

Christmas stories VI

For the past six years during the Christmas season, I have written a column in remembrance of the many great and wonderful lessons I learned from my father, Ernest A. Emord (aka "Tommy Reardon"). I have done so in the hope that these stories, but a small sampling of the remarkable legacy he left, might inspire you to hearken the call of an earlier age, of, to paraphrase Lincoln, the better angels of our nature. A professional boxer from Brockton, Massachusetts, a career military man who served the United States armed forces for 32 years, a humble man of great humor, wit, and devotion to his family and country, Ernest Emord lived a life set apart from the ordinary that touched the lives of many in remarkable ways. Here are a few more remarkable stories from the life of Ernie Emord.

The Part About Grocery Shopping I Overlooked. I had just turned 4 years old. Since my first year I had accompanied my mother on jaunts to the grocery store. When I was 4 my family lived at Alconbury Royal Air Force Base in Alconbury, England. My father served in the United States Air Force at that base. Repeatedly, my mother took me along with her to the Air Force Exchange commissary at Alconbury. I observed how my mother pulled items she wanted from the store shelves and placed them in a shopping cart. I watched her push the cart through the store and finally outside for the trip home. I stood below the height of the check-out counter, so the one part of the trip I did not notice was my mother's payment of cash for the items she acquired. Intrigued by the grocery store experience, I decided one morning at the customary time when I met my 3 and 4 year old friends to tell them about this remarkable place. They all were amazed by my description, so I decided to take them there. Somehow I managed to lead four or five boys all the way to the commissary from base housing.

When we arrived, I had the boys help me retrieve a grocery

cart, and I instructed them to pull from the shelves whatever they wanted. The boys went throughout the store but settled only on candy (lots of candy), chocolate (lots of chocolate), and some cakes and pastries. With a full cart, we all worked to push it through the check-out and out the door to the street. There, we continued to push the cart all the way back to base housing. We pushed the full cart onto the grass and into an open field next to where we lived. We turned over the cart and then shared the contents, eating quite a lot of it before the Air Police arrived. The Air Police surveyed the situation and, after a few questions, discovered that none of us was beyond the age of 4, none of us was accompanied by a parent, and that none of us had a clue about grocery shopping beyond going, getting, and eating. The all-important payment part was unknown to us.

While the police stood puzzling over what might be done to take care of the problem, my father arrived in uniform. He looked at the cart, the food all over the ground, and the chocolate covered faces of all the kids, and he smiled. He had an amiable, quiet conversation with the Air Police and then handed them cash from his bill fold. The Air Police then left and my father stood there in front of us. He asked us if the candy, chocolate, cakes, and pastries were good. We all said yes, very pleased with our achievement. I proudly explained to my father how we all managed to find the commissary and how we did what mom always did, get the cart, fill it with what we wanted, and then take the cart out. He complimented us on getting everything right about grocery shopping . . . but one thing.

He then knelt down to our level and told us a story with a smile on his face. He said that everything we had taken from the shelves at the commissary was made by someone who had to get paid to be able to make those things. He explained how the people who worked at the commissary also needed to be paid in order to survive and that the money for all of that had to

come from somewhere. He then asked us if we knew where the money came from. I said the base commander. Others of the boys agreed with me or said maybe their moms or dads paid some of it. Others said they did not know. He then told us that it actually came from each person who took something from the store shelves. He said whenever you take something from the shelf that you intend to keep, you, the one taking it, agree to pay for it right then and there. So, he said, you could take your allowance to the store and get something you could afford and give that money to the people who work at the store in exchange for that something.

In that way, the people who made the things would keep making them. The people selling the things would keep selling them, and each of them would have money to pay for the things they removed from the shelves. So long as each person pays for what he or she takes from the shelves, he said, then we all could count on the grocery store to continue having what we wanted on the shelves, and no one who made the things would stop making them or who sold the things would stop selling them. We all appreciated the message. A few of us stopped eating the food we brought back while we listened. Others found eating the ill-gotten gains a pleasant experience while they were told the story.

