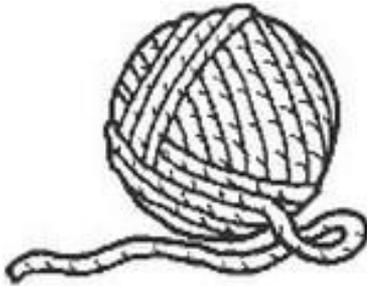


That Little Ball of Christmas String

By J. Wanless Southwick



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Story of a Christmas vision, to be read at Christmas time.

“Tell me a story” said little Camden as he climbed onto my lap the day after Christmas 2012. This booklet contains the impromptu story I whispered into his ear that afternoon. I was so impressed with the story that I was compelled to preserve it in writing.

jws

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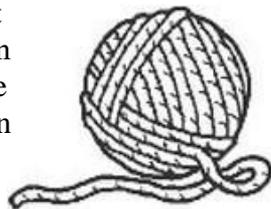
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That Little Ball of Christmas String

Every time I visit my aging parents, I can't resist going to my mother's curio cabinet in their living room. I guess I need to reassure myself that the ball of string is still there on the shelf behind the glass door. Others usually gather around me and stare at the ball of string too.



“Please tell us the story again...,” came the voice of the smallest one nearby.

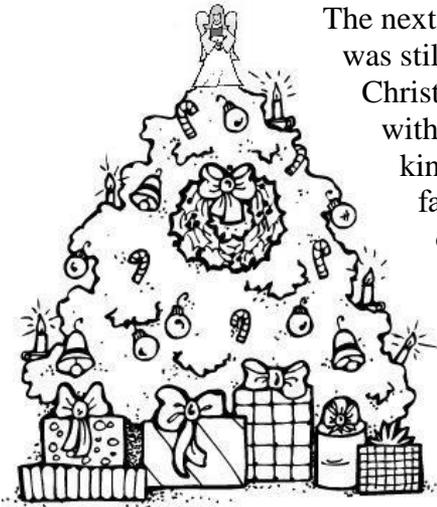
Many years ago, when I was a freshman in college, I met Estelle. Her name meant “star.” I was smitten with her! To me she was the most beautiful girl on campus. When the Christmas weekend was near and festive merriment was everywhere, she fretted that circumstances prevented her from going to her distant home for the holidays. It didn't take me long to muster the courage to ask if I could take her home with me. That smile of hers! My heart pounded as I realized her answer was “Yes.”

It was a long drive from college to my home. Estelle and I had plenty of time to chat. Things that were important to one of us were also important to the other. The feelings of attraction that had been developing for weeks were now knitting us tighter together. Then I made that dreadful mistake. I made a comment in jest that came out all wrong. It wasn't that she just misunderstood my intent, but my comment contained a hidden barb that I didn't expect. When it cut into her self-perception, the joy of previous moments drained away. Her silence screamed more than anything she could have said. She leaned tight against her side of the car.

At first I tried to explain what I meant by the jest. The barb only seemed to gouge deeper. “That’s dumb,” I thought, trying to excuse myself. Our drive took us past homes with brilliant outdoor lighting. Festive displays of trees, Santa Claus, sleighs, and reindeer had no effect on the sullen mood inside our car.

New snow began falling. My attention focused on driving. The increasingly dense snow storm made it difficult to see. I tried to reconnect with Estelle by commenting about the holiday lights and telling her how the road winds to my parents’ rural home. She didn’t respond.

Ours were the first tire tracks through the snow for the last mile of the trip. When we entered my home, we were cheerfully greeted by my parents and three siblings; Becky (14), Tom (11) and Sarah (8). Estelle and I put on happy faces and said all the right things for that kind of occasion, but we didn’t make a conscious effort to look at each other...



The next day was Christmas Eve. Snow was still falling. The traditional Christmas tree was fully decorated with colored lights, bulbs of all kinds, and shiny ornaments. The family’s heirloom angel ornament graced the top of the tree. I noticed an abundance of presents under the tree. Perhaps it was because my Dad’s work had been particularly profitable that year. I quietly slipped my gift for Estelle into the mix.

It was well past noon when suddenly all the lights in the house went out. The power outage not only darkened the Christmas

tree, but a profound silence enveloped us. The background hum of light fixtures, refrigerator, and furnace fans were suddenly gone. Dad was the first to break the silence, saying “Well it looks like this might be a good time to build a fire in our fireplace!”

