

A Boy's Christmas Wish

By Gerald Decker

Driving to work one winter morning, I was half listening to an interview on Public Radio while paying attention to traffic. The host of the show was interviewing a guest that had collected stories from department store Santa Clauses.

Now use your imagination and go back with me 65 years to when I was in the first or second grade and went to visit Santa at Lewis' Department Store, the most prestigious and upscale store in the area. I knew all about Santa and had even played him in the school play. I suspected that today's visit was just the excuse my mom and sister needed to go shopping. But, I went along with the idea, just to be safe. (You see, I had already started to switch some of my allegiance from Santa to my Guardian Angel who seemed to have a great deal of influence in the world.)

Besides, Lewis' had really neat Christmas decorations. They had these slightly animated scenes from Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. In one, Scrooge would sit in front of the fireplace and, if you

looked closely, you could see him nod forward when he fell asleep. Then a door would open and a ghost would emerge. (Of course, it was only a piece of gauze on a wire with limbs and a face drawn on it.) The ghost would move up and down a bit and then go back



Gerald Decker

through the opening and the door would close. Inevitably, one of the onlookers would say, "the ghost of Christmas past." This was neat stuff for a kid who lived on a farm that didn't even have electricity.

Still, even though a visit to Santa had its up side, I was terribly embarrassed with the thought of standing in line with all those little kids and actually talking to the guy. One thing I vowed: I would not sit on Santa's lap. When my turn came, my mom and sister were watching from a distance. I had rehearsed exactly what I was going to say just in case Santa was legit. But I couldn't wait to get this over with.

I sauntered up to Santa—trying to act as cool as possible—and stood as straight as a soldier next to his right knee. I had planned to lean on his knee just as I

had seen my dad do against a fence so many times. In this relaxed manner, my dad would talk about how the farming was going with the other men. But that didn't happen. After an uncomfortable pause, Santa leaned forward and put his right ear close to my face. So I piped up, "I want a manure spreader to put on my Radio Flyer wagon so that I can help my mom clean the chicken house." Santa proved to be a kindly sort and indicated that this might not be a bad idea. I assured him that I had thought about this a lot, and that, with a little help from my brother, I could make it work. I hinted at an electric train for the day we got electricity, but the manure spreader had to come first.

Fast forward now with me back to my car in the present day. The radio show host asked the author if he had a favorite department store Santa Claus story among all the ones he'd collected. The author responded that one of his favorites was about a boy who asked for a manure spreader to put on his wagon so that he could help his mom clean the chicken house. I am still waiting, but at least now I know that Santa hasn't forgotten.

Gerald Decker has been a member of our parish for over ten years. He is a soybean researcher at the University of Minnesota.

Possible themes for your story:

Grace . . . Forgiveness . . . Generosity . . . Dignity . . . Perseverance . . . Honor . . . Gratitude . . . Compassion . . . Humility . . . Life Lessons . . . Family . . . Personal Transformation . . . Loyalty . . . Childhood Innocence . . . Adoption . . . Illness

If you're interested in becoming a contributor to *More Stories*, or if you'd like to interview parishioners for future issues, please contact:

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"Everybody is a story. When I was a child, people sat around kitchen tables and told their stories. We don't do that so much anymore. Sitting around the table telling stories is not just a way of passing time. It is the way the wisdom gets passed along. The stuff that helps us to live a life worth remembering. Despite the awesome powers of technology many of us still do not live very well. We may need to listen to each other's stories once again."

Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D.,
author of *Kitchen Table Wisdom*

