

The Gift

By Justin J. Agolia
12/25/03

It's hard to believe that six months have already passed since my father died this past July. In one sense it seems like it was yesterday that I was with him, sharing a dinner with him and discussing future plans together. On the other hand, it feels like it's been years since I've seen him.

The grieving process is something that can be so wrenching at times that it feels as if you're living a whole other life, while, at the same time, trying to get by with the one you've been given.

Obviously Christmas has taken on new meaning for us. The loss of not having my father around to give him his presents, to sit down for a special Christmas breakfast, or sit by a fire and listen to Christmas music is so intense right now. Many of you are home enjoying the holiday with loved ones, reminiscing on past holidays, and simply enjoying the presence of one another.

We are so grateful to be with our relatives this Christmas. For me this is the first holiday season that I've been away from our Long Island home. This year we're in the mountains of NY, spending it with our relatives who have graciously opened their homes and their hearts to us. They have gone out of their way to prepare such wonderful meals and deserts for us. They have entertained us, made us laugh, and at times, they've shed a tear or more with us. I have personally felt overwhelmed at their kindness to us. Just seeing all my cousins and aunts and uncles has made it special despite the unusual circumstances.

In spite of everything I feel like an onlooker, watching from the outside looking in. Everything around me seems to be in total silence even in the midst

of large gatherings, similar to when the volume on a TV is registered at zero, yet you still see the picture clearly.

Underneath the smile I still sense an enormous, underlying feeling of anguish. I see the pain in mother's face as tears stream down her cheek as she wishes me a Merry Christmas. She has gone out of her way - even with her own physical ailments - to make this Christmas as special as it could be. I am ashamed that at times I haven't recognized her thoughtfulness to us. Although she is strong, I see her pain and loneliness as she tries to make sense of her situation.

I also see the pain in my brother's hearts as well. Just a few words about my dad and tears begin to well-up in their eyes, like a stream quickly filling a dry and vacant pond. The sadness that was once suppressed with a smile and painful jest now quickly rises to the surface. I have to admit that this is such an uncomfortable feeling, of something being so wrong and unjust that even in front of your own loved ones you feel embarrassed to shed those tears.

It's this self-management we must deal with everyday, a process of balancing the public self versus the private self. And managing these feelings is such a draining process since one must try to find the balance of being both real yet not overly negative.

Upon thinking about this Christmas, I was wondering what I could possibly share or offer as something encouraging to others. As I look back on this past year, I want to somehow look at it in its entirety, if I could possibly do that, a kind of big-picture perspective.

The year 2003 will always be a year my family and I will never forget. It's the year that we lost someone very special. He was our husband and father and those roles can never be replaced by another, at least in this lifetime.

For many who knew my father you knew that he had a particular burden for unborn children. He wanted these little young ones to have a future, to experience life fully, and have an impact on their world. At the same time, he was very much concerned about the mothers who were dealing with so many issues (e.g., feelings of shame and loneliness, their responsibility, their health, and their future).

My father came to me in March and shared with me that he wanted to create an ad campaign, something that would encourage the Church to do something, to take an active role instead of just talking about this very sensitive subject.

Interestingly, out of our many discussions came a different type of burden – a concern for getting the Church to see the need as they had never seen before. As a result our goal was to bring attention to the importance of life for every person, not just the unborn.

I remember reading something from Michael Card and he said that “when God gives a gift, he wraps it in a person.” When I first read this, I began to realize that God not only gave his own son as a gift to us, but that humans are gifts to one another. This presented us with the idea for creating the tagline. Instead of focusing on life in the womb, we began to consider what a child’s life would be after he/she was born. Moreover, what would life be with a child joined with his/her mother?

After much reflection, we decided to use similar wording but it would focus more on the child, “When God gives a gift, he wraps it in a child.” That was it. And from that theme, we created the rest of the design and copy.

We also decided that instead of using traditional imagery of a baby in a mother’s womb, we would select a photo that would capture the essence of a mother with her baby and the potential future that child would have within and

upon our world. The image we chose was of a mother holding her baby up and looking directly into her baby's eyes. The baby, in turn, was looking at her mother with a big, beautiful smile.

What an experience and privilege it was to work with my father on this particular project. My father was always full of creative ideas and to work with him on this campaign allowed me to see, once again, ideas naturally flow out of him which, in my opinion, was directly correlated to his relationship to God – the One who embodies all creative thought.

It's amazing how many people saw that ad. Ironically the week the ad was published was the same week my father was admitted to the hospital. I remember coming to the hospital one morning and noticing a copy of the ad posted on the wall directly opposite his bed. He took his only copy and personally tacked it on the wall. So many people saw the ad, from doctors to nurses, and the many who visited my father. Many discussions originated from it.

In one sense it was sad because I watched my father sit and slowly die away. For me the ad became so irrelevant that I forgot all about it until last fall.

With the many days and hours I took to reflect and question why the Lord took my father home, I began to take some time to appreciate my father's life and see the goodness that God created in him through Christ. And then, it hit me – the ad. As I remembered the process we went through to create this piece, the tagline came to mind once again: "when God gives a gift, he wraps in a person."

But now something spoke to me, something I hadn't seen or heard before, particularly with the tagline. It simply came to me this way: "when God gives a gift, he wraps in a father."

Who would have known that when I was working on this project with my father that it would foreshadow the events that took place a few months later.

So now, as I think upon this holiday and the idea of gifts being wrapped and unwrapped, I see something far greater, something much more eternal and rich and that is my father and mother as the greatest gifts given to me.

Although I am full of sadness this day, I can clearly see that my father was truly the best gift given to me. Nothing could ever replace that. He gave me nothing less than himself. I love you pop! Merry Christmas.

Thought:

Who are the gifts around me today? Have I recognized others as gifts and let them know how much they are appreciated?

Maybe you've never had parents who loved you just as you are. Or, perhaps you never really had your parents in your life. You have every right to feel and admit those losses. But without being insensitive to your feelings, I also encourage you to see yourself as a gift, whether you had two parents present in your life or not. Ask God to show you how you may first **see** yourself as a gift to others, and then, second, how you can **give** yourself as a gift to a friend, your spouse, or even to your children.