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Stops Along the Way: A cop's Christmas story

By Don Bachmann, For FauquierNow
Dec 22, 2022



A scene from this year's Warrenton Christmas parade.

Photographer: Luke Christopher



Many years back, I served as a grants administrator for a metropolitan police department. I spent time with veteran officers and listened to the stories they would tell. Most were common, many were sordid, and some were perversely

funny; few were uplifting.

This is one of their stories, a cop's Christmas story ...

The watch commander handled the briefing and would determine the police response to the incident. He read out the fact sheet, "Vandalism of St. Joseph Church on 23rd and Franklin. Theft of two statues from an outside nativity display. Timeline in the early a.m. Perpetrator(s) unknown."

The crime would not normally place high on the long list of crimes to be investigated, but this was an act of desecration and the local citizens would demand action. Additionally, St. Joseph Church was in a gang-infested area where the department wanted to establish a neighborhood watch program; they needed to maintain the goodwill of its residents.

Subsequently, the watch commander decided to make an effort to find the vandals. He assigned two veteran detectives who knew the neighborhood to manage the case.

His only instruction, "Work the case quickly."

The preliminary investigation only yielded a few clues. Footprints in the snow at the crime scene indicated a single perpetrator. The damage caused was minimal – more likely due to haste rather than a conscious effort to desecrate the site.

The perpetrator's sole objective appeared to be the theft of two small statues. But, according to the church pastor, "The statues were not valuable – merely painted plaster replicas worth less than \$50."



The detectives reviewed the sparse evidence and decided on a course of action. They checked the local pawn shops, looked inside trash containers, put the word out to their informers, and searched the immediate area for likely witnesses.

Their persistence paid off. A snitch said he saw the crime and provided the name of a rival gang member; they had a suspect.

Now with a tangible lead, the detectives spoke again to the pastor. He told them he knew the suspect and his family, and their questioning revealed an all-too-familiar story.

The suspect's family was poor, the husband had left, and the mother was barely able to support her two young children. They lived in a two-room apartment in the neighborhood and relied upon food stamps to get by.

The mother was religious and took her children to church. The boy, however, was rebellious and started to hang out with one of the neighborhood gangs.

When the mother became ill, the boy went with her to the hospital ER. Prescriptions provided temporary relief, but her condition only worsened until she became bedridden.

The pastor said he had gone to visit them at their apartment and gave the detectives the family's address. Based on this information, the detectives went to the suspect's home.

When the detectives arrived, a young girl let them in and told them her mother and brother had just left for the hospital. The detectives scanned the meager apartment, and there, in plain sight, were the missing statues – statues of the infant Jesus and Mother Mary.

The statues were nestled in a shoe box stuffed with straw under a hanging paper globe – a makeshift manger scene with Bethlehem's star.

When asked about the statues, the sister explained, “The baby Jesus and Blessed Lady had just appeared on my mother's bedside bureau while she slept. When she awoke and saw the little shrine, she cried tears of joy.


“She said, ‘They were a beautiful gift from an angel, and both she and God were happy.’

“Then, we all prayed together. Mother asked God to protect us and made us promise to hold this special Christmas in our hearts.”

Additional questions were asked, and the detectives called the hospital and checked police records for prior arrests for the boy. The hospital confirmed the seriousness of the Mother's condition, and the boy's record was clean.

The two detectives evaluated the facts and determined the probable motive in the thief of the two statues. Most motives are simple ones – this one was no different. The boy simply loved his mother and, by his action, merely wanted to comfort her.

Then, these two hardened detectives spoke to their watch commander on the boy's behalf. In the end, no charges were filed. They told the sister the statues were borrowed, returned them to the church without explanation and closed the case.

In retrospect, I can't condone the little thief's choice to steal, but I believe I understand it. I also believe I understand the police officers' choice not to make an  arrest.

Maybe it was the time of year or the circumstances – maybe both? But, as I mentioned earlier, most motives are simple ones. I believe the officers, by their action, simply wanted to show that they cared.