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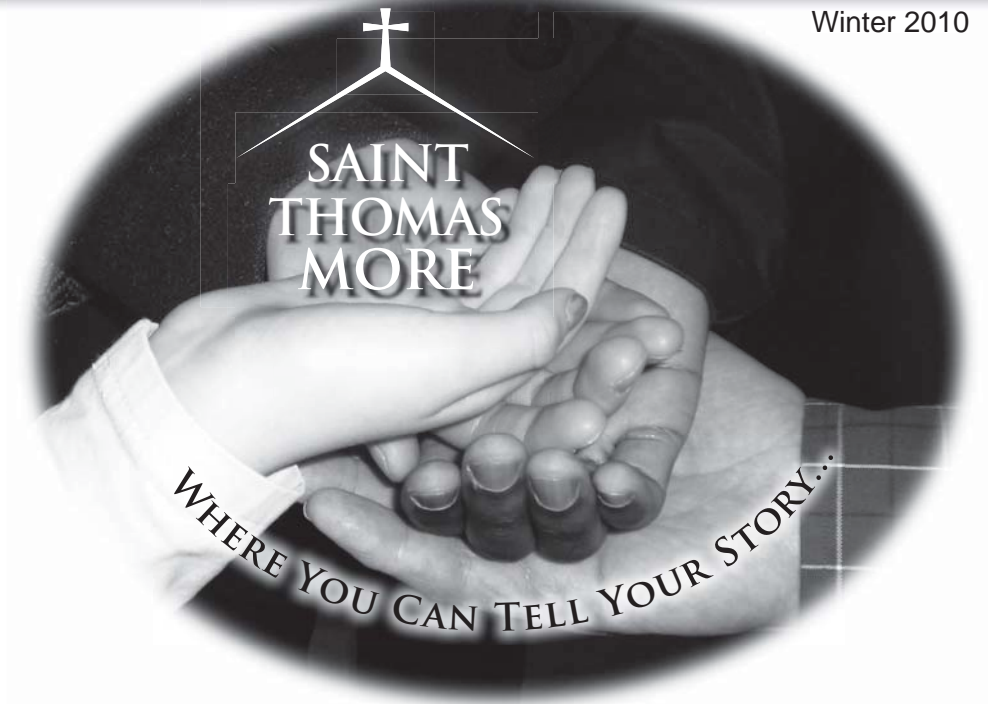
An Introduction to *More Stories*

Once in a Sunday homily, Fr. Joe described a typical gathering of his family during which a particularly outspoken aunt would say something inappropriate, thereby causing another family member to ask, "Why does she have to talk like that in front of the children?" As he spoke, I created the scene in my imagination, drawing upon my memories of similar family gatherings. His story is now a part of my life, as my mind and heart created space to hold this image.

Stories are just like that: they connect us to each other as one captures another's imagination and brings forth a more personal meaning.

And so it is with *More Stories*. We invite you to read each other's stories and consider contributing one of your own. By sharing our stories, we bring our fellow parishioners into our minds and our hearts, and thus, into our lives. We plan to produce *More Stories* every quarter, so we welcome your submissions for future issues. Please consider being interviewed—in an informal setting—by a member of the STM Communications Team, or you may simply submit something you've written yourself. Enjoy!

Gerald Decker



Family Blessings

With Lucia Kabanou as told to Donna Kemmetmueller

Lucia came to the United States from the Republic of the Congo. Her husband was here already, working at St. Luke's, before Lucia and her daughter, Paola (who was three at the time) joined him in 2002. When Lucia came to Minnesota, a member of the parish staff who worked with Lucia's husband arranged to welcome them with a housewarming gift and some donated items



Lucia Kabanou with two of her daughters, Paola (left) and Sarah (middle)

to help the family settle. This parishioner's name was Jeanne. Lucia really appreciated this kindness, and felt so welcomed. About the faith community, she says, "It felt like home to me; I felt, 'this is where I belong.'"

After Lucia's family moved into an apartment that fit them all, Jeanne surprised them again. She arrived unexpectedly one evening while Lucia's husband was attending a class, and asked Lucia to come down to the entryway. There, she revealed a complete dining table set, which the two women then hauled up the flights of stairs and set up. When her husband came home that evening, Lucia shared the surprise with him. Years later, Lucia recalls, "I still have that dining table set." When her family moved this past summer, she insisted on keeping it. "This means so much to me; I don't know what it will take for me to change that [dining table], but right now, I don't want to talk about it!" she said.

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When she arrived in Minnesota, Lucia did not speak English and was dependent on others for all transportation. Now, she speaks English fluently and has her driver's license. Jeanne helped Lucia to gain this independence, for which Lucia feels deep gratitude. Lucia says, "I really want to thank Jeanne; [I wish] I could see her now, so she could see the changes I have made from then." Eight years after her arrival in Minnesota, Lucia is grateful for all Jeanne did for her and her family. Lucia suspects that Jeanne does not realize how much her kindness blessed the Kabanou family. "She [probably thinks] those are just little things," Lucia reflects. "To me they weren't little. She really helped us find our way."

