

LEGACIES, BIG AND SMALL

It's the late 1950's and a bitterly cold winter day on the Canadian prairie. The wind blows snow across the road in streams. We are bundled in the car – my mom and dad in the front, my two sisters and me in the back. With our winter coats and jackets on there is not a lot of room. The heater is going full blast to keep everyone's feet from freezing. We've been visiting relatives 50 miles away, and are still a few miles from town. Suddenly through the blowing snow we spot an old man walking along the side of the road. How did he get way out here, I wonder. There is not a house or abandoned vehicle in sight. He isn't wearing a hat, and doesn't have much of a jacket. His shoulders are hunched up and his head tucked down to try and protect his ears and face from the wind. His arms are folded across his chest, with his hands buried under his arms to keep them from freezing. He doesn't turn and face us, but he must hear us coming because he moves to the side of the road as far as he can to let us pass by. He doesn't put out his thumb for a ride. Hard experience has taught him that such appeals are futile. He is aboriginal - a native Indian. Dad takes his foot off the gas. The instant mom feels the car start to decelerate she turns and looks at him. There is a deafening silence. I watch and listen. "Well, we can't leave him out here", dad says. "George, we can't", mom pleads. "We don't have enough room in the car. We don't know where he is going." "We can't," she says, a worried look on her face. Dad's foot has moved to the brake, so, apparently, we can and we are. He says quietly, "Ruth, I want to give him a ride." We begin to back up, and as the distance closes between us and the solitary figure trudging down the road I see that it's Joe. Joe is at the very bottom of the social barrel in our town. He's a hopeless drunk, frequently seen staggering around on the sidewalk outside the liquor store, or in the back alley behind the beer parlour, or being loaded into a police car – unfortunately fulfilling the stereotype held by too many in our community to justify their prejudices. He is a big man, like a lot of his Sioux forefathers who fled north after defeating Custer at the Battle of Little Big Horn, ending up on a reserve in Canada. Even in his decrepit state you get an idea of what an imposing physical presence his plains warrior forefathers must have been. Joe has a coarse face, bearing the scars of a hard life of drinking, fighting, and physical beating. Dad gets out. I hear him say, "Hi Joe. Come on. Let us give you a ride. It's too cold to be walking out here." Mom slides into the middle of the seat to make room. "Hi", we say, with awkward smiles as Joe climbs in. Joe nods. The rest of us are quiet as we continue our journey. We don't know what to say, but it doesn't matter. Dad chats with Joe like he would to the next door neighbour. He does that with everyone, especially those considered to be on the margins of society. He doesn't ignore them. He doesn't look past them as if they don't exist. Dad rose above his own humble roots but he never turned his back on them. In the 1950's every prairie town had a Chinese cafe and usually one lone Chinese family living in the community. Dad was always friends with the local Chinese family in whatever town he lived. He didn't go in their stores, buy something, and leave. He got to know them and would ask how they were, how their family was, what they were doing, how business was going. He also connected with old Russian and Ukrainian farmers in the area, who barely spoke a word of English. They would arrive at our door bringing a turkey, flat of eggs, or freshly baked bread for our family. Sometimes dad was awkward with words. Sometimes he didn't know quite what to say. But he had an ability to communicate with people, whatever their so-called social level. He had his faults. This wasn't one of them. It was one of his virtues. As I get older and look back, what impresses me the most is the small things he did, and his willingness to take the initiative, and to extend the hand

of friendship and compassion to total strangers, especially those less fortunate in life. He volunteered in the community, but he also did these little things, that anyone can do, and that don't cost a thing. They may just require a little bit of courage to reach outside our comfort zone. These little things – as little as simply acknowledging people, and not marginalizing them, and ignoring them – won't solve any major social problems, but they can make the lives of those we reach a little better, even if only for that moment. We shouldn't let our inability to achieve big results stop us from achieving little results.

I went to a funeral last month. It was for a lawyer, a single mom, who died in her 50's of breast cancer. I lost contact with her when she moved her practice back to New Westminster a few years ago. But, when her office was in Surrey we sometimes referred clients to each other if we couldn't act in a particular matter, and we occasionally consulted one another when one of us was struggling with a thorny legal problem. There were lawyers, former business clients, family and close friends at the funeral. These were the people I expected. What I didn't expect, but, frankly, what impressed me the most was the large number of people in attendance who appeared to be economically poor. They significantly outnumbered the group I expected. When a person dies their importance in the community is sometimes measured by the number of prominent people in the community at their funeral. In this case what impressed me most was the exact opposite. It was the number of poor people who came to pay their respects. As I sat in the church I thought what a wonderful honour this is, what a great tribute, and what a fine testament to the sort of person Lynda was, that the largest group at her funeral were not those from her own socio-economic group, but those from below it; people that many in her position would not have associated with, for whatever reason. Lynda was evidently a volunteer, something that I, for one, didn't know about her. She, too, was willing to extend the hand of friendship to those she could as easily have ignored, and to reach across her comfort zone and bridge the gap.

As I write this piece it is the Grey Cup weekend. Milt Stegall will be on the field for the Winnipeg Blue Bombers. Milt is a shoe-in for the CFL Hall of Fame as he has scored more touchdowns than anyone in the history of the Canadian Football League. He is also on the cusp of setting the all-time record for receiving yardage. He is a great player, and, by all accounts, a great person, about to enjoy all the accolades in football he richly deserves. He is 37 and nearing the end of his career (although by his performance you wouldn't know it) and this week was asked about his legacy. This was his response: "The legacy I want to leave has nothing to do with what I do on the football field. Because one day, people are going to forget all the touchdowns, all the big plays, and all the games I helped win. The legacy I want to leave is somebody who made a difference in someone's life. That's the legacy I want to leave – somebody who went on to help somebody. Because that's the legacy that's going to last forever."

Few people have the physical gifts to become star athletes like Milt Stegall, or the brains to make an important discovery, or the talent to achieve great fame. Some who have these gifts do not have Milt Stegall's character. However, all of us can leave the sort of legacy that Milt speaks about. It may not last forever. Realistically, it may last no longer than the lives of those we touch. That doesn't matter. It is not the legacy of fame and fortune. It is more important than that. It is the legacy of doing little

things, humble things, that anyone can do. In many cases it is these 'little things' that matter most, and that, in truth, are big things.

"Service Above Self" is a motto of the Rotary movement, whose Surrey clubs have been generous and important supporters of our Society. It is a motto not limited to Rotarians. 'Service above Self' exemplifies those of you who volunteer your time, energy and talents to the Society – whether serving as companions to those facing death, providing support to those in grief, sorting clothes in the thrift store, or helping in the office. These unselfish 'little things' accomplish important things. They are your gifts to the community and your fellow human beings – little things that mean a lot.

Merry Christmas to you and your families.

Brian Clarke, Board President

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