



Dear Friend

or

(How Many Blessings Can You See in This Picture?)

By William Hecht

I WAS BLESSED, though I did not suspect it (and usually don't), when Paul asked me if I might join him on Christmas Eve. He intended to call the Salvation Army or Goodwill Industries and offer to help serve dinner that night to the needy and homeless. I told him that I had no other plans and would be glad to join him.

That Paul would initiate such a plan was not the surprise that it would have been many years ago when we first met. He had been an investor client of mine. He came from old money out of Chicago. He had inherited a couple million dollars and a few eccentricities. The point is that he had always been generous--even magnanimous--but after he lost his money (and then some) and had to work and struggle to support himself and his children, his motivations changed. He now indulged the habits and grooming of his class as simply part of him and appeared to want to indulge a charitable nature as an expanding part of him.

(Blessing Number One: I got to watch.)

When Paul informed me, just a few days before Christmas, that he had called the Salvation Army and that they didn't need volunteers, I was not dismayed. A month or so ago, I had been to a wedding where an impressive young priest presided, "Father John"--and with an Irish last name. He had mentioned in his address to the congregation that he did much of his work at a homeless shelter downtown--the Bernard House (he had been slipping-in some PR. I later learned that he came from a good family, had gone to Harvard or Yale). He was frighteningly authentic and made you want to--inspired you to--assist him. I would call the Bernard House and see if they needed any help.

(Blessing Number Two: Few people ever really shine or even sparkle. Many people don't even know what a shining person looks like. After watching Father John, I will keep my eyes peeled for shining people. I secretly want to shine myself someday, if only for an instant.)

The woman who answered the phone for Bernard House regretted that they had plenty of volunteers to serve dinner on Christmas Eve. She was quick to mention, however, that they were in need of people to assemble the hygiene kits they planned to distribute that night at the end of the “soup” line. That work would be done from 1-5 p.m. Christmas Eve afternoon. I told her that Bill and Paul would be there to assist with that. Paul was pleased with the news.

Christmas Eve landed on a Thursday this year. The stock market closed early and Paul and I had decided that we would have lunch before we went to Bernard House. The place he suggested, Star of Delhi, served Indian cuisine--naturally. Imbued with the spirit, I was looking for cues and revelations by this time. The name, Star of Delhi, got my attention. Star of Bethlehem, Star of Delhi. Wasn't one of the Wise Men from India? Is this important? Paul had also suggested an Italian place and a Mexican place. . .

We had a nice lunch but Paul related an interesting story. Life had been good lately, he explained. Things had been working out in various unforeseen ways. Yes? -- Wonderful. He had been out in the desert riding his horse a week ago (an old habit, indulged with much duress). He had been musing about the positive turn of events in his life, having a minor epiphany of appreciation. Neat. Well, he and horse had been crossing a rural drive when an approaching car stopped. Out of caution? Out of interest? A woman rolled down her window to speak to him. She was *cherubic* looking. It was the only word he could use to describe her. Then she told him he was blessed. Just that. You are blessed, then drove off. Did she almost not see him and run into him and horse? Was she merely expressing how exasperatingly she wished *she* could be out riding in the desert? You are blessed. Window up. Drove off. But if you had *seen* her. Pink cheeks, reddish-blond hair...

(Blessing Number Three: In trying to determine whether or not she was some supernatural manifestation--A white Infinity! Of course that's what she'd drive!--we were reminded that it didn't matter whether she was a real estate salesperson who wanted to be out riding instead of keeping vigilance over some open house or whether

she was a passing cherub. The message was what counted and that, in fact, you don't always get to know that you are delivering a message or that you are a messenger.)

Some of the homeless had already begun to assemble by the time we found the Bernard house. It was an old warehouse refurbished. Paul drove around the back where a tall steel gate rimmed a back lot. The gate was open and we took one of the unfilled parking spots and walked through a covered section where a dozen people sat or slept on benches. A few others paced slowly about. We tried the back door, which was locked. Someone suggested we knock.

The door soon rumbled open and we were greeted by a large, amiable fellow who might have been Native American. He nonchalantly led us down a clean hallway, past a stainless steel buffet line, and through the spartan dining hall to a stairwell, alongside which descended a conveyor belt. I might point out now that I had expected to have been greeted with more exuberance: Father John, in person, opening his arms to welcome us and beam at our selflessness. Oh, here are the wonderful people who are giving their precious time to help the needy!

Father John was not there and the reaction of the staff--and I don't mean to be critical or at all resentful--was very cordial, but more along the lines of "Here come the ivory-tower amateurs and they're going to save their immortal souls in four hours."

(Blessing Number Four: The insight that once the commitment is made, the work of heroes and saints and shining persons is mostly drudgery: Hercules, because he couldn't fly, had to do a lot of walking in-between his Twelve Labors. And Mother Teresa, for all her fame, cleaned bedpans and shooed bugs. The tricky part is the commitment).

We were shown down the stairs to a large basement area full of boxes of household items and racks of used clothing. A mustiness hung in the air, the odor of discarded things. Our guide called out our presence to someone named "Bob" and from around the corner came an athletic, wholesome-looking kid who seemed slightly out of place there.

Bob, a college student as we later learned, matter-of-factly explained the logistics of our task and left it to us as to how we might proceed. There were two other volunteers and more would join us. Meanwhile, we marshaled our organizational skills and cleared

a long table which became our assembly line. Our objective was to produce four hundred hygiene kits to be handed out with the 5 p.m. meal.

