

Love at Work
Formerly: True Gifts of the Season

*Character is the ability to carry out a good resolution long after the excitement of the moment
has passed.*
~Cavett Robert

“For today’s art class, you’re making Christmas presents for your family,” said Mrs. Jelsma, my fifth-grade teacher. My classmates quickly scrambled over to the arts-and-crafts table to collect paper, pens, colored pencils, markers, glue, glitter, and any supplies they would need for their projects.

I watched as each of them returned to their desks and went to work. Kelsey began cutting strips of paper to make a garland for her tree. Melinda was busy designing an ornament. Kelly was making a cardboard picture frame covered in red and green glitter.

I was stuck. I wasn’t sure what to make. I sat there for a while, and then it came to me: I could create a poster for my dad. I grabbed what I would need: a large piece of paper, some crayons, and magic markers.

In big bubble letters, I wrote my heart’s desire for my dad: “PLEASE STOP SMOKING!” In smaller print, I wrote the biggest concern of my life at age ten: “I’m afraid you’re going to die.”

There is nothing like the bluntness of a child who has not learned to filter her words and says—or writes—exactly what she feels.

I took my time coloring each bubble letter. It was plain and simple, but I hoped it would be enough for him to take my plea to heart.

I folded the poster in two and took special care to get it home that day. I got off the school bus, marched into the house and went immediately upstairs to where Mom kept the boxes and wrapping paper. I wrapped my poster, added a label, and placed it under the tree.

On Christmas morning my sister and I tore through our gifts eagerly. Finally, there was just one left. The poster I made for my dad was leaning against the wall, unnoticed. I handed it to him quietly, unsure what his reaction would be.

He knelt on the floor, surrounded by opened presents, toys, and wrapping paper. He held the box in his hands, reading the label out loud: “To Daddy, Love Lori.”

He gently shook the box, but it was as light as a feather. Slowly, he unwrapped his gift.

I held my breath as he read the words quietly to himself. I watched as a tear leaked out of his eye. My mom glanced over his shoulder, gasped and started to cry. My sister ran behind them both to see what all the fuss was about.

There wasn’t a dry eye in our home that Christmas morning. Dad wrapped me in a hug and said, “Okay, Lori. Okay.”

The tender moment passed, and we all got absorbed in the bustle of the day. I forgot about my poster as soon as I returned to school after winter break. It seemed as if everyone else had forgotten my gift as well. That was, until a beautiful summer day.

We were outside riding our bikes, my sister on her ten-speed and me on my little girl bike, wishing I had a grownup bike like she had. All of a sudden, from around the corner of the house, my dad appeared, pushing a brand-new, red-and-white ten-speed bicycle.

“Is that for me?” I squealed with delight.

“It sure is, kiddo. I took your Christmas gift to heart. Over the last six months, I saved all the money I would have spent each week on cigarettes. This is what I bought with the money I saved.”

I jumped into his arms, nearly toppling him over. “Thank you, Daddy!”

I took off to show my friends my new bike, thankful for the practice I had riding my sister’s ten-speed. But I was even more grateful that my dad had quit smoking.

It has been almost four decades. I’m proud of him and grateful for the many years that we’ve had together. I look forward to many more.

I’m also proud of my younger self for having the courage to ask my dad for what I wanted most: for him to quit an unhealthy habit. I’m grateful for the sparks this experience created in my own life as, to this day, I’m still riding my bike and writing about my heart’s desires.

—Lori Ann King—