He was no stranger to fire building. His childhood home was heated with wood, so he still had the habit of keeping a small supply of firewood in a metal tote near the fireplace. As he began the task, Mom opened the living room window curtains. The rest of us drew close to the window to peer out into the storm. The afternoon sun was obscured by clouds and falling snow. The snowflakes were huge! It was a silent wonder!

I need to explain that my parents’ house had a semi-circular driveway. It let a vehicle turn in from the street, circle around the front yard’s flower garden and flag pole, approach the home’s front porch, and then continue in an arc back onto the street. Of course, the flower garden was buried in deep snow and no tire tracks could be seen in the driveway.

Perhaps it was because of the silence that our ears were attracted to a soft jingling sound. I think my youngest sister Sarah heard it first.

“Shhh...,” she said as she pressed her face to the window glass to see where the sound was coming from.

She gasped as her eyes saw what her ears were hearing. Out of the dense snow storm came a prancing horse, pulling a sleigh!



The horse seemed to delight in making the sleigh bells on its harness jingle as it pulled to a stop near our home’s front door.

If there ever was a “one horse open sleigh,” here it was at our front door! The driver may have been chubby, but he didn’t wear a Santa Claus costume. He was dressed in thick, warm winter clothing of a dark color. Hat and gloves seemed more functional than stylish. But it was his passenger that captured our attention. She was a petite little girl, all bundled up in a snow suit with hat, gloves and boots. When she slid out from under the heavy blanket that covered their legs, the driver handed her a package that was so big she could barely see over it as she shuffled through the snow toward our front door.

We didn’t wait for the doorbell to ring. We stood astonished in front of the little girl who appeared to be about 10 years old. We invited her in but she just stretched out her arms to give us the package. A brilliant smile made her pink cheeks glow as she shook her little head and exclaimed “Merry Christmas!”

When the package passed from her hands to ours, she was off to the sleigh in a few slippery skids through the knee-deep snow. The driver gave her a lift with his outstretched hand and the horse started the sleigh moving. The jingling harness bells quivered in euphoria as the horse resumed his prancing gait down the driveway toward the snowbound street. The sleigh disappeared into the curtain of snow but the jingle, jingle, jingle of sleigh bells lingered a bit longer until finally fading into the power-outage silence.

It was not dark yet, but the flicker of newly kindled flames from the fireplace brought comforting illumination as we stared at the surprise gift. Tom returned from his bedroom with his Scout flashlight. We appreciated the details we could see with the extra light as we examined the package. It was square, measuring about 12 inches on every side. It was wrapped in plain brown paper and tied together with ordinary brown string. Becky read three lines of text that were written in pencil on the

top of the package, “Don’t Open Until Christmas!” The second line read, “Remember to Sing the Hymns of Christmas.” Lastly was the exclamation, “Merry Christmas!”

We sensed that there was something special about this unexpected gift. Dad suggested that we put it under the Christmas tree. As soon as we did, the electric power returned. The tree’s Christmas lights came back on. We noticed how odd the brown-paper package looked among the more colorful, ribbon-wrapped presents. Tom curiously nudged the strange package and even tried to peek between the folds of its brown paper, but a disapproving glance from Mom put a stop to that.

Neither Mom nor Dad could identify the strangers who brought the gift to us. Estelle seemed a bit overwhelmed by the experience. She remained much more silent than I was comfortable with. How I hated myself for causing her to sink into her own private isolation. But on the other hand, I asked myself, “Why couldn’t she just take a little joke?”

Christmas morning followed the family’s traditional routine. The youngest children waited as long as their excitement could stand before bouncing on Mom and Dad’s bed to get them up. We had a strict rule about not peaking at the Christmas tree until after Mom had fixed hot chocolate and toast. Oh, how impatient I remember being during my childhood Christmas mornings. Finally, with the family gathered to see the sight, the youngest were allowed to enter the living room to see what Santa Claus had brought for them. Sarah went first, closely followed by Tom. Their exclamations of the joy of discovery filled the room. Becky was a little more restrained, as she tried to demonstrate her budding maturity, but she immediately found delight in a large, unwrapped gift that had her name prominently displayed on it.

Yes, Santa Claus must have visited our home overnight, because the gifts that were under the Christmas tree when we went to bed last night, were now colorfully buried under another layer of attractive presents this morning.