While she and her family now live in Burnsville, Lucia stays active at St. Thomas More. "Church to me is like family," she says. "It's difficult to change that." Much like Jeanne's gift of her special dining table set. Such treasures of lasting value are not something Lucia is willing to give up.

In the past year, Lucia has had her two youngest children, Sarah and Joy, baptized at St. Thomas More, and she hopes to have her marriage blessed by Fr. Joe in the coming years as well.

Lucia has been a member of the St. Thomas More Community for eight years. She and her three daughters can often be seen at the 10:30 a.m. Mass.

"Telling stories can be healing. We all have within us access to a greater wisdom, and we may not even know that until we speak out loud.

"Listening to stories also can be healing. A deep trust of life often emerges when you listen to other people's stories. You realize you're not alone; you're traveling in wonderful company. Ordinary people living ordinary lives often are heroes."

Dean Ornish, M.D., in his foreword to *Kitchen Table Wisdom*

The Graduation Gift

With Ken Goodpaster as told to Gerald Decker

One has only to spend a few minutes with Ken Goodpaster to realize that he has a love for the Church and a love for his vocation as a teacher. In a recent interview for *More Stories*, Ken shared how a single important event in his life contributed to these life-long pursuits. ***



Ken Goodpaster

My mother was a devout Catholic. Her family came from Eastern Europe. One of her favorite devotions was to the Infant of Prague, and I often accompanied her to Mass and to other services. My father, on the other hand, was what I would call a 'devout anti-Catholic.' He was very suspicious of the Church; why, I don't know. I recall one time when I came home hoping to sell subscriptions for the diocesan newspaper seeing the subscription book go flying across the living room.

A gulf started to develop between my father and me. As a teenager, I began to rebel and my schoolwork began to suffer. My father decided that I needed some discipline in my life, and so, I was sent off to boarding school.

The one exception to my father's suspicion of the Church was his respect for the Jesuit order of priests. We lived near Cleveland and he flew me out to Arizona to enroll at Brophy College Preparatory near Phoenix, an academy for boys run by the Jesuits. I learned a lot at the academy—from mathematics and classical languages, to how to wait tables in the dining hall. Even punishments for infractions of school discipline were turned into learning opportunities: we weren't just grounded or sent to detention, we were assigned reading or extra study.

It was during these years at Brophy

that I developed an appreciation for the Church, its history, its academic traditions, its saints, its institutions. I knew I wanted to be a teacher, and somehow in conjunction with the Church. I was not attracted to the priesthood, so I decided in my senior year to join the Brothers of Holy Cross (the order that founded the University of Notre Dame).

When graduation came around, I was selected to give the valedictory speech. My family attended and the speech went well. My dad drove all the way from Ohio with my mother and my younger brother and sister. They stayed at a motel not far from the school . . . which placed a financial burden on my father, as he was not a wealthy man.

After the graduation ceremony, I joined my family at the motel. It seemed so luxurious to me. I decided to take advantage of the swimming pool. While I swam, my father went upstairs to retrieve something. When he returned, he was carrying a large manila envelope containing two pieces of paper: I was soon holding his baptismal certificate and a certificate of marriage from the parish Church. My dad had decided to embrace Catholicism. He wanted to support my decision to join the religious life, and was afraid that not doing so could prove to be an impediment for my entry to Holy Cross.

He did this for himself, of course, but he also did it for me. A reconciliation had begun. A gulf between father and son was bridged, and a supportive relationship developed.

Ken Goodpaster has taught Business Ethics at the University of St. Thomas for 20 years, after teaching for ten years each at Notre Dame and Harvard. He has led an effort at The University of St. Thomas to ensure that Christian ethics and Catholic social principles are an integral part of pursuing a business degree.

One Cool Dude

By Maureen Kelleher

Today is his anniversary. Seventeen years ago, on January 11th, 1993, my father died at home, surrounded by my mom, my four sisters, my brother, and me. As he took his last breath, a single tear rolled down one cheek, despite the fact that he had been in a coma for days. He was only 64 years old, but had succumbed to the cancer that had started in his lungs and spread to his brain and beyond.