Have a blessed Christmas.

Stops Along the Way is an occasional column from Orlean resident Don Bachmann.

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Stops Along the Way: Forgiveness on Veterans Day

By Don Bachmann, For FauquierNow
Nov 10, 2022



The author's parents, circa 1944.

Provided

When I go to church, I light a candle for my mother who passed away several years ago. I light it in acknowledgement for all the sacrifices she made to provide me with opportunities for a better life. I light it in gratitude for impressing upon me the values under which she was raised. And, I light it in Thanksgiving for her forgiveness of all my transgressions.

She was my hero.

In 1943, my father stood picket duty in the freezing cold of the Aleutians. The fog at times was almost impenetrable, and the only way he could define his patrol area was the barbed wire that outlined the perimeter of their Army camp. He knew that his mission was to serve as a tripwire in case the Japanese were to invade the U.S. via Alaska's chain of islands.

He knew that he was expendable.

Japanese probes of this invasion pathway in 1942 proved to be a faint, but they worked hard to convince us otherwise. At the height of their military expansion, they landed troops in the Aleutians and bombed western Alaska's coast.

In the end the Japanese faint had its effect. It diverted U.S. military forces to protect a possible invasion route and recapture occupied territory in the island chain. And, consequently for my father's company, it kept them on constant alert status – ever vigilant and unable to release the tightly wound spring.

Many men of my father's Army Company experienced combat fatigue due to this continuous stress. Today we call it PTSD and recognize it as one of the tragic consequences of war. But back then, returning soldiers were reluctant to express their anxieties and would often seek to disguise their symptoms. They were afraid of being called weak or cowardly. Such was the case with my father.

When I was old enough, my mother tried to explain it to me. At first this seemed odd to me – especially since my father had received an Army citation for bravery. He earned that citation when he crawled across a thinly iced river to rescue fellow soldiers.

Their transport had skidded off a bridge and fallen through the ice into the river below. My father had managed to jump free and crawl to safety, but others were not so lucky. The partially submerged survivors clung to the edge of the ice unable to climb out due to their water soaked clothing and the collapsing ice around them. And, adding to the urgency, they knew that the longer they stayed in the freezing water the greater the chance of hypothermia and death.

Realizing the danger, my father crawled back over the cracked ice carrying a lifeline to his buddies. I'm sure he knew the consequences if the ice gave way. I'm also sure he must have been terribly afraid; a fact which only compounded his bravery. I say this because one cannot exhibit courage without fear.

The reckless can function without fear, but this is not bravery; the truly brave have to struggle to overcome fear. Beyond the moment, the tragedy is that in many instances that fear continually returns to haunt one, and it cannot be put aside without help.

When my father returned from the war he suffered from combat fatigue, which was manifested in several ways. He experienced traumatic flashbacks, was partly paranoid, and easy to anger. And, to overcome these inadequacies, he often assumed a demeanor of masculine bravado, sought the acceptance and praise of drinking buddies and walled himself off from his family.

He hid behind a mask unable to reveal himself.



You see, inside he was still afraid, and just like when he walked that picket line in the fog, he had to choke down his fear and disguise it. I didn't know this at the time, but now I know it to be true; it all finally makes sense to me.

When I was a boy, whenever we went somewhere by car my mother would drive; my father never drove. One day, I realized why. We were taking a long drive from Chicago to Las Vegas to visit relatives, and my mother was getting very tired. But to reach our self-imposed halfway mark, my father volunteered to drive.

The highway was flat and straight, and he was confident he could handle it despite not having driven in over nine years. My mother's exhaustion led her to yield to his insistence, but she was vigilant.

At first, he seemed to do well; but, as the road became more twisting, he became more anxious. And then, as we came out of a turn, there appeared a small bridge overlooking a running stream. My father stiffened and just seemed to freeze behind the wheel. My mother saw it too and grabbed for the wheel to prevent us from toppling off the side of the bridge. We skidded to a stop along the dirt shoulder on the other side of the bridge.

