

Christmas Presence

Twelve Gifts That Were More
Than They Seemed

Edited by Gregory F. Augustine Pierce



ACTA
ASSISTING CHRISTIANS TO ACT
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Dedication

*To Monsignor Jack Egan,
a great Chicago priest,
who believed in the Incarnation...
and acted as if he did
every day of his life.*

Introduction

Ah, Christmas presents! Children wait impatiently for them with great anticipation, adults search for them with determination (often mixed with frustration), and everyone tears them open with enthusiasm as soon as the signal is finally given. And then for the most part they are quickly forgotten—put on shelves, packed into boxes, eventually making their way to a garage sale, second-hand store or trashbin.

All except a few, that is. In each of our lives, there has been at least one special present that transcended its immediate value and even the intent of the giver. It may have been great or small, modest or invaluable, expected or not. But it was a gift that was more than it seemed, a gift that had another gift lying just beneath its surface, a gift that we never forgot because it revealed to us the essence of Christmas—the divine presence that permeates the world.

I received such a gift one winter in Chicago.



My wife, Kathy, and I had trouble having children, and so we were delighted when our twins, Abby and Nate, were born in 1987 (on my fortieth birthday no less). We were as delighted when we got pregnant again right away with our third child, Zack.

With three children under twenty months, however, the reality of the hard work of parenting hit us: the feeding, the diapers, the baths, the crying, the rocking, the sleeping. I should say the trying to sleep—the trying to get them to sleep (especially at the same time) and the trying to get a few minutes of sleep ourselves.

Unfortunately for us, our three babies (who are now teenagers) were terrible sleepers, right from the beginning. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that there were so many of them at once. They would wake one another up or vie for feeding time waiting for a turn at Kathy's breast or for a bottle to warm up. All I know is that during that particular period in my life I watched more David Letterman (when he was on from midnight to two A.M.) than I have seen before or since, always carrying at least one baby in my arms who was most unhappy. I now tell new fathers that they will be tired for the next five years and *then* they will get some rest.

One of the things that suffered during those years was my spiritual life. I was working at my job, helping Kathy whenever I was at home, and trying (mostly unsuccessfully) to stay somewhat involved in church and community activities. The few moments I had for myself were used mostly to "veg out" or to catch a few hours of sleep (until one of the kids woke up again with needs that only Kathy or I could meet). The idea of prayer or meditation or spiritual reading seemed a luxury at best and a joke most of the time. If I did try any spiritual exercise, I'm sure it didn't last long before I was long gone to slumber land.

I was just about at the end of my proverbial rope in December of 1989. The twins had just turned two, and Zack was about three months old. My sleep time and my spiritual life had both shrunk to what seemed virtual zero. I was exhausted, burnt out, feeling anything but the Christmas spirit.

That's when I received a direct answer to a prayer, and it changed my life.



On what seemed the tenth night in a row, I was up with a crying child in my arms. In this case it was my daughter, Abigail (which means, just for the record, "the joy of her father"). Kathy was probably feeding Zack, or maybe I was just trying to give her a chance to sleep, since she was even more tired than I was (assuming that was possible).

All I know is that I was trying to calm Abby down and keep her from awakening her two brothers, for then—as I knew from experience—all heck would break loose. So I took her downstairs and was walking her from room to room, rocking her in my arms, stroking her hair, trying every trick I had in my meager parenting repertoire. But for some reason that night (gas, nightmare, diaper pin sticking into her skin?), Abby was not to be consoled. She was crying, and she was crying loud enough to wake up you-know-who.

It was then that I reverted, almost instinctively, to prayer. It was that kind of direct communication with God that we

humans use when we don't have time for niceties with the divine. It was me and God, *mano y mano*, no-holds-barred, no preliminaries, not even a healthy fear of the Lord on my part.

"I don't get it, God," I said, perhaps even aloud, since Abby was making enough noise to cover it up anyway. "I thought parenting was supposed to be a wonderful, uplifting, transcendent experience, but I don't see the spirituality in this at all. I am exhausted. I don't want to be up at three in the morning with another crying baby. I just want to go to sleep. This childrearing is nothing but work. I don't find it holy or sacred or meaningful at all. Please show me how you are present in all this crying and lack of sleep!"

Just then, Abby stopped crying. Something had caught her two-year-old attention. She was looking out the living room window at the streetlight in front of our house. She pointed at it, smiled, and said a single word: "Snow!"

To this day I don't know how she even knew the word, much less how she connected it with the white flakes falling outside. Her age was such that she couldn't have remembered the snow from the previous year, much less what it was called, and this was the first snowfall of the season.

