

# **The Christmas Lesson**

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**This is a true story and I believe that its message is an important one.  
Although the setting is Christmas, it is not truly a Christmas story.  
Rather it is a story of love, of giving and of family.**

My three brothers and I were raised in a relatively typical household in a small city in central Massachusetts. Most of my childhood memories are good ones...and the best memories center around the holidays. Halloween, birthdays, Independence Day and Thanksgiving were all very special around our house. But nothing...NOTHING...could hold a candle to CHRISTMAS!

Every Christmas was steeped in unique holiday traditions. These rituals were as constant as the Christmas star and this consistency brought great comfort and excitement to me and my three brothers. The series of events was unwavering: On the afternoon of the day before Christmas, my Dad would give each of us a five dollar bill. Our task (and our great joy!) was to go to our town's Main Street with a mission...to buy a gift for each member of the family. One dollar per gift...careful, thoughtful, selective shopping could stretch that dollar very far!

Upon returning home from our shopping spree, we would wrap the gifts and prepare for the rituals that were Christmas Eve. Again, the sequence of events never varied...a special Christmas Eve dinner of spaghetti and meatballs...followed by THE OPENING and THE READING.

THE OPENING was a time-worn tradition wherein each of us could select one gift from under the tree to open after dinner. Great planning and forethought accompanied the selection of the gift that we would open and I had recurring nightmares of opening a brightly colored box on Christmas Eve and finding MITTENS! The correct choice was, of course, a toy or game to play with before retiring on Christmas Eve.

Following THE OPENING came THE READING. My father would gather the four of us around his overstuffed chair and read us Clement Moore's classic "Twas the Night Before Christmas" poem from a battered old book held together with electrical tape. Pages were torn and missing and I am sure that he was forced to recall much of it from memory. Certainly thousands of American families followed an identical ritual, but to us it was uniquely ours.

After THE READING, we played with our newly opened toys and prepared (reluctantly) for bed, sugar plums, and so on. Like all little boys, we would whisper long into the night. We fought the age-old battle of wanting to stay awake...but knowing the consequences of being wakeful when HE arrived.

On December 24, 1957 I was eight years old and my brother Jim was five. We were very close and shared an exceptionally warm relationship. He was my brother, but he was also my friend! I cherished that friendship then as I do today.

On that day thirty-six years ago, we began the rituals as tradition would dictate. I did not know that I would learn a lesson that Christmas that would stay with me for a lifetime.

It was bitterly cold and the town was blanketed with snow from three early, but welcome, snowfalls. Jim and I were clutching our crisp five dollar bills as we ran toward Main Street to buy gifts. Past the jewelers, past the hardware store, past the bowling alley...we headed for our ultimate destination: W.T. Grants! Nowhere else on the promenade could two eager brothers convert five dollars into valued gifts for our five loved ones.

I was rummaging through the orange boxes of Hartz Mountain Hamster Food for my brother Tom's menagerie when Jim came up behind me. "I found it!" he squealed, "I found it! The perfect gift for you...it's the best! Wait until you see it. You've got to open it tonight!"

I cannot recall ever seeing Jim so excited and he jabbered about the special gift for the rest of the excursion. During our walk home he continued to attempt to secure a promise from me...the promise that I would select HIS gift to open that night after supper. I was unwilling to commit to this course of action, although I was learning in his direction. After all, Jim knew the rituals as well as I did and he surely would not select a gift that I could not play with on Christmas Eve!

As we walked home braced against the cold December wind, Jim continued his onslaught. Suddenly, in midsentence, he stepped on a patch of ice that was covered with a light coating of snow. His feet went out from under him and the precious parcels that he had been clutching tightly to his chest flew out of his hands. In mid-air, in the manner of a cartoon character, he shouted, "Don't look, Rick- I don't want you to see your present!" The Grants bag slid across the ice, tattering and tearing as it skidded along the surface, and came to rest against a small snowbank. As it lay there, I could clearly see the gift that Jim had purchased for me...a Jumbo Santa Claus Coloring and Cut-Out Book complete with tracing paper. A fine gift, indeed.

"Did you see it? Did you see it?" Jim stammered as he leaped on the bag. I assured him that I hadn't (after all, I was the older brother) and he calmed down quickly. We continued our journey home and Jim maintained his constant stream of requests that I select his gift as the one to open that evening.

