



Christmas Gifts I'll Never Forget

They weren't expensive presents; they were profound lessons which the author learned from his children.

by Joseph N. Bell

Art by Bill Randall

IT ALL STARTED several Christmases ago with our 10-year-old daughter, Patsy. We had opened the gifts from the other children—indeed, we had opened all our gifts—before we found hers. They were two very small packages, wrapped carefully if a little untidily, with more area of gummed stickers than of paper.

Inside each package was a homemade card. Mine read:

"Dear Dad:
I.O.U.
5 car washes
10 lawn trimmings
5 leaf rakings
5 snow shovelings
Merry Christmas from Patsy"

Her mother's gift included 10 trips to the grocery store, 10 house dustings, 10 Saturdays of helping with the housework, and "practicing the piano without complaining"—which was the most welcome gift of all.

I don't remember how many of these presents were actually collected; I'm sure a good many of them were. But I've never forgotten the spirit behind those two simple gifts—the desire to give bountifully of what she possessed. She had very little money with which to buy presents. But she had unlimited energy, good will, love, affection, and a desire to give of herself. And she had time. Of these commodities she gave unstintingly; and what thoroughly satisfactory gifts they made!

We've been trying to apply the I.O.U. principle to Christmas ever since—with some remarkably heart-warming results. For example, we once gave a neighbor couple, who were tied close to home with a small baby, a Christmas I.O.U. for a dozen nights of baby-sitting. They were as grateful as if we had given them a new car, and we in turn were able to work up a new Christmas glow every time one of us stayed with their baby while they went out.

But Patsy's I.O.U.'s taught us an even more basic lesson: that there are many fine gifts we can give in addition to expensive material things. And often these gifts bring more joy than the most costly store-bought presents. For example, two years ago, my wife Janet baked individual fruit cakes for the entire neighborhood at Christmastime. Last year she prepared a dozen pans of breakfast rolls on Christmas Eve and baked them on Christmas morning. Then all of us went through the neighborhood delivering breakfast rolls with a Merry Christmas from our family.

These gestures bring pleasure and satisfaction far beyond the time and effort required to perform even the hardest of them.

We can learn a great deal from children—with their clear insight and ability to keep from getting tangled up in trivialities—every day in the year. But especially we can learn from them at Christmas. Left alone, they would retain a solid perspective on the beautiful things of Christmas—the desire to give, to share, and to sanctify the ideals taught by Jesus, whose birthday we celebrate on Dec. 25. At least that's the way it has been at our house over the 15 Christmases we've spent with our children. Although they've taught us many things—like the lesson of the I.O.U.'s—two stand out.

FIRST, OUR CHILDREN have made us realize the importance of being good receivers as well as enthusiastic givers. This lesson has come up frequently, but I recall two Christmases in particular where it was underscored.

Our son David had long been interested in printing and had several times put out neighborhood newspapers, painfully pecked out on a typewriter. He had a toy printing set which he had long ago outgrown; we looked into the cost of a larger one and felt it was too expensive. But that Christmas we bought David an encyclopedia to keep on his desk for reference in his schoolwork. When the book was delivered, he answered the door and I caught a glint of exhilaration in his eye when he saw the package, although it was securely wrapped and unidentifiable.

On Christmas morning, he searched impatiently under the tree until he found that package. Excitedly he tore off the wrappings, and I'll never forget the look of complete, utter desolation and bewilderment when he saw what was inside. After a few minutes of stunned silence, he gravely thanked us for the gift and a few minutes later went upstairs. I found him in his room, crying, but he wouldn't tell me why. He promised to rejoin us, and when he did, he was cheerful the rest of the day.

It was three years before he finally told us the reason for his heartache that Christmas morning. He had been praying for a printing press, and when he saw the return address of a printing

company on the encyclopedia package—and felt its weight—he was convinced the package contained the press he wanted so badly. He hadn't been able to hide his first disappointment; but he refused to let it spoil our Christmas, too.

A few years later, I was helping our youngest daughter, Debby, do her Christmas shopping when we passed a candy store. There was a magnificent box of candy on display in the window and, half in jest, I said to her:

"You know, I've never had a box of candy like that all my own."

A few weeks later, on Christmas morning, there it was—my box of candy, with a card which said a little unsteadily: "Merry Christmas from Debby." The candy had cost five dollars, and I knew that was almost exactly the amount she had been saving for a new doll she wanted desperately. Yet I've never seen such an expression of beatific delight as she had when I opened her package. She had scarcely looked at any of her own gifts, waiting for me to find and open the candy.

I was deeply moved and I told her so; then, putting my arm around her shoulders, I said: "This was a wonderful, generous thing to do, but really it's too much. You shouldn't have spent all of your savings on my gift. Now, we'll take it back next week and get a nice small box of candy that I'll like just as well—and you can still get the doll you want."

She gave me a puzzled look. "But I want you to have this one!" she said. "It's your first box of candy, and I want to give you this very special one all your own."

"I appreciate that," I told her uncomfortably, "but won't a little one do just as well?"

"No," she said, and tears welled up in her eyes and her voice.

Suddenly I saw that she wanted me to have that box of candy even more than she wanted her doll—and that I was depriving her of one of the most satisfactory of all human experiences, the joy of giving. By being a poor receiver, I'd already taken the edge off her pleasure and anticipation, but it wasn't too late to recoup her joy; it always lies just below the surface, ready to be called forth, in the very saddest of children.

"It's the most wonderful present I've ever had," I told her, "and I want to share it with everyone who comes here today."

She glowed then, and in her eyes I could see the spirit of Christmas personified, and I wondered in how many other homes this same glow was warm-