

Marathons of father and disabled son show real Christmas message



Black Santa, the Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul and many other organisations, including the church typify the practical aspect of the Christmas message. But there are things that we all can do as well.

We can build relationships: whether in business or socially. This means rising above the opinions of others, who have what is often termed as grasshopper mentalities. These are folk who:

- Constantly talk about life's injustices. For example they go on and on about how badly they have been treated and/or misunderstood.
- Make excuses about not succeeding in work or socially. Sometimes they even try to put folk down simply because they have succeeded.
- Complain about what they don't have rather than focussing on what they do. These are folk who never seem to be satisfied with their lot.

Surely Christmas is a time to build, or renew relationships and so change that grasshopper mentality to relationships of a giant killer mentality. The Christmas story is about remembering an event whose message is centred on building/renewing relationships.

We can improve our listening skills: A man once said to his friend "My wife talks to herself a lot. How about yours?" The reply was "Yep, but she doesn't know it. She thinks I'm listening". Now that is really not funny but listening skills are essential to building relationships. Some experts say that it is impossible for a single worthwhile thought to enter your mind while you are talking.

Have you seen the poster that reads, "I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I'm not sure that what you heard is what I meant?" The problem is that sometimes we mean what we say, and so become upset if others don't take our words literally. At other times we don't mean what we said to be taken literally and so don't understand why others can't read our minds.

Real listening involves more than just keeping our mouths shut (though maybe for some of us that would be a good starting place). It's about paying attention and making sure that what we hear is what's really been said – or not said!!

The truth is that we all have our own unique thinking processes and ways of expressing ourselves so we cannot assume that what we say is what the other person has heard. The Christmas story has over the centuries communicated a message that hasn't changed but maybe what we understand has been influenced by other factors, such as a very commercialised and expensive holiday period.

We can learn to give and receive: Let me relate a story about a father called Dick Hoyt who pushed his disabled son, Rick, eighty-five times, 26.2 miles in Marathons. Eight times he's not only pushed him 26.2 miles in a wheelchair but also towed him 2.4 miles in a dinghy while swimming and pedalled him 112 miles in a seat on the handlebars - all in the same day. He's also pulled him cross-country skiing, taken him on his back mountain climbing and once hauled him across America on a bike.

And what has Rick done for his father? Not much - except save his life. This unique story began in Winchester, Mass., over 40 years ago, when Rick was strangled by the umbilical cord during birth, leaving him brain-damaged and unable to control his limbs. Rick's parents were told that he would be a vegetable the rest of his life. Dick said doctors told him and his wife, Judy, when Rick was nine months old to put him in an Institution." But the Hoyts weren't buying it.

They noticed the way his eyes followed them around the room. When he was 11 they took him to Tufts University and asked if there was anything to help him communicate. The answer was no. So Dick told them to tell him a joke. They did and Rick laughed. Realising there was a lot was going on in his brain they rigged him up with a computer that allowed him to control the cursor by touching a switch with the side of his head. Rick was finally able to communicate.

After a high school classmate was paralysed in an accident and the School organised a charity run for him, Rick said to his Dad that he wanted to do that. But how was Dick, who had never run more than a mile at a time, going to push his son five miles? Still, he tried. "Then it was me who was handicapped," Dick said. "I was sore for two weeks." But that day changed Rick's life. "Dad," he typed, "when we were running, it felt like I wasn't disabled anymore!" And that sentence changed Dick's life. He became obsessed with giving Rick that feeling as often as he could. He got into such good physical condition that he and Rick were ready to try the 1979 Boston Marathon.

For a few years they joined the massive field and ran, until they found a way to get into the race – officially. In 1983 they ran another marathon so fast that they made the qualifying time for Boston the following year. Then somebody asked Dick: "Why not a triathlon?"

Even though he never learned to swim and hadn't ridden a bike, he faced the challenge of pulling his 110-pound son through a triathlon and now they've done 212 triathlons. At the ages of 65 and 43, Dick and Rick finished their 24th Boston Marathon, in 5,083rd place out of more than 20,000 starters with their best being two hours, 40 minutes in 1992 - only 35 minutes off the world record, which is held by an athlete who was not pushing another man in a wheelchair at the time.

And Dick got something else out of all this too. In one race he had a mild heart attack. Doctors found that one of his arteries was 95% clogged. He was told that if he hadn't been in such great shape he probably would've died 15 years

ago. So, in a way, Dick and Rick saved each other's life. His story and video can be viewed on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f4B-r8KJhIE> and believe me it is quite a video.

Is this not the real meaning of the Christmas story? A time of building relationships and listening to the real meaning contained in the Christmas story? And a time for giving and receiving in more ways than one, including the real Christmas gift?

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