Now I had a dilemma. I knew how badly Jim wanted me to select his gift...but it was my Christmas, too. And, frankly, my eight year old mind saw little purpose in opening a coloring book on Christmas Eve...not when Uncle Dave's packages generally held a truck or a gun or (dare I wish) a Slinky. Throughout the late afternoon, Jim used every opportunity to continue his public relations attack. The more he pleaded, the more firm I became in my resolve that I would open Uncle Dave's gift - although I never shared this information with Jim.

I was puzzled by Jim's ongoing barrage. It was unlike him to be so insistent. And this situation was not in keeping with the sacred traditions of the Christmas Eve ritual...that each family member was free to make this decision independently, without interference or undue pressure. Such unspoken rules are our only defense against holiday anarchy!

We sat down to supper and amid the clatter and chatter Jim continued to plead his case. Finally, my father interceded and reminded Jim that this was Rick's decision. My father then looked at me and I believe he was assured that I would do the right thing. He had more confidence in me than I did in myself.

Following the meal, we encircled the tree for THE OPENING. Jim thrust the gift into my hands and looked at me hopefully. The size and shape of the gift confirmed that it was indeed, the coloring book. My decision was made. I did not want to disappoint Jim but I was not going to be put in the position of coloring all Christmas Eve while my brothers played with real toys. I would open Uncle Dave's gift...and Jim would have to understand. I would open Jim's gift on Christmas Day. And I would let him color in it with me after Church Services. But Christmas Eve was a night for toys.

I put Jim's gift back under the tree and picked up Dave's present. I shook it, listened to it and held it up to the light. Yes, this would be my Christmas Eve gift. When my turn came, I torn it open. Dave had surpassed my wildest expectations...a Mattel Fanner 50 Repeating Cap Pistol. I turned to show my new prize to Jim and was surprised to see him sitting on the couch, tears in his eyes and his gift to me in his lap. He fingered it gently, lost in thought.

"What a baby" I thought. I could not believe that he was going to spoil his Christmas Eve. My mother called Jim to the tree and told him that it was his turn to open a gift. He selected one, almost at random and slowly tore away the wrappings. It was a Mr. Wizard Junior Chemistry Set! Surely that would bring a smile to his face. But it didn't. He opened the box, looked at the chemicals and plastic test tubes, and put it back under the tree.

As my two older brothers and I played, I couldn't but notice Jim. He sat quietly in my father's big chair in his blue

pajamas holding his gift to me on his lap. I was confused...and maybe a little guilty...but it was Christmas Eve and my job description as an eight-year old required playing and frolicking. So play and frolic I did.

After an hour or so, my parents restored order and we all gathered around my father's chair for THE READING. He took out the battered old Night Before Christmas Book that sat on the bookshelf 364 days of each year and began to read the holiday classic to us. We all laughed as he struggled to hold the loose pages together while he ad-libbed missing pages. We all laughed, except Jim. He sat sullenly; not angry, not sad...just dejected.

We finished the story and were hustled off to bed. I tried to strike up a conversation with Jim but he responded with monosyllables from the bottom bunk. I tired of trying to cheer him up and as I drifted off to sleep, I could hear him crying softly below me.

At dawn, we all bounded from bed and into my parent's room. Slowly we walked down the stairs to behold the sight we had been anticipating for months. The living room was filled with toys, boxes, games, stuffed animals and sleds. Chaos followed with shouts of "Who's is this?", "Just what I wanted!" and "Look, Mom, Look!" It was a spectacle and even Jim appeared to be getting into the spirit of the moment.

I was sitting next to my brother, Tom, as he opened his gift from Jim. As he tore away the wrappings, I became confused. His gift was a Jumbo Santa Claus Coloring and Cut-Out Book, complete with Tracing Paper. As Tom thanked Jim I thought, "Well, if Tom got the coloring book, what was Jim's gift to me?"

I walked over to the tree and rummaged through the packages. Finally, I found the gift marked "To Ricky, From Jimmy." I removed the foil wrapping to find a brand new copy of "The Night Before Christmas."

Tears filled my eyes as I scanned the room for Jim. Our eyes met, then he looked away. I was at once, ashamed, embarrassed, and deeply sad. I had the opportunity to show a kindness to my brother...and I didn't. I had an opportunity to show how much I loved him...and I didn't. I had the opportunity to brighten his holiday...and I didn't.

A valuable lesson was learned by that eight-year old on that Christmas morning. He has tried since not to miss such opportunities. The Holiday Season and the initiation of a New Year provides us all with countless opportunities to brighten the lives of others. Let's take those opportunities seriously for they are precious indeed.

In the words of folksinger James Taylor, "Shower the people you love with love. Show them the way that you feel."

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