I suddenly realized that the reason I was awake was to witness and share my child's discovery of the mystery and delight of snow. I had also been given an immediate and direct answer to my prayer. God was present: in the snow, in my children, in my work as a dad. I had but to look for that presence and be open to it.

That experience actually changed how I think about spir-

ituality and my daily work. I no longer see them as separate or competing things. I recognize that all my work—on my job, with my family, in my church and community—will have plenty of "crying time." That is the nature of the human condition. But now I realize that God is always present, even in the midst of the most frustrating, physically or psychologically wearing, seemingly unproductive times.

The gift of a crying child allowed me to recognize the sacred in my daily life.



This memory led me to wonder if other people had a story of a gift they had received that turned out to be more than it seemed at the time. I remembered the carol "The Twelve Days of Christmas" and decided to ask twelve of my favorite writers if they had such a story they could give to me, and each one did:

- **Kass Dotterweich** gave me a story about Christmas shopping in the mall of the heart. "When my son Joseph was five years old," she says, "he went on a shopping spree that none of us will ever forget. He certainly did not have the money to buy presents for both his parents and his five siblings. Nor did he have the crafty wherewithal to construct something homemade for each of us. Instead, Joseph did his Christmas shopping at home—and this was way before the advent of the Internet."
- **Tom McGrath** recalled the story of the year his dad

signed up to teach religious education to eighth graders. "As a sixth grader at the time," Tom notes, "I saw these guys as bullies, hooligans and ne'er-do-wells. They smoked, spit, used foul language on the playground and wore their hair like James Dean. I was convinced they were irredeemable. My dad thoroughly enjoyed the classes, however, and I couldn't understand why—until a week or so before Christmas, when I accompanied Dad and his class to deliver food to people in a poor neighborhood."

- **Father James (Jeff) Behrens** offered the story of ten lost Christmas stockings—stockings that symbolized "that we humans are filled with good things that have been 'emptied out' of God. Now it is our turn to empty ourselves to fill the larger world with good things."
- **Alice Camille** described a present from one of her nieces who had just developed her sense of irony. "Gifts that children cobble together and give—out of scraps of paper, ingenuity and love—are the best of all," Alice proclaims. "From my nieces over the years, I've gotten a various assortment of poems, bookmarks and curious items hard to define. But the year of the toaster goes down as the most amazing testament to love ever to come my way at Christmas time."
- **Michael Leach** reprised a story his sons want to hear over and over. "Our two boys are men now," he explains. "It's Christmas Day, and they want to hear again about their first Christmas in Connecticut, that historic day in 1972 when the snow was higher than a reindeer's antlers and their parents opened a fortune cookie beneath the

Christmas tree."

- **Father Pat Hannon** produced the story of the floppy-eared puppy, Buddy, whom he schemed to get for Christmas one year. "This convoluted strategy," he reports, "culminated on my eighth Christmas in a gift clumsily wrapped in the Sunday funnies, a gift—as I was to discover years only years later—that changed the entire direction of my life."
- **Delle Chatman** told of the worst year of her life and how a visit to her grandmother's homestead healed her soul. "When Grandmother suddenly plunked back into my life," Delle recalls, "the Hollywood lifestyle that had consumed every ounce of my devotion found a familial foundation that grounded me in reality again."
- **Fred Hang** described his unique nativity scene. "Every Christmas for the past several years," he begins, "I have placed a tiny ceramic frog in the manger. But to understand why, you have to know how the whole frog thing got started."
- **Carol DeChant** mined the significance of a camera that her Aunt Harriet had given her when Carol was eight. "My aunt had married too late in life to have children," she says. "So, unfamiliar with kids as she was, she didn't know any better than to give me something that was not (as we say today) age-appropriate. Thank goodness, because that Brownie Hawkeye transformed me from a gawky, self-conscious kid into my comic-book hero, Invisible Scarlet O'Neil."
- **John Shea** contributed the fictional story of a Christmas

kaleidoscope that was literally more than meets the eye. "It was a large kaleidoscope," he relates. "The casing was real wood, a dark stained oak that gave it a polished, handsome look. It came with a stand that made a clear statement: 'I am not an ordinary, budget-bin kaleidoscope. I belong in a prominent place, displayed on a table or shelf. I do not deserve the back of the closet and, under no circumstances, should I disappear beneath the bed.'"

