

A Life Flight Christmas Story

I would like to share a true story of a Christmas miracle that I experienced first-hand more than 20 years ago.

It was December 23, 1993 and I, along with the other two members of my flight crew was assigned the task of participating in a public relations "mission". The mission was to fly out to a number of local hospitals and deliver toys to the children who were going to be confined there over Christmas.

It was a noble endeavor I suppose. It was also going to be broadcast live on a Tejano radio station courtesy of a DJ who was flying along with us. The station, in fact, donated the toys we were to distribute.

At the appointed hour we loaded up the aircraft with several bags full of wrapped presents and headed off to hand them out. First at one hospital and then another, we gave our gifts (a matchbox car set for the boys and a comparable gift for the girls) to the children who at best seemed polite, but not really surprised or excited.

Many were being forced to put down the Nintendo controller or the Gameboy to accept a gift from Life Flight. The children unwrapped the gifts said "thank-you" (that was usually a prompted response) and returned to their more interesting toys and games.

The pilot, flight nurse and I soon began to feel rather cynical about this "mission".

We were delivering toys to children who had far more (and seemingly better) toys than we could hope to bring them. Furthermore, all had parents and/or siblings there with them. In short, it was clear that these kids, however misfortunate to be in hospital over Christmas, were happy, loved, and well cared for. They seemed to lack for nothing.

As a flight crew we dutifully performed our assigned sorties, mainly entertaining ourselves with friendly wagers as to how soon our DJ-passenger would become airsick.

Not a very spirited Christmas project. But honestly, the day's travels were leaving the three of us quite empty and bored.

When we stopped at a hospital in Pasadena and completed our toy distribution: we were approached by a hospital administrator who said that the hospital had recently collected plush toys to be given out and that they still had a large box full, now unneeded. He offered them to us with the idea that we might be able to add some hospitals, and children, to our list for the day.

As bored with the whole process as we (the flight crew) were, we accepted them graciously and arranged with our supervisors to stop at more hospitals before coming "home" for the day.

We carefully noted the number of children at each new prospective hospital against our available toys and plush animals. We were thus able to add four or five new hospitals to our day's travels.

That would leave us with but one remaining toy, an obsequious yellow and orange colored stuffed owl. This toy was as unattractive as it was poorly made. It was just plain ugly! Even the stitching was second-rate. This was a perfect toy to be thrown away at day's end. No loss whatsoever.

Our penultimate stop was at a hospital in Texas City. This was a new added stop, thanks to the Pasadena stuffed-toy donation.

The day had been long. We were tired, although our DJ was still not airsick, he was a real “trooper”. The kids at this hospital were as “thankful” as all before. This stop was apparently as empty as had been the others too.

After handing out the apportioned toys we prepared to return to the aircraft for the twenty-minute flight to our last stop. A nurse asked if we had, by any chance, one more toy.

She said that there was one more person that might appreciate a visit or a toy, but this patient wasn’t a child. He was an eighteen-year-old with cerebral palsy.

Could we, *would we*, visit him...and if possible...give him a toy.

Now remember that all of our remaining toys had been already designated for a child at the upcoming (final) hospital: all save one...that ugly old owl.

What the heck...it sure beats throwing it away.

So owl in hand, the four of us walked behind the nurse to a lonely room at the end of a long hallway, to his room.

As we entered all was dark. The lights were off. The drapes were drawn tight. The nurse drew the drapes and turned on a bedside lamp, awakening the young man. She told him that some people from Life Flight had come to wish him a Merry Christmas and to give him a present.

As he stirred we could see his small emaciated and contracted form, pale and all alone in this sad place. Our hearts went out to him at once.

The flight nurse handed him the owl. He clutched it tightly to his chest and tearfully replied that it was the most wonderful thing that anyone had ever given him. I struggle –even today, two decades, plus, later-- with the obvious truthfulness and profundity of that statement.

An ugly and unwanted stuffed animal was the “most wonderful thing” that anyone had given him. How tragic.

I also realized that I was not the only one who needed now to wipe my eyes.

The four of us were teary-eyed and speechless.

We returned silently to our aircraft and, except for the requisite preflight check commands, said nothing all the way to our next stop.

It was a miracle. God had taken three tough Life Flight crewmembers, people who had seemingly seen everything in their collective careers, and made them instruments of God’s will.

We had a mission that day. No it wasn’t to give matchbox cars to children who could care less about them. No it wasn’t to advertise a radio station. No it certainly wasn’t to show how compassionate and community-minded Life Flight was and is.

It was rather simply, to deliver an obsequious yellow and orange colored plush owl to a young man who was all-alone in the dark. To deliver to him the “most wonderful thing” anyone had ever given to him.

But isn’t that really what Christmas is all about: giving to a world in darkness and need the most wonderful thing ever; the gift of the Christ Child.

Our lives are similarly pitiful when we are without Christ. We too are alone. We too have the drapes of our souls pulled tight and our heart lights off.

In many ways Jesus (a poor child born in a lowly manger) was also seen as an unwanted gift: a Gift that was ultimately so unwanted, misunderstood, and unappreciated two thousand years ago that the world tried to throw Him away too...upon a cross.

*The stone that was rejected has become the chief cornerstone.
This is the LORD'S doing; its is marvelous in our eyes.
This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.
(Psalm 118: 22-24, NRSV)*

I hope that this Christmas you will decide to pull the “drapes” on your life and allow the gift of the Christ Child, that once-rejected stone, to become the cornerstone of your life. Christmas is the day of our Lord. It is a day of miracles, if we can but look beyond our cynicism and worldliness.

If you will allow God's love to come into your life whether in the form of an ugly stuffed owl, or a poor baby lying in a manger you too will experience the miracle that is Christmas.

Grace, peace, and miracles this
Christmas...
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