Rather than be traumatized by a stern reprimand, my father had the wisdom to appreciate that a compassionate explanation would go a lot farther with 3 and 4 year olds than chastisement. I do not remember feeling the slightest bit guilty or fearful for what we had done. I was glad my dad paid the police, and I was glad someone told me about the important part of grocery shopping I had overlooked: the payment part.

The Intelligent Dog. My father was never one to tell a yarn to an unsuspecting person. He enjoyed that humor, never at the expense of the other person beyond a good ruse. One such person was Pete Valez, an Air Force enlisted man stationed at Chanute Air Force Base. When I was 6 years old, I joined my

father on a short car ride to Pete's base quarters. Our dog, Yella, a golden Labrador Retriever, joined us in the car. Yella was young and spry, fond of moving about in the car from one open window to another. I sat in the front seat passenger's side. The dog was in the back seat. Pete met my father in front of his quarters.

My father and Pete began a conversation. My father's back was to the car. From his vantage point, Pete could see my father and the car clearly. He could make out that I was in the front seat and the dog in the back. Suddenly, midway through my father's conversation, Yella bounded from the back to the front seat, with his paws landing on the horn, producing a loud horn blast that also caused the dog to bark. Without missing a beat, my father turned toward the car and said with annoyance, "Yella, be patient. I'll be through in just a minute." He then turned back and continued talking to Pete. An amazed expression came over Pete, who kept staring away from my father and intently at the car. It was clear that Pete actually thought the dog honked the horn the horn and barked with impatience. Walking with my father to the car to see this amazing dog, Pete remarked, "Chief, you have quite an intelligent dog." My father replied, "yes, but he is still learning about patience."

Yella Ate the Couch. In the 1960's drive-in movie theaters were all the rage. Although my parents rarely went to a movie, they decided to see the movie "Patton" with the lead played by George C. Scott. They lamented the fact that our family dog, a golden Labrador Retriever named Yella, would be home alone, but they thought the few hours he would be without companionship would not be a problem. After the movie, they came back home. My father opened the door for my mother and she walked in. A few moments later she said, "Ernie, Yella ate the couch." Sure enough, the only couch they had in the living room was now a wooden box with springs sticking out and white fill everywhere. As she moved in, astonished. My father

followed her.

As they both looked in amazement, they heard a tail wagging under the dining room table against the wall, creating a familiar patter indicative of the dog's pleasure at their return. My father then turned to my mother and said, "I guess Yella really wanted to see that movie," and the two of them laughed. The couch could be replaced, the dog was irreplaceable. To avoid the purchase of a new couch, my mother discovered the wonders of duck tape. For a very long time, I recall sitting on a silvery taped thing we called the living room couch.

Ending Trespass. Chanute Air Force Base had a problem. It was the 1960's and students opposed to the Vietnam War decided to trespass on base property to protest the war. They chose a novel way to do so. They hid in the cargo bay of moving vans going on the base and would thereafter exit the moving vans, chain themselves together, and sit over the areas they thought were missile silos. The Air Police would then arrest them, jail them for a brief time, and release them off the base. The frequency of these acts of trespass increased over time and the base commander asked my father, the Senior Enlisted Advisor at Chanute, to find a way to stop them. At first my father spoke to the Air Police, directing them to make sure that no moving van entered the base without the cargo bay being inspected.

That, however, proved unsuccessful as several of the vans would come to a near stop, flash their papers, but would keep rolling and enter the base while others contained furniture and boxes that blocked the view of humans hidden in the hold. Frustrated by the continuation of the problem, my father decided to become an Air Policeman.

My father manned one of the main entrances to the base on a daily basis. Eventually, a moving van arrived. He ordered the driver to stop. The driver flashed his papers but did not come

to a stop, rolling past the entrance. My father then jumped onto the running board of the moving van, held onto the outside mirror, pulled his side arm from its holster with the other hand, shoved the barrel of the pistol through the open truck window into the mouth of the driver, and ordered the driver to stop or be shot. The driver stopped. The other Air Police then broke open the cargo bay. There inside were student protestors. All were arrested. From that moment forward, the practice of student protestors trespassing on the base came to an end.

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