We started calling each other, "Dude," while I was still in high school. I don't remember exactly how it came up, but, for some reason, I said the word, "dude," and it cracked him up. (And this was long before this particular noun enjoyed the enormous popularity it does now.) The way he said it was adorable. He really strung out the vowel sound—like "Duuuude,"—in his impossibly thick Irish brogue. It was such a small exchange between us, but we became "Dude" to each other from that moment.

My father was a good and decent man—and a study in contradictions. Although he was a 'traditional' Irishman in most ways, he changed diapers and prepared baby bottles before going to work so that my mom could get a few more precious minutes of sleep (trust me, this put him in the minority, especially in the 1960s). He was a proud Irishman, but he just couldn't wait to become a U.S. citizen so that he could vote in his adopted country. A man with the stereotypical Irish temper—and colorful vocabulary that often goes with it—yet he prayed fervently and audibly every morning and night of his life and was never without his rosary beads. And Dude had a powerful work ethic, which he passed on to us all; so it was somewhat surprising when he insisted that one of my teenage sisters quit her part-time job because her boss was verbally abusive.

Like many of his fellow Irishmen, Dude was a gifted storyteller with an incredibly quick wit. He also loved to sing. Age and

years of smoking took a toll on his vocal cords, but I'm pretty sure he never realized it. Standing next to him in Church, I had to steel myself against embarrassment since Dude belted out the hymns as if he were the choir soloist.

My parents grew up together in County Cork, Ireland. They were best friends throughout their childhoods, and didn't date until after my mom moved to New York at the age of 19 (talk about playing hard to get!). In my teens, I often accompanied him when he drove my mom to or from the job she'd taken once we kids were old enough to manage at home without her. Despite all the public transportation available throughout New York City, Dude made himself her personal chauffeur whenever possible. I'll never forget one evening I sat in the passenger seat beside him. As usual, he was drinking coffee, chain-smoking, and listening to the radio. As my mom appeared in the doorway, he turned to me, a little choked up, and said, "I can still see her as a young girl, my Nell, coming toward me down the path back at home. She looks the same." By the time my mom reached the car, I had dissolved in tears. I've always envied them their life-long history together, although it made losing him especially difficult for her.

Unfortunately, Dude was a typical Irishman in one more crucial way: in his late 30s, he began abusing alcohol, ultimately becoming an alcoholic.

When it became so bad that he was disruptive in the home and no longer bringing home a paycheck to his wife and six children, my mom did the unthinkable and threw him out. She arranged for friends who were members of Alcoholics Anonymous to take him to rehab, and he eventually became what the regulars

called an "A.A. guru." Dude helped people often: sometimes he took calls in the middle of the night and, if needed, he was the one who got up and drove someone to rehab in upstate New York, then drove back home and went straight to work after a sleepless night. This was a normal part of life during my childhood,

So I guess we shouldn't have been that surprised by the crowd at my father's wake. The rooms on both sides of his viewing room had to be opened up to accommodate all the people. My siblings and I were struck by the number of men and women—many of whom we had never met—coming through the line to pay their respects. Many uttered the very Irish phrase, "Sorry for your troubles." (They wouldn't say, "Sorry for your loss," or "I'll miss your Dad," but "Sorry for your troubles." It made us feel that we should respond in kind, but we suspected that wouldn't really have been appropriate.) Some of them were truly beside themselves and inconsolable. Quite a few said that my father had saved their lives, and that really stuck with me. I had always known how active Dude was in A.A., but the sheer number of lives he had touched so deeply made me just about burst with pride.

I'm very grateful that I never missed a chance to tell Dude how much I loved him (I even kissed him on his bald spot every time I passed him by). Something that really comforts me to this day is my belief that I will see my father and everyone else I love again after I die. For now, I carry his photo and his rosary beads with me wherever I go. And I treasure the people who are still here with me. But, when my time comes, I expect him to be waiting with a cup of tea and open arms. I love you, Dude. See you then.

Maureen Kelleher grew up in New York City and has been living in Saint Paul for almost five years. She volunteers with the St. Thomas More Communications Team, and is secretary of her book club.



Maureen Kelleher