- **Patrick Reardon** told of one Christmas gift that he keeps before him all the time. "It's a representative of a type of gift that never disappoints," he explains. "It always leaves me feeling loved, filled with joy and life, as happy as a lord-a-leaping. I keep it on my dresser because it stands for all those other cards and notes and communications that, in our family, we give each other day in and day out. It represents all the gestures of affection that are part of our everyday lives together—the hugs, the kisses and the frequent bald statements of love that we exchange."
- **Vinita Wright** had a collection of remembrances—of weather and religion, of tradition, family and food. "The word *Christmas*," she announces, "causes me to remember, first of all, that ancient narrative of my faith: that God came to earth as a little baby, wrapped up and placed on a straw bed, his young mother miles from her homeland, his father disturbed by dreams." But when Vinita goes a little deeper into that story, she discovers other stories as well. "They have grown out of that original story, but their characters and settings and plots are from my own life."



These are all, indeed, stories that remind us of the very reason we give gifts at Christmas. We do so to put us in touch with the mystery of the divine spirit who was incarnated, took on flesh, became a human being. Because of the birth of Jesus, we now know we can touch that divine spirit through the material world—of cameras, frogs, toasters, kaleidoscopes...and snow and crying babies.

The Incarnation—the presence of God in our world—is the essence of Christmas.

Christmas Shopping in the Mall of the Heart

Kass Dotterweich

How we all long to live the true spirit of Advent—the spirit of awareness, anticipation and acceptance that prepares the human heart for the Feast of the Incarnation. We want to fashion our own inner crèche for the gentle coming of the Light of the World and let our love for each other become, as mystic and poet Caryl Houselander puts it, “the four walls that shelter him.”

The pressures of our culture, however, often leave our longing awash in a sea of counter-Advent realities. Let's face it: Christmas takes preparation...and perspiration. In the weeks before December 25, we find ourselves flustered and frazzled with the rush of details that, if left unattended, will in some way make our celebration of the holiday less than what we project it to be.

Not so with my son Joseph, at least not that Advent season over twenty years ago, when he was seven years old.



Now, of my six children Joseph is definitely the one who hears most clearly that "different drummer." He finds his way through life by putting one foot in front of the other in a rhythm that simply does not seem to conform to the expected.

Early one Sunday afternoon that December, Joseph had the privilege of lighting the third candle on our Advent

My years of being Mom had taught me that if my children are not hurting themselves or others and are not about to destroy some treasured object, then I don't ask questions. After all, the childhood imagination needs its freedom if it is to learn to fly.

wreath, displaying his evident pride in being the one to light the "pretty pink one" that symbolizes our rejoicing in the ever-nearer arrival of the baby Jesus. Perhaps I should have seen something on the horizon right then, so serious was Joseph in his privileged status as the lighter of the candle of hope.

Later that evening, I noticed him moving through the dining room with a most inquisitive look on his face. He strolled, he bent and stooped, he got down on his belly to take a look under the china cabinet. He then began to rummage, digging into

the clutter on the top of the dining room table and pulling out the drawers in the buffet—clearly in search of something. Within a short period of time, however, Joseph left the room with a mild display of frustration.

My years of being Mom had taught me that if my children are not hurting themselves or others and are not about to destroy some treasured object, then I don't ask questions. After all, the childhood imagination needs its freedom if it is to learn to fly. Whatever Joseph was doing was clearly harmless. And if he needed my assistance, he'd surely ask.

For days after, I observed this peculiar behavior from Joseph many times over...and in every room in the house. He would stroll through a room, rummage through cluttered countertops and drawers, wiggle under beds, dig through closet floors, reach under chairs—always disturbing dust and debris that had been neglected or forgotten or ignored for a very long time.

When my curiosity finally peaked a few days before Christmas, I gave in to what I knew would be a brief and fruitless exchange. "Joseph, what are you doing when you roam through the house digging through stuff?"

"Huh? Oh, um, nothing," he responded sheepishly, seemingly embarrassed that his odd routine had even been noticed.



Finally, Christmas Eve day dawned. As is the custom in our family, the Christmas tree went up and underneath went the presents—things from grandparents and aunts and uncles that had been arriving in the mail over the weeks. At one point, I noticed Joseph bringing out his presents for all of us

and putting them under the tree as well. Suddenly, my heart experienced a surge of a mother's greatest fear—the fear of the unknown.

What was Joseph putting under the tree? And not so much what, but how? Joseph didn't have any spending

After the family went to Mass and shared a small breakfast, it was time to gather around the tree to see what surprises nestled there waiting to delight one and all.

money, and he definitely was not inclined toward make-everybody-something craft activity. Add to that the fact that Joseph had been known to engage in a little shoplifting from time to time, and I experienced a major maternal panic.

I spent a rather tense Christmas Eve that year, worrying about what "presents" Joseph was giving his parents and siblings. I was haunted by the

memory of a conversation with the manager of a local department store six weeks earlier. She had accused my child of slipping an eraser into his coat pocket—an accusation that eventually proved true. Joseph had, indeed, taken the eraser. Why? "Because Jimmy has one just like it," he explained in all innocence, failing completely to see the moral nuances that were so obvious to me.