It was a close call.

In a minute my father's panic was replaced by anger. He said that he was in control and that she almost caused an accident. In truth, she saved us, but he couldn't admit it – to admit it was to acknowledge the constant fear that he was living under, an unacceptable admission.

My father was a good person, but the war changed him. He died in 1973 – never able to fully recover from the wounds inflicted upon him. It took me over 40 years to understand this; it was what my mother tried to tell me so long ago.

Some of you may have noted the title of this piece, "Forgiveness," thinking it is about me absolving another for a defect or a transgression. In truth it is not about forgiveness given, but rather about forgiveness sought. I seek forgiveness for not understanding what my father and so many other veterans went through; and, still do.

They saw their duty and performed it to the best of their ability. When a veteran returns from war missing a limb or is disfigured, we acknowledge the suffering they endured on our behalf. But, many times, we miss the wounds that do not appear on the surface; we miss the emotional and mental scarring.

Today, when I go to church I light two candles. One is for my mother; the other is for my father. I now realize that he suffered in silence. I realize that his war scars ran deep inside him and prevented him from ever becoming whole again. And finally, I realize that he walked that picket line all his life – living with demons he could never fully expunge.

May you both rest in peace; you both are my heroes.

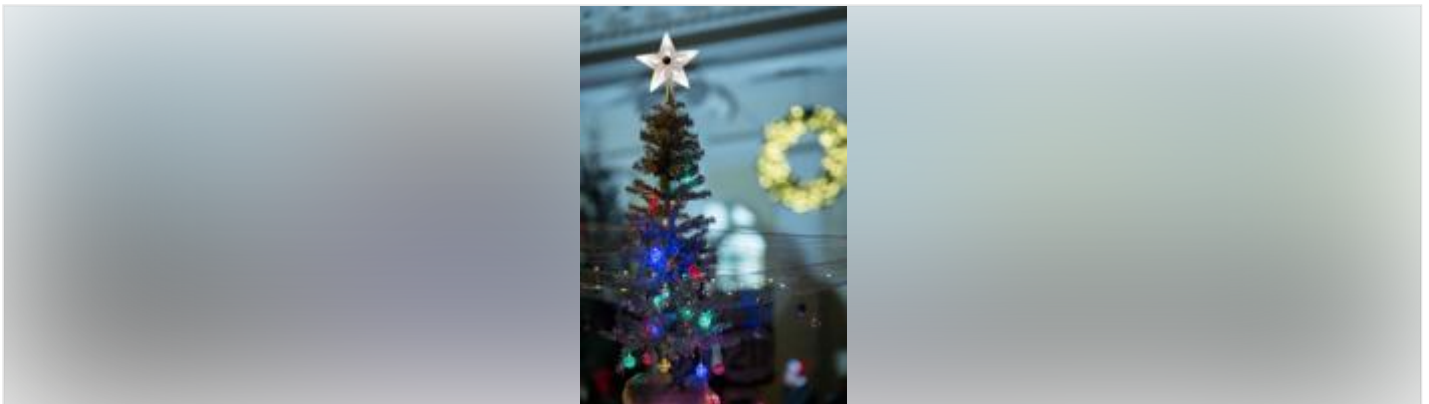
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Stops Along the Way: Thanksgiving and leftovers

By Don Bachmann, For FauquierNow
Nov 24, 2022



For most of us, Thanksgiving means a day of celebration – a day of enjoying gastric pleasures in a relaxed environment with family and friends.

A traditional Thanksgiving dinner normally includes a turkey with stuffing and gravy, homemade cranberry sauce concocted from a secret family recipe, assorted potato dishes, a medley of vegetables and for dessert – a slice of the

mandatory pumpkin pie à la mode.

