

The greatest Christmas blessing we have to share

Written by Wauneta Breeze

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By John Whitehead of the Rutherford Institute

When my dad returned to Pulaski, Tenn., after serving in World War II, he couldn't find a decent-paying job. My birth barely a year later only reinforced what my parents already knew — they had no choice but to leave their home and family and this small southern town behind.

Factory towns were booming in the north. So, like hundreds of other desperate families, my parents packed their meager belongings and we moved to Peoria, Ill., where my dad got a factory job at Caterpillar Tractor Company. My mom found a job in a grocery store, but wages were low for unskilled workers. And, as fate would have it, periodic recessions would only worsen things.

I was too young to realize how poor we were. But I do remember one Christmas when I was about 8 or 9. I desperately wanted a cowboy pistol and holster from Santa Claus.

I got the pistol, but I guess the economy had hit Santa hard, too, and he couldn't afford the holster. So my Dad made one using one of my mother's old leather purses. It didn't look like the holsters on television, but it did the job.

Still, when some of my friends made fun of it, I felt ashamed.

It wasn't until I was married with children of my own that I truly appreciated how special my dad's gift was. He had given me something from his heart because he wanted to make his little boy's Christmas dream come true.

For many Americans, the tough times are back again — especially those with families to feed. And with Christmas approaching, I have to wonder what, if anything, some kids are going to find under the tree this year.

Much of the world may see America as the land of the wealthy, but the reality for many people is much different. For instance, just prior to the current financial meltdown, statistics on poverty and hunger in America indicated that 36 million people were living below the poverty line, including 13 million children.

Nearly 4 percent of U.S. households experience hunger, which equates to almost 10 million people, including three million children. And households with children reported food insecurity at almost double the rate for those without children.

There are, of course, federal food assistance programs. However, the demand in recent years has been so great that, on average, 20 percent of the requests for emergency food assistance have been completely unmet.

Add the homeless problem to this mix, and it's staggering. In America, 3.5 million people experience homelessness, including some 1.4 million children. And with the demand for emergency shelter having greatly increased, some cities just don't have enough room for all those needing housing assistance.

These problems have worsened since the Wall Street collapse, with thousands losing their homes and the jobless rate soaring. So what will these families get for Christmas? The answer is simple: what others are willing to share.

If there is any lesson for this time of the year, it is sharing with those in need and showing compassion to our fellow human beings.

There are, of course, many worthy organizations that need money this time of year. But few

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are capable of accomplishing what you can personally do in your own neighborhood, town or city.

Do you know a family in need? If so, help them. This year, for example, in addition to our regular giving, our family members joined together to donate clothes, food and toys to a family with five children that otherwise wouldn't have had Christmas. We're also substituting gifts within the family with donations to people in need.

Thus, the true essence of Christmas is giving something of yourself to others. Compassion must start with assisting those who need help the most. True compassion is all about bringing justice and mercy to real-life situations.

Especially in cases of children in need, compassion has to begin with sacrificial giving.

As the noted author and theologian C.S. Lewis once wrote:

"I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditure excludes them."

True giving is not limited to money and material items. It includes giving time to those in need, volunteering at the homeless shelter, delivering meals to the hungry, going through your closets and drawers and sharing that which is so desperately needed — clothes, shoes, warm coats, the list goes on and on.

I know we all think about the poor, the needy, the homeless and the hungry. But we should be ashamed if that's all we do. Christmas is not the only time of the year to give of ourselves and our blessings, but it is a good time to start.

So what is the greatest Christmas gift? The giving of yourself and your blessings to those in need.

Constitutional attorney and author John W. Whitehead is founder and president of The Rutherford Institute. His new book *The Change Manifesto (Sourcebooks)* will be out in September 2008. He can be contacted at johnw@rutherford.org. Information about The Rutherford Institute is available at www.rutherford.org