I also remembered an afternoon in late autumn of that year when Joseph somehow had enough candy bars to "share" with all his siblings. Investigation had led me to the corner convenience store where I learned that Joseph had,

indeed, been seen acting furtively there (much like he had been around the house recently).



That Christmas Eve, my last conscious thought before drifting off to troubled sleep was that maybe I should open a couple of Joseph's presents and see for myself what was going on. Instead, I merely repeated my Advent mantra over and over again: "Come, Lord Jesus, and do not delay. Give courage to your people today."

Christmas morning dawned and, despite my apprehension, the festivities began. After the family went to Mass and shared a small breakfast, it was time to gather around the tree to see what surprises nestled there waiting to delight one and all. One by one, the presents were handed out, and one by one, recipients pulled at bows, ripped at paper, and glowed with satisfaction as some new treasure came to the surface.

Through it all, Joseph was a bundle of anticipation...and so was his mother. As the mountain of packages under the tree dwindled, Joseph's presents for others became more and more obvious—his wrappings of old newspaper and miles of adhesive tape set his gifts apart.

Instinctively, we all avoided the unavoidable, until Joseph finally exploded, "Can I give everybody my presents now?"

I swallowed hard, sat perfectly still, and focused on how best to handle the situation when the truth became evident.

"Sure, Joe. Go ahead," I said, thinking to myself, "Might as well get this over with."

"Here, Christine. This is for you," Joseph offered with flushed anticipation, handing his oldest sister a small, bulky bundle and moving in close for a good view of her reaction. Clearly, Joseph knew his sister was going to be delighted—and that disturbed me greatly.

Christine, thirteen at the time, looked at Joseph with perhaps not the same kind of misgivings I was experiencing but perplexity nonetheless. "Thanks, Joey," she said as she peeled away layers of tape and crinkly newspaper.

Oh, how I held my breath for the hit. I was already rehearsing how to get the information I would need from Joseph. "Oh, honey, how nice. Where did you get that? Did Grandma go shopping with you? Help you pick it out? Pay for it?"

Within seconds, however, Christine's eyes were dancing with glee as she held up a hairbrush—her hairbrush, the one that had been missing for weeks, the one that she'd painfully grieved because it was the only one that "worked."

Joseph, ignoring Christine's queries of "Where did you find it?" then made a dive for the next present and handed his oldest brother, Jerome, what looked like a shoebox. Again, within seconds, Jerome was grinning from ear to ear as he held up his Little League cleats, missing since right before the playoff games late the previous August. "Cool man! Where were they?"

And so it went. Present after present was handed out with high anticipation, and present after present brought surprise

and wonder. Each family member rediscovered a treasured object that had somehow been lost, misplaced or forgotten in a chaotic household of eight people.



As for my present? Joseph had taken from the corner of my home workdesk a small porcelain Madonna and Child statue I had picked up at a yard sale years earlier for fifty cents. I never noticed the statue anymore. According to Joseph he'd taken it from my desk weeks earlier, and I never even missed it. Quite frankly, it was just a little piece of junk to me.

Today, however, that little statue is a sacred object enshrined in my curio, where I display my especially treasured heirlooms. My son had shopped in the mall of the heart and had brought home to me two precious gifts that I didn't even know I wanted...or needed.

First, in his innocence Joseph had reminded me that the Incarnation is not so much about God's giving of some *thing* to the world but rather it is about divine life permeating *all things*. Christmas is not about some newness entering into the world—something that wasn't there one minute and is the next—but rather it is the celebration of the Spirit that gives to all of us what in fact we already have. Christmas gift giving merely celebrates our essential humanity. Those gifts that are ours in the moment of creation and in the moment of our own conception are the essence of peace.

Joseph also gave me a renewed appreciation for the joy of surprise. With great sadness I admit here, decades later, that I had been watching my son through a mother's critical eyes—not through a mother's eyes of wonder. I had shut

Joseph also gave me a renewed appreciation for the joy of surprise.

down on my own child's potential for good and focused only on his limitations, expecting something disturbing instead of delightful. Through the long hours of that entire Christmas Eve day, I hadn't even "hoped"

for something good. Rather, by making assumptions about what I considered the inevitable I had robbed myself of the graces of anticipation and expectation.

I continue to marvel at the priceless present Joseph gave me that Christmas morning. It was certainly more than a recycled fifty-cent statue. It was a reminder of the essence of peace and the appreciation of surprise that we all possess but somehow fail to notice.

Dad's Gift

Tom McGrath