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The Ultimate Gift
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The movie, *The Ultimate Gift*, begins with a video which declares that Red Stevens has died, and his older offspring having received their millions with greedy anticipation. But a different fate awaits young Jason, whom Stevens, his great-uncle (sic), believes may be the last vestige of hope in the family. By video, Red said, "Although to date your life seems to be a sorry excuse for anything I would call promising, there does seem to be a spark of something in you that I hope we can fan into a flame. For that reason, I am not making you an instant millionaire." What Stevens does give Jason leads to *The Ultimate Gift* story.

While sophisticates probably give this move multiple "rotten tomatoes," I thought it was wonderful. Red Stevens' partner and life long friend was played by Bill Cobb who portrayed Charlie Evers, Medgar Evers' brother in *Ghosts of Mississippi*, the story about Byron De La Beckwith, the murderer of Medgar. The power of Cobb's portrayal of Charlie Evers led me to locate him in hopes of visiting with him. Alas, he was deceased.

At Christmas, we entered the gift-giving season, thinking of pretty packages wrapped under a tree. But, the twelve gifts received by Red's grand nephew are significant not only in their number – the twelve days of Christmas and the twelve gifts received by Jason Stevens – but also by their nature. Each gift was chosen by Red to teach a lesson and to develop character in Jason. If Jason succeeded at the fulfillment of the requirement of one gift, he was given the next, until at last, he received "the ultimate gift." And, if your interest in this story is such that you wonder about the origin of each of the twelve gifts, you can watch the prequel entitled *The Ultimate Life* in which that story is told.

The very idea of "navigating" a gift bespeaks of the nature of the gifts Jason is to receive. The impact of the gifts "given" to Jason, harkens back to William F. Buckley's father's declaration to his children, when he said, "There is one gift that I regret that I cannot give you. It is the gift of poverty. I was raised in poverty and there are lessons which you cannot learn having grown up in wealth." In a very real way, through twelve experiences portrayed as "gifts," Jason learned the lessons which his grand uncle wanted him to learn and which he hoped that Jason would.

It is impossible to fully portray the spirit, pathos and feelings of Red's twelve gifts in words alone. To get the full "picture," you must experience the "picture show," but I will try to explain

each gift and what Jason was to learn from each, as I believe there are lessons for us in each. Red's life-long attorney and partner, played by Cobb, explained to Jason that he was not receiving a rich inheritance but he was receiving a series of gifts. If he failed in the task required by each gift that was the end of the gifts. Red's friend told Jason that he expected him to fail and to fail quickly.

It is not surprising that the first gift was the "gift of work." Another life-long friend of the grand uncle was a rancher in Texas. Jason was given a airplane ticket to Texas and nothing else. He was met at the airport and was taken to the friend's ranch. The first day Jason was taken to the middle of the vast ranch where he found a pile of fence posts. Jason's task -- his first gift -- was to build a fence. That day he sat all day. The next day, he also did nothing. But the third day, realizing that the receiving of "the gift" meant completing the task,, Jason was up before the 5 AM breakfast call and began working, putting up a shabby fence. The next day, he started "doing it right" and ended the month having built a fine, sturdy and straight fence. His reward was his grand-uncle's friend's judgment that anyone who could build that fence could be successful at anything.

Jason returned to his luxurious living only to discover that all of his possessions had been stolen and then his car was stolen too. The estate executor told him that to continue fulfilling the stipulations of his inheritance; he had to find one true friend. That night Jason dined with his long-time girl fiend. When the huge bill was presented, Jason found that none of his credit cards were honored. He asked his girlfriend if she would pay the bill. She wept and ran away. He was alone and without a friend. With no place to live, he slept on a part bench.

There he met a child, Emily, and asked her to be his friend. She asked what was in it for her. The condition was that he could not buy friendship. She agreed to be his friend and when interviewed by the executor said, "We have been friends for a long, long time." Asked if she intended to remain his friend, Emily said, "I expect to remain his friend for as long as I live." We do not know at this point that the little girl has a fatal illness. Emily's goal was to find a husband for her mother, Alexia, as her father had abandoned them when Alexia found out she was expecting a baby.

Having experienced the gifts of work and of friendship, the executor gives Jason a check. He takes it, declares his independence and desire never to see them again, and leaves. On the elevator, he opens the envelope and returns to the office. His grand uncle by pre-recorded video tells him that is a paycheck, which he earned building the fence in Texas. He is told that he must give the \$1,500 away. He is now being given the gift of knowing the value of money. Jason returns to the park to find the homeless man whose park bench Jason had used.

He found the man going through a woman's purse. When the man fled, Jason looked for identification only to discover it was Alexia's purse and that she was going to be evicted if she couldn't pay \$1,600 in rent. Already developing affection for Emily, Jason made arrangements to pay the bill but he only had \$1,500. He promised to pay the remaining \$100, which he did through various nefarious means. Having spent millions of dollars on frivolous living, Jason learned the value of money for a home for Alexia and Emily, strangers who were becoming "real friends."

Through a series of exercises and experiences Jason receives the following gifts:

1. the gift of work (he must learn to value the lessons and fulfillment of work)
2. the gift of friendship (he must learn to value others for themselves)
3. the gift of money (he must learn the value of money and the good it can do)
4. the gift of family (through experiencing his dysfunctional family and their inability to express gratitude, he must learn the value of family)
5. the gift of gratitude (through recognizing his own pride and arrogance, he begins to develop humility from which comes the gift of gratitude, being thankful for gifts.)
6. the gift of laughter (he must learn to see the joys of life)
7. the gift of problems (he must learn to welcome problems and to learn from them.)
8. the gift of learning (he must learn even if learning is painful)
9. the gift of dreams (he must have his own dream which allows him to dream of helping others fulfill their dreams.)
10. the gift of a day (through the eyes of a dying child, he learns the value of every day of one's life.)
11. the gift of giving (Winston Churchill said, "You make a living by what you get; you make a life by what you give. Jason learns the joy of giving.)
12. the gift of love (this is the ultimate gift to care for others more than you care for yourself and to live for others more than you live for yourself.

In the end, Emily dies, Jason inherits \$100,000,000 and gives it all away and he receives Emily's gift to him, Alexia. Called to the estate's executor's law office, Jason is told that he has fulfilled all the challenges given him and he was now to receive the remainder of his inheritance; \$2,000,000,000. The money is secure in his hands as he will now use it for others.

The application is that our lives are a series of gifts, not prettily wrapped in bright, colored paper, but in the form of challenges, crises and conflicts, which if received (embraced) will produce in our lives character, courage, convictions, commitments and companionship with other with whom to share life.

Please watch *The Ultimate Gift* and then *The Ultimate Life*. No one would claim them as the greatest movies ever, but in the experiencing of them, you will receive a gift. I promise. This gift will be foundation of a healthy life.