But, before the celebration can begin, a Thanksgiving prayer is required – a prayer of gratitude for blessings received, but also a prayer in remembrance for absent loved ones. And then, with this task fully discharged, we can indulge ourselves without remorse.

Plates are piled high with a selection of all the delicious offerings before us. Stories are told, toasts offered, and casual exchanges yield uninhibited laughter. All are comfortable and secure.

It is a good tradition.

And, for anyone who follows this tradition, the feast isn't over when one pushes oneself away from the table. It only concludes with the host and hostess laboriously processing all the leftovers into take-home containers and then doling them out to their guests over their polite objections.

I am grateful for leftovers.

Do you ever notice how an excellent meal only seems to taste better when you prepare it a second or even a third time? Turkey, stuffing and all the trimmings can be savored yet again.

The same is true of memories – memories of times passed. They can also be savored yet again.

I remember past holiday celebrations and the many tables where I sat. I remember my mother's dinner table packed with those same dishes and delicacies. And, most of all, I remember those dining table chairs filled over the years with family and friends.

I remember ... the time when Sooty the dog snatched a drumstick from a turkey platter; the time when Dan and Laura announced their engagement; the time when Uncle Harry wept for his lost wife, the time when ...

All are there.

As these thoughts flood into my mind, I realize that not one of those precious moments is really lost; every moment still resides within us only waiting to be brought forth. They are not moments of subtraction but of addition; they can be added to the whole of each of us.

Edmund Spenser once wrote, “For whatsoever from one place doth fall, is with the tide unto an other brought: For there is nothing lost, that may be found, if sought.”

The poet had it right. There is nothing that is gone forever -- not if we seek it with our hearts. The past mingles with the now and adds to the joy of our present lives. We live our lives for the times that ever were, for the times that are, and for the times that yet may be.

I look forward to savoring this year’s Thanksgiving feast with its leftover delights. I also look forward to savoring past memories and creating new ones that will continue to be savored for many years to come.

I wish the same for you.

Bon appétit.



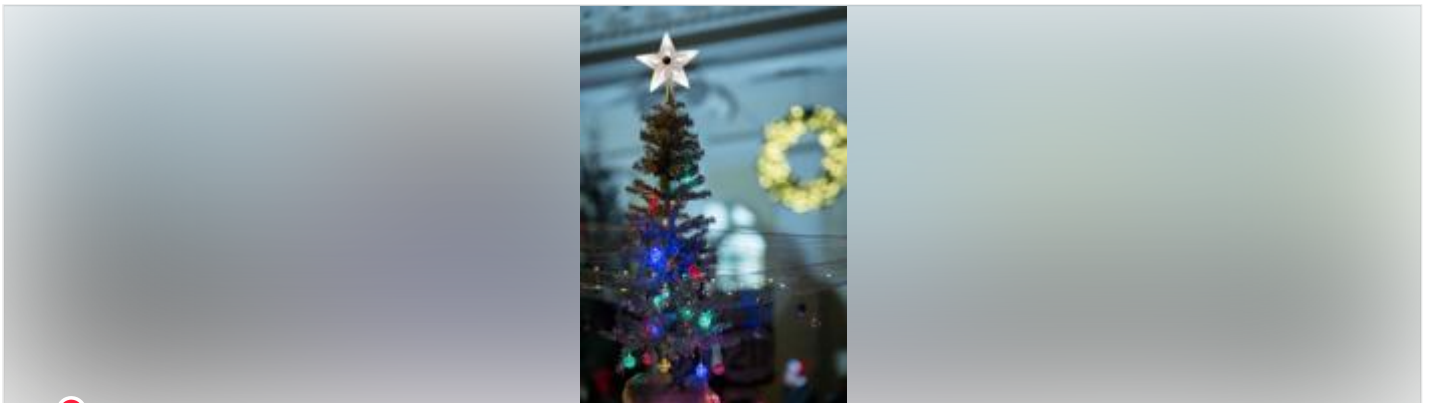
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