

The Unintended Lesson

by Rev. Joe Dirt - Thursday, January 28, 2010

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My Uncle Dutch is not a tall man, and he has what we affectionately call a Buddha belly. I know that he was skinny once upon a time. I have seen pictures of him when he was young and in the Navy, but that is not the Harry Dodd I know. He is elderly now, with white hair, and it is hard for me to not think of him in a suit and tie. The first thing that you will probably notice about my Uncle is his smile. While he doesn't smile all the time, it is certainly there more than it isn't. And it is the type of smile that just lights up his whole face.

He is married to my mother's sister. Now that I am older, I recognize her as kind, gentle, woman. However, when I was little she put the fear of Peggy into me. I remember staying with her one summer and her showing me a paddle that was as least as tall as I was. I guess that makes it about 6 feet long, at least in my memory. She was one of eight sisters and had 3 girls. My mother had all boys and I don't believe that my Aunt Peggy was totally comfortable around little boys. She certainly never used that paddle or spanked me, but I was always just a little bit afraid that she would. I guess a little fear went a long way in this case.

My Uncle spent much of the first part of his adult life as a country preacher in small Oklahoma communities. Towns with names like Mounds, Depew, & Oktaha. After the Navy, he worked as a painter and a cabinetmaker for a while. He was quite good as a carpenter and continued to do it even after he entered the ministry. He also loves to garden. Not gardenias and azaleas but corn, okra, beans, things to feed the family. Country preachers really don't make a lot of money and with a wife and 3 daughters every little bit helped. It seemed like he was always going.

Country preaching was really a team effort with my Aunt and Uncle. He may have been in front of the congregation, but she was behind him. Not only as a wife and partner, but also as church "secretary" or Sunday School teacher or nursery attendant or whatever needed doing. It was a calling for both of them.

The second part of Uncle Dutch's adult life grew out of his ministry and a lack of help. Oklahoma Baptist kids go to camp in the summer time. At one small camp he helping with, they lacked a cook. So out of necessity he took on the kitchen chores. He discovered that he enjoyed camp cooking and putting on camps in general.

This eventually led to him becoming the director of Falls Creek, the Mother of all church camps in

Oklahoma. He did this successfully for 15 or so years, touching the lives of the many young people that passed through this camp. Those kids that passed through there in 70s and 80s will remember, “What is a Hairy Dodd”, an affectionate pun about the camp director. When he retired from Falls Creek a quilt was made of all the various tee shirts that had some reference to this. He and my aunt were both as proud of that quilt as any actor would have been of their Oscar. In a way it is equivalent to such an award, and transcends it at the same time. It is a testimony to love, to faith, to a man, to a couple working to improve the lives of people.

These two folks are more than relatives. They have been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. I played with their 3 kids when I was little. My mother and Aunt Peggy drove cross-country together with 6 small kids, part of them sick with measles. When I was a teenager having trouble with my parents I spent a summer with them. They married me and if I had been half the husband my Uncle Dutch is I would still be married today.

My Uncle Dutch preached as a minister, and I am sorry to say that I did not pay as much attention to his sermons as I should have. But his real preaching comes in the way he lives his life. His faith is the simple, deep sort. The sort that is lived everyday, in common ways. He has taught me two lessons about life that I am sure he did not realize, but had he thought about it, would have.

The first is about faith. Having a science degree and working in a technical field I tend to look for a rational explanation of things. He sees miracles in the common. He was recently in the hospital and could not eat or drink anything for several days. To him the fact that he was not thirsty or hungry was a miracle and a blessing of God. I was looking at the IV hooked to his arm pumping him full of fluids and nutrients. I think his outlook is, in the long run, much more rational. It was a miracle. A miracle of science or of faith, that is not for me to say. But it certainly made his stay much more comfortable.

If we look around us there is a myriad of simple miracles happening everyday. Ranging from sunsets to the birth of a grand child. Science can certainly give rational explanations to all of this, but faith can too.

The second lesson is sad in many ways. He does have that ready smile, but his life has certainly not been without many bumps and some tragedies. Several years ago, my cousin Judy, his middle daughter was the victim of an accidental shooting. She left behind her three young children. Her funeral was the largest that I have ever been to, people from all over Oklahoma came. I certainly see this as a tribute to all the lives that my Aunt and Uncle have touched. I have never lost a child, but I understand that even with a grown child it is a hurt that does not go away. His faith never wavered. It certainly would have had me questioning God.

The actual lesson came several years later, after his retirement. He has a workshop built behind his house and he was showing it to me. On one of the workbenches were the parts to build a cedar hope chest. He pointed it out to me and began to talk about how he had made one for his oldest daughter, Nancy. He had purchased the parts to make a second for Judy, but never got around to it, and now it was too late. I could hear the sadness and regret in his voice. His face had a troubled look on it. He told me that he thought he might go ahead and finish it and give to Becky, his youngest. I don't know if he saw me or not, but it brought tears to my eyes. I have always looked up to my Uncle as an example of how one should live one's life. I know that he is not perfect, but he always works to live a Christian life.



There is certainly a lesson to be learned here about not procrastinating and taking care of relationships while one has the chance. The value of relationships is certainly one of the most important lesson any of us could learn. The value of using our time wisely is certainly important. To me the sadness visible in the man as he talked about the task not completed for his departed child is a lesson that I will always cherish and never forget.

I thank my Uncle Dutch for the lessons and for the support that has been there throughout my life from both my Aunt and Uncle.

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