A routine soon developed. Becky would choose a present, read the gift tag, and hand it to the intended recipient. Everyone was supposed to watch while that present was being opened, but often attention was distracted by lingering interest in a just-opened present on one's lap. I particularly watched to see how Estelle received and opened her gift from me. She handled it in a delicate, affectionate way. When she saw the contents of the little package, she lifted her eyes to mine and flashed a genuine look of admiration as she whispered, "Thank you...."

Mom had her little Christmas-gift notebook in her lap again this year. She seemed to take pleasure recording who got what from whom. Every year her notebook helped us remember to whom we owed thanks for each gift. We accumulated our opened presents into piles near where we sat. The stashes seemed larger than in years past. My group of presents was appropriately few, compared to those of my younger siblings. My favorite was the modest gift from Estelle. I doubt that she could have misunderstood my tender feelings as I beamed an appreciative thank-you glance at her.

Crumpled Christmas wrapping paper littered the floor. No attempt was made to save the colorful wrapping paper this year. I remember in my early childhood, we would carefully remove bows and paper, neatly fold the paper, and set them aside for use the next year. Those were poorer years, but definitely happy family times. The littered floor bore witness to the relative affluence of this year. With a word of caution about throwing away something valuable, Dad gave us a big plastic garbage bag to clean up the mess.

Cleanup became a game for the children as they scooped up noisy paper and stuffed it into the garbage bag. As the last of the debris was being picked up, Estelle asked, “What happened to the plain-wrapped package from yesterday?”

We were stunned. None of us had seen it all morning. Tom wisely deduced that it couldn’t be in the garbage sack. Becky began looking around the room, inspecting each of the stashes of opened presents. Little Sarah made the discovery when she picked up one of the last pieces of crumpled paper under the Christmas tree.

“Look at this!” she exclaimed as she picked up a little cube with her fingers. “It shrunk!” she declared as she handed it to her father.

Dad looked at it closely and then reached into a nearby cabinet drawer, from whence he retrieved a magnifying glass. He studied the little package. The more he looked at it, the more puzzled the look on his face became. Softly he explained, “It looks the same, only smaller!”

He handed it back to Sarah who stared closely at it. She took in a quick breath and exclaimed, “I think it is getting smaller!”

Mom cleared Christmas clutter from the coffee table and suggested Sarah put the miniature, plain-wrapped gift on the table.

Becky took the magnifying glass for a closer look and then read aloud, “Don’t Open Until Christmas!” “Remember to Sing the Hymns of Christmas.” “Merry Christmas!”

“Maybe we should sing!” said Sarah excitedly. Then she started an impromptu solo, “Jingle Bells, Jingle Bells, Jingle all

the way..... Oh, what fun it is to ride in a one horse open sleigh....” She let her voice climb high after the word sleigh.

A few others joined in with a scramble of other parts of the song.... “Dashing through the snow...” “Bells on Bobtail ring...” Our thoughts turned to the way that strange gift was delivered to us on Christmas Eve.



When the cacophony subsided, Mom spoke seriously, “Why don’t we gather to the piano and try that again?”

She took her customary seat on the piano bench in front of the keyboard and touched a few keys, but wasn’t satisfied with the sound. “The Hymns of Christmas...” she muttered, as she reached for the Church Hymnal.

“I think it’s stopped shrinking,” announced Tom.

“Let’s sing some more!” Sarah insisted.

By then, we were willing to expect anything, so with one eye on the coffee table and the other on the hymnal we began singing as Mom played one Christmas hymn after another. A warm feeling came into our hearts as we heard and sang the beloved melody of “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear.”

Dad’s rich tenor voice had a unique tenderness to it that day. Estelle’s lovely soprano stirred my soul. I felt Estelle’s hand slip into mine. I tingled all over as I turned to her. We spontaneously whispered “I’m sorry” to each other. She smiled

as she squeezed my hand. I lost the ability to sing for a moment as emotion flooded over me.

We sang . . . and we watched the plain-wrapped gift grow. The more we sang the bigger it got!

By the time we were singing “Silent Night” the plain-wrapped gift appeared to be about the same size it was when we received it from that beautiful little girl on Christmas Eve. After we finished the last verse, Mom gently played it again and we softly hummed the melody. All eyes were on that extraordinary gift! We marveled that such a plain package, devoid of beauty and attractiveness, could be so self-energized and responsive to the attention we gave it.

The piano keys fell silent and our humming ceased, but the music echoed back to us from within the gift. The package’s brown string vibrated as sound from the hymn leaked out between folds in the wrapping paper.

