, until this Christmas, presents were small and few. We didn't know we were poor, but we were. Now, however, the post-World War II boom had been well established; it had reached central Louisiana and my father had a good job and Christmas was going to be bright. We couldn't wait to get home.

When we arrived, deep in the woods of Camp Livingston, where we lived in a two-bed-room, power-company house, which we shared with another family, my brother and I raced into the house. There in the living room sat the most beautiful piece of furniture we had ever seen; and, it talked. It was a large radio in a beautiful wooden cabinet.

No one had a television, a circumstance which I would now count a blessing, so this radio became the center of our entertainment, amusement and education from the outside world. As I look back, I realized that in purchasing this particular gift my father was making a statement about what was important to him for his family. This gift opened up an entire new world to a country child, who knew so little of the city that crowds of a few hundred were frightening. This gift taught me to love music, news and learning. It taught us to laugh and to listen. It taught us that laughing was not fun, unless it was shared with those whom you love.

A Christmas Collie

If you have never read this little book; you should. It only takes about ten minutes. It is a poem beautifully illustrated that tells the story of a boy, born about the time that my father was. When the boy was five, he wanted a puppy and on Christmas Day, he had one. The story follows the boy through growth, illnesses, school and finally war. His puppy grows and while his master is away at war, dies. My tears come as the poem tells of the boy, now a man, sitting in his chair,

eager for his son to awake for Christmas; for this boy, now a father, has a collie puppy for his boy.

The cycle and details of this story track my life.. I tried to read it to a nurse recently when I brought a copy to a patient, but I couldn't finish it. As I remember, "my" collie, really he belonged to my brother and to me, those same tears well up in my eyes. His name was "Boy." He could jump anything. He would not allow any injury to my brother, or to me, including discipline from our mother. If she wanted to punish us, it had to be in the house, as "Boy" took his protective responsibilities seriously and made no exceptions.

As the school year in 1950 came to a close, my family was moving to Natchitoches, Louisiana and our father felt that we could not take "Boy," so he was given to a family "up town." Actually, they lived on the road near the school we attended. They had a cyclone fence – they were up town, you know? Unfortunately, it was only five-feet high. Every morning, when my mother would take us all the way to school, "Boy" would hear our car coming; recognize it; jump the fence and stand across the road, daring my mother to pass without letting us get out and greet him. She never did. I shall never forget "Boy" and neither will my brother. He was our friend and always shall be.

I'll Be Home For Christmas

Few songs are as haunting as this one. "I'll be home for Christmas; if only in my dreams." On Friday, December 17th, I began to want to "go home." I knew that I would be with my wife's mother on Christmas Day and my mother the day after Christmas next week, but that was a week away. Alas, even though I was on vacation, I had too much to do, so I did not go on Saturday. But, on Sunday morning, I got up very early. I got enough done that I felt that I could go.

I left at 6:30 A.M. and drove straight to Ball, Louisiana. Ball connects with Kingsville, where I first remember attending church; which connects with Pineville, where two magical houses stood both occupied at one time by my father's parents; which connects with Alexandria, where I was born. At Ball, there is a cemetery where my father's grave is. I visit it often, though I realize that he is not there.

On Sunday, December 19th, as I stood over his grave, I began to shiver and realized it was 36 degrees. I placed a gift on my father's grave. I knew what would happen to the gift but it is my touch point with him. In his life, he was the most contented man I knew. There was no thing that he wanted, or needed to fulfill his person. That reflects great character but it makes it difficult to buy him a gift. Finally, I settled on something he enjoyed: a four-pound box of Godiva chocolate. He loved it and was rather reluctant to share it.

When my father died in October, 2005, I visited his grave for the first time a week after his funeral. As I drove the same way I did this past Sunday, I thought of his candy. It took a little while, but I found a mall, which had a store, which sold Godiva. I bought the smallest box they had. As I drove to Ball that morning in 2005, I smiled to myself. As I placed the small box on his headstone, I knew this would become my "touch point" with my father's memory.

My brother told me later – he lives only three miles from the cemetery – that when he first saw the small box of candy, he thought it was silly. Three weeks later, when he returned and a “critter” had eaten the candy and scattered the wrapping, he said that he was moved to tears. We both believe our father would have liked that. The attached picture shows this Christmas’ small box of candy on my father’s headstone. I wonder what critter – four-legged or two – will enjoy this morsel.

In 2008, I took my son and my grandson on a trip to visit the graves of their grandfather, great grand father, great, great grandfather and great, great, great grandfather. In preparation the visit to my father’s grave, who is my son’s grandfather and my grandson’s great grandfather, I bought a slightly larger box of Godiva. As I placed the box on my father’s grave, I suggested that we share a piece of Godiva. And, we did.

The Journey

This past Sunday, leaving my father’s grave, I drove from Ball to Kingsville into Pineville, I drove down Wonder Lane, which is a winding, narrow, free-shaded, until-recently-dirt, road, which takes me to those two magical houses where I entered the most wonderful world – the world of my grandparents. As I drove, I thought of my family and of my eight grandchildren. I lamented to myself that my grandchildren will never know my grandparents and Wonder Lane will never be magical to them, but then I realized, I don’t so much want them to share my memories as I want them to have memories of their own as wonderful as mine are to me. I realized that I would spend my life helping them have such memories.

After a brief visit at my brother’s home – he and his wife were joining me in Natchitoches for lunch – I took my leave and headed to see my Mother. After all, she is the reason I was going to Natchitoches. I had determined to retrace the path we traveled every Christmas as we drove from Natchitoches to Pineville. It is not the shortest route, but it is the most significant. I know every crook and turn in the road. I wonder if I will realize it when I take my last trip this way? I wonder what road has this significance to my children and grandchildren.

When I arrived at my Mother’s home, I carried some of her Christmas gifts into her house. I look at this incredibly healthy, 93-year-old woman and embraced her. The years continue to take their toll but slowly for which I am grateful. A cardiologist friend had brought her a Grayson Ham – for those of you who do not know what this is, well, everyone can’t be blessed – and she wants it sliced. I took it to the grocery and left it.

My brother and his wife arrived and we went to lunch at Almost Home. At the end of the meal, our waitress brought my mother a box of cookies. This ritual has taken place for years. I know this young mother of two doesn’t have the money to give this gift I made sure that her gratuity covered the service she provided and the cost of the cookies. She protested but then accepted the gift. I was right about the “affording.”

After collecting her ham and taking her home, I shortly said goodbye. In the next three-hours drive to Beaumont, it seems like only a few minutes, I was aglow with the warmth of my

childhood home and memories as I eagerly returned to the hearth where my life is – yes, “life” is correct for my wife, my children, my grandchildren and my profession are my life.

Christmas

Christmas is for home. It is for the home of our memory and for the home of now. For those of us who worship Him, it is the time we remember the incarnation of Jesus Christ, even though He was probably not born in the month we call December.

I thank God on this Christmas for all of those who have made my life rich and that includes many whose genetic link to me either doesn't exist, or is so remote as to have long since been lost. I thank God for the warmth and love of Christmas. And, whether you worship Him as God or not, I pray that the gift of His love will bring you joy and peace this year.

Why is this article entitled Christmas Eve Eve?

A memory. My son has started his own collection of memories for his children and for his extended family. Every Christmas Eve Eve, he gathers all of our family, sometimes that includes Great Grandmothers, and we celebrate love and joy and peace and FAMILY. I am thankful for these memories.