

The Message Behind the Gift

by

James C. Magruder

*The heart of a father is the masterpiece of nature.
Antoine-Francois, Abbe Prevost d'Exiles*

I never wanted a gift more in my life than Christmas of 1967. It was a simple gift, really-- a record player. It was before the era of component stereo systems, and as a 14-year old teenager I wanted total control of my music. I was still riding the boom of the Beatles and the British Invasion and was tired of painfully waiting for the radio to randomly play my favorite songs. If I owned a record player, specifically the model I pinpointed in the Sunday newspaper sales circulars, I could listen to "my music" any time---in the privacy of my bedroom. That is, in whatever privacy exists in a bedroom shared with two brothers.

I was one of six children in a single-parent home. My mother died two years earlier after a short but brutal bout with cancer. I don't know how much the medical community knew about cancer in the sixties. I didn't know much---certainly not how quickly it would end my mother's life---and change mine forever.

We were an average middle class family. Although my father was a successful accountant for a major automobile manufacturer, six hungry mouths to feed on one income changed everything. We weren't scraping by but there weren't many extras. Hand me down clothes were a way of life. Yet, we were a solid family run by a disciplined man with rigid schedules, strict rules, and daily routines that kept life organized, efficient and predictable.

In the weeks leading up to Christmas, I poured over the sales circulars every Sunday to ensure my record player was still being advertised. If it went on sale, it was one more reason to conduct my own advertising to my father and pitch the reasons it should find its way under our tree---with my name on it. One more plug couldn't hurt, right?

Looking back, my father must of felt overwhelmed, or worse, inadequate Christmas shopping alone for three sons and three daughters. I wonder if he asked himself: How will I make everyone happy? How can I make each gift equitable? Will this Christmas be meaningful? And most importantly, Will the finances stretch far enough?

This particular Christmas he asked my aunt and uncle to help him shop. And on that Sunday afternoon I showed my aunt that my record player was advertised in the newspaper again. Maybe she would remind my father of my request and lobby on my behalf.

My father was, by nature, a stoic man so he never acknowledged that he would honor my request. Never mind that I had only one thing on my Christmas list. And despite my frequent hints, he appeared noncommittal to my relentless requests. Either he simply couldn't fulfill my dream or he learned to wear a poker-face like a glove.

Christmas came with great expectations that year. After church, we assembled around the tree in the living room in our quaint Cape Cod home. I don't remember which one of the six of us was selected to hand out the gifts while the rest of us watched and awaited our turn to open one---I was too busy surveying every package under the tree. There was good news. Plenty of gifts for everyone. And bad news. No gift large enough to be a record player.

I enjoyed watching my brothers and sisters receive what they hoped for on what was probably our first Christmas of significant healing after our mother's death in 1965. Still, we felt

her absence---none more than my father. For me, the thought of receiving my special gift was a healthy diversion from the pain of what remains our family's greatest loss.

As I watched the presents quickly disappear and it became clear I would not receive my coveted gift, I felt the empty rejection you feel when you're the last one chosen for a team game. I guess I knew it was simply too much to ask. Yet, I wondered how to question my father.

I looked over to him. "Dad, I think something is missing," I said.

"Really, what?" he replied.

"Well, I was hoping for ...," my voice trailed off.

"Have you checked under the tree?" he suggested.

"Yes, but..."

"Have you checked *in* the tree?" he added.

"In the tree?"

I rifled through the branches careful not to disturb the ornaments. In the back of the tree near the bottom I found a sealed envelope with my name on it. I ripped it open. There was one sentence scrawled across the middle of the page. "Look in the basement near the clothes dryer." I ran to the basement and looked around the dryer. Nothing. I popped the door open and looked inside the dryer. Another envelope. I opened it. "Look in the closet in Mary and Joanie's bedroom." I ran back upstairs to my sisters' bedroom closet. I found another note with the next clue. This process continued until my father had me run all over the house. The thrill of the hunt intensified with every note. At last, I discovered the final note. "Look under your bed." I raced upstairs to my room and looked under my bed. There, wrapped in newspapers, was a large gift.

I shredded the newspapers. Beneath this crude wrapping paper was the gift---a record player. I paused. It was not the one I wanted. I was stunned. It was better than the one I asked

for. Far better. I knew I didn't deserve it. It was a major name brand. It even carried the two words that symbolized quality in that era: Solid State. I excitedly plugged it in and spend the afternoon with my siblings listening to our favorite records.

My father would never know the full impact of what he did for me that Christmas. I used this cherished gift all through high school and college. In fact, I used it long after technology passed it by. I'm sure he would've been satisfied if I got just a few years of use out of it. I used it for ten years. Eventually, I replaced it and carefully put it in storage. It survived numerous spring cleanings, rummage sales and moving days.

In the end, I kept it for 37 years. This Christmas, it's been 47 years since I opened the gift. It remains the most memorable gift I've ever received.

Why did I keep it so long? I suppose it's because of the powerful message behind the gift that my father unknowingly sent me: The value of a gift is not what it's worth; it's what it says about you're worth to the giver.

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