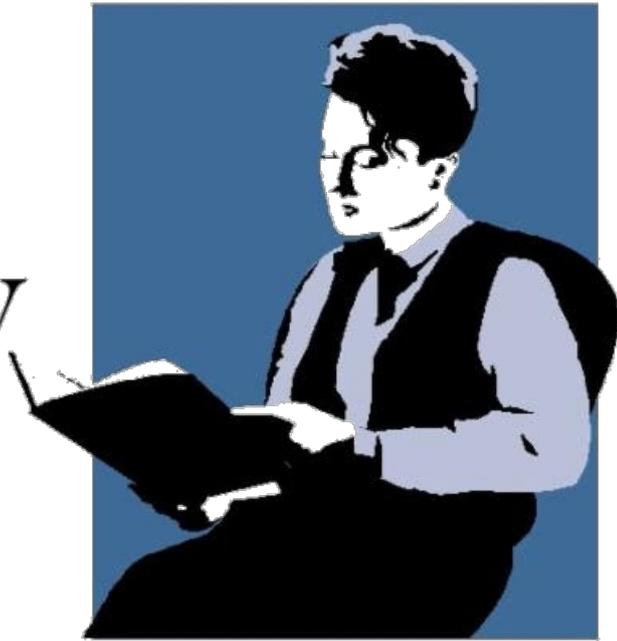


The Friday Story



by Robert M. Hebel

THE UNWRAPPED PRESENT

December 27, 2019

At this time of year, I often reflect on the Christmas mornings growing up in Lawrenceville, New Jersey - the opening of presents, the wrapping paper flying everywhere, the smell of freshly brewed coffee, the sound of bacon sizzling on the stove, Christmas songs playing on the stereo, and the many hugs and smiles from my grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins and friends dropping in throughout the day. But there is one Christmas in particular that I recall each year. A Christmas morning that changed my life.

I was eight years old. My only desire was that I wanted a "Johnny Lightning Racing Set" for Christmas. I had sent no less than five letters to Santa Clause asking and pleading for the gift. I remember writing all the reasons why I deserved the racing set, and that "I would never write to him again if he didn't leave it under the tree on Christmas Eve."

Well, times were tight that year (I only realized this sometime later), and instead of opening up the Johnny Lightning Racing Set with automatic lap counter and a lifetime membership into the Johnny Lightning Racing Club, I received two pairs of pants, a sweater, a small red truck, and a letter from Santa which I crumpled without reading.

So instead of rejoicing on Christmas morning, I yelled, screamed and said I hated Santa Clause, "the big fake," with all my might. My mother cried. My father said I didn't realize what I was saying. I was sent to my room, with the crumpled Santa Clause letter in my hand.

There in my room, I cried and cried. But somewhere between planning to write the President of the United States not to let Santa Clause into the country, and writing a nasty letter to Santa Clause, I picked up the crumpled letter from Santa now laying on my floor.

"Let's see what this big, fat jerk has to say," I remember yelling at the top of my lungs.

I sat down at my desk and read the letter from Santa Claus.

Dear Robert,

I am sorry if I have let down one of my best friends: you. I was not able to leave the gift you asked for, and I am sorry. But there is a present that you may have overlooked. It is not under the tree and it is not wrapped. It is not something you can plug in or assemble. It is with you every day of the year, and it gives and gives even when it hurts.

Remember when you struck-out in little league this past season? Who was there to give you a comforting hug? Remember when you won the spelling contest? Who cheered the loudest you when you were awarded the winning prize? And remember when you were very sick this past fall? Who stayed with you all night long, held your hand, and placed a cool cloth on your forehead?

You have probably never thought about it in this way, but Robert, as you continue to grow and cast doubt on much (even on my very existence), realize that the most precious gift is one that is not wrapped or found under a tree. The unwrapped present is the love of a parent; the love for their son.

This very special gift is waiting for you right now - your mother and father. Go and hug them tightly, and try to never let go. This Christmas day will pass all too quickly, but their love for you is timeless and beyond worth. And, it is this love is what Christmas is all about.

Your friend,
Santa Clause

Many years have passed since that Christmas morning, and the letter remains carefully preserved. I often reflect on how my mother would stay by my bedside when I was ill, and I laugh when I picture my father fast asleep, snoring in the easy chair, waiting for me to return home from the high school prom so many years ago.

"Thank you, Santa, for showing a selfish eight-year-old boy the true meaning of Christmas. It has made all the difference in my life and in the lives of my children. I just wish I could have that unwrapped present again right now."

Until Next Friday,

Author

A blue ink handwritten signature, appearing to be 'R. Hebel', written in a cursive style.

Robert M. Hebel

<https://www.thefridaystory.com/stories/the-unwrapped-present-christmas>

It all started with a weekly story.

The Friday Story began as a weekly voicemail to my team. Only the managers received it at first. These voicemails were an invitation to reflect on leadership, customer service, attitude, inspiration, and teamwork. Soon, the stories I left on voicemail took on a life of their own. They became a staple of weekly staff meetings and The Friday Story was born.

That was in 1992. From there, The Friday Story grew to reach more than 20,000 people weekly. While the medium has evolved, each story is still a “lesson plan for life.” Every story is an opportunity to stop and remember that goodness has an everlasting effect; that while plenty of people get ahead by doing bad, history shows that it catches up to them. Each story is an invitation to do good, to improve the human condition, and to lead. So...what’s your story?

Author

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