“Can we open it?” asked Sarah in her excited little voice.

That question was on everyone’s mind. What would we find inside? Surely this gift must be powerfully important. Who sent it to us?

“Well, I suppose we should,” opined Dad. “After all it is Christmas.”

Tom dashed to his stash of Christmas presents to get his new Scout pocket knife, declaring “I get to cut the string!”

Becky held up her hand in protest. “Let’s not cut it,” she whispered.

She looked at Dad for support, who nodded as she gently pulled on a loose end of the bow in the string. The string began to twinkle as she pulled. As the string fell away, the plain brown paper began to sparkle. We stared at the magic. The sparkling paper began to unfold and fall away onto the coffee table.

There, to our amazement, was a crystal-clear, solid cube with moving images deep inside. Most of us were on our knees to get a closer look into the glowing cube.



As images came into focus, a vision of the manger scene prompted Sarah to ask, “Where is Baby Jesus?”

“What is that word?” interrupted Becky.

A word, as if on a snowflake, was spiraling gently downward from the top of the cube. We looked more closely.

“It’s Jehovah!” announced Tom triumphantly.

We all watched the word float slowly down toward the animal shelter. As it drifted passed our eyes we saw the word change into another word. Sarah got a good look at the transformed word as she peered through the side of the cube.



“The word is Jesus!” she exclaimed, as the word floated gently into the arms of a beautiful young woman and morphed into a wiggling little baby.

Suddenly the vision inside the cube exploded with color, music, and singing... **“Joy to the World the Lord is Come!”** It sounded like an enthusiastic but invisible Mormon

Tabernacle Choir and Orchestra. We knew the hymn and felt its power.

A hillside appeared in a corner of the cube, with sheep and shepherds, and a brilliant star above them all. Then an angelic voice declared, **“Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy! This day the Savior is born, which is Christ the Lord.”**

The hillside scene dissolved, transporting the shepherds to the animal shelter, where they witnessed the glorious, but humble, arrival of their promised Messiah. **“Behold the Lamb of God! . . . He who comes into the world to take upon him the sins of the world and redeem all who have a repentant heart and a contrite spirit.”**



The words were penetrating! Our hearts burned. Joy was real, but the sounds and moving images began to fade. The vision was disappearing and there was nothing we could do to hold on to it. The crystal cube began collapsing into a small glowing sphere, hovering above the brown wrapping paper. The paper started sparkling again, but this time it evaporated. The sphere floated upward, becoming a bright little star that guided itself

toward the angel ornament at the top of our Christmas tree. When it was directly above the angel, it glowed brighter until it flashed and was gone. Silence followed. . . .

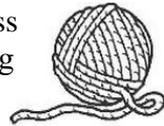
In my astonishment, I was compelled to find and open the family Bible. Estelle drew near as I located and read aloud, **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... All things were made by him... And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.”**

I looked into Estelle’s eyes, inviting her confirmation to my conclusion: “Jehovah, the Creator, became baby Jesus?” She nodded. “He was God’s gift to us,” she declared in a hushed voice that all could hear.

Mom picked up her little Christmas-gift notebook. Her face beamed as she wrote another gift entry in it; “We each got the gift of a Savior from God, when Christ the Lord was born.”

Becky got our attention. She pointed to the coffee table where the brown string was twinkling ever-so-less frequently, until it was just ordinary brown string again. Dad carefully picked up the string and examined it. After a few thought-filled moments he said, “My grandmother used to save string by winding it into a ball.” He demonstrated the process to us.

He gently put the ball of brown string onto a glass shelf inside Mom’s curio cabinet. “This wrapping string will help us remember the sacred vision we saw this Christmas day,” he said.



Now Estelle and I have children and grandchildren of our own. We treasure the sight of that little ball of Christmas string and the memory of that vision of God’s gift. Each Christmas season we try to create the right mood, so we can sing the hymns of Christmas and retell the story of that magical Christmas vision.

Scriptures

The Word

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

The same was in the beginning with God.

All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.

In him was life; and the life was the light of men.

And the light shone in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. . . .

He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. . . .

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us

The Gift

God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son.

The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord



Author Wanless Southwick and grandson

Children in his family come to his lap. Sometimes they bring a story book to be read. Sometimes he will tell an impromptu story. This story, “That Little Ball of Christmas String,” began ad lib into the ear of a child one day after a snowy Christmas.

A family discovers how to prevent
God’s greatest Gift from shrinking
into obscurity during Christmas.