Some thoughtful soul had sewn, from all imaginable fabrics (curtains made the best ones), hundreds of little bags with drawstrings. Each, when complete, was to contain: toothpaste and toothbrush, two disposable razors with shaving cream, small shampoo and lotion bottles, one pair of socks, two hotel-size barsoap, a greeting card, a sewing kit, and some kits received things from a pile marked “miscellaneous.” Bob explained that there were also about a hundred kits already prepared from different organizations, but that these were incomplete in various ways.

We first assembled kits from scratch (I had socks, razors and greeting cards for my station), then worked on completing the donated kits. We discussed the usefulness of some of these items. I personally committed the sin of cynicism by remarking that the toothpaste should last a long time for the guy with one tooth. We wondered whether the shower caps (miscellaneous pile) would be used to keep feet dry and just how critical lotion was to a streetperson. As the afternoon wore on, though, the people and their plight loomed more somber, more real. We developed a good pace and the kits moved fast along the line.

Well into the afternoon, a new batch of donated kits landed at the front of the assembly line. Made by schoolchildren, they were nice felt stockings with holiday stickers on them. I took one and began to inspect its’ contents. It was crammed with most of the things we planned to put in them except for the socks, razors, and sewing kit, which we would add to a kit bag along with the stocking. During the inspection of this bag, however, a crumpled piece of white paper fell out and dropped to the floor. It looked like a bit of wrapper or scrap paper. I almost threw it into the trash box when a horrible notion arrested this instinct. What if, I asked myself as I bent down to pick it up, it was *intended* to be in the bag? I picked the paper up off the floor and in so doing unfolded it enough to recognize it for what it was. In pencil, with the kind of frayed, spiky lettering that we all produced in second or third grade, was the salutation “Dear Friend.”

Without reading on, I immediately smoothed the note and replaced it in the stocking. I am not sure why I didn’t read it or why I didn’t take it and insist on reading it aloud to the others. It may have been that conscience of privacy that forbids reading

another's mail. Or I was, perhaps, merely quick to cover up what had almost been a soul-shattering negligence--impeding the delivery of a sacred message. The most likely answer is that a child's note to streetperson is a pure thing, like a prayer, and I was not ready, not yet worthy, to know it.

(Blessing Number Five: If you are in the right place, doing the right thing, you are more likely to get a glimpse of something perfect.)

When the bags were all filled, we returned the basement to a semblance of its prior order and sent the boxes of kits up the sagging conveyer while Bob stacked them at the top. Paul and I made our good-byes and passed through the empty dining room, to cross the now bustling kitchen where a dinner of burritos--the usual Thursday night fare--was in full preparation by the regular staff.

Outside, in the parking lot, much had changed. A long and wandering line had formed outside the gate. Many dozens patiently awaited the hot meal, which began in twenty minutes. As we left the parking lot, one man pulled back the sliding steel gate for us. Caught up in the charitable spirit, I offered him five dollars. He said he couldn't take *that* money.

(Blessing Six: I realized that they taught them here, at Bernard House, to earn their pay, that the greatest gifts help them help themselves).

As Paul drove back around the front of Bernard House to get to the freeway loop, we saw that the line continued around the building. We guessed that there were at least two hundred persons, mostly men, queued up for the meal and, if they were aware of them, the special kits. It had been one thing to pack kits for them down in the basement; now they had faces. They didn't spare the energy to be curious about us, though. And there was a subdued quality about them. It was as if they dared not anticipate anything over boldly--they had already known too much uncertainty, borne the weight of too many dashed hopes. . .

Traffic was sparse on the drive back. Paul dropped me at my car and I thanked him for suggesting the outing. I had accepted a late invitation to a friend's for Christmas Eve dinner, so I went home, changed clothes, then scurried off to join that clan. They were a hospitable group and I enjoyed myself, but the transition from Bernard House to a suburban gathering was more abrupt than I could manage, and before very long I

found myself checking the time. Two hours later, sated and tired, I drove home, looking forward to a good night's sleep.

Many nights I forget to pray, though I am getting better about it. I remembered, thankfully, to kneel down that night before I rolled into bed. Christmas Eve, I mused, a special prayer in order? I reviewed quickly the events of the day. The experience at Bernard House leapt to the forefront. But my prayers usually begin with thanks. Thus, I began:

“Dear God, thank you for a wonderful day.”

The second part of my prayers, when I am being the least bit thoughtful, is where I ask for something for someone else. The most conspicuous beneficiaries of any prayers on that day would have to have been the homeless people I had seen and the others I packed kits for. As I opened my mouth to begin the supplication, I found some words already there, my lips moving ahead of them.

“Dear Friend,” I said gently and to my own surprise, “I am sorry that you don't have a house.” A vague, familiar innocence visited my heart as the words flowed forth:

“Here are some things you can have. You can keep them if you want. Merry Christmas.”

(Blessing Number Seven: I was reminded how to pray: simply, sincerely, and for others).

I was suddenly, wonderfully tired. I crawled into bed and pulled the covers high up to my chin. The day before Christmas can be a long, long day.

[Each time I read this story, I am a little surprised at the sentimentality. The story is mostly true; I changed the name of my friend and the name of the shelter. There are other embellishments I will neither identify nor apologize for. I wrote this while in my early recovery from alcohol, probably in the late 'nineties. I have always thought that good recovery program is a “spiritual fitness” program. I was (I hate to admit) a more compassionate person in those days and my writing probably reflects that. This story will always rank as one of my favorites despite its sentimentality. –WRH]