

The Angel Tree

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THE REQUEST TO WORK A SECOND YEAR in the Salvation Army's annual "Angel Tree" booth, a thoughtful community Christmas project enjoyed by church members, came during a thunderous downpour one Monday morning in December.

A powerful storm, which had spawned over dark Alaskan waters, had drifted down the coast moving through the northern states and was now building over southern California. So hard in fact did the storm blow that our town mayor had unceremoniously declared a state of emergency. The nearby city of Hesperia announced the closing of thirty-six roads, including eleven of their major dirt roads, because of heavy flooding. Even Victorville closed roads, and Apple Valley's police in their off-green uniforms issued citations to motorists for driving around barricades.¹

With morning skies in deep grays and blustery ruts of meaningful black, I opened the garage door. The rain continued to fall in strong gusty currents; I noted water as close to the house as it had ever been. Though not overly worried, but concerned enough, I telephoned a friend who I thought might have quick access to sandbags. Water was building without hesitation at the garage door.

I've long complained that our resident desert lot, when it rains, was poorly planned. At one point I suggested to the builder after we had lived here that drainage pipes of some kind should have been laid at key points under the lot to help with the natural flow of water from nearby roads. "All that run-off empties right here," I said gruffly. "That would cost money," was his puzzled reply. At the time we both were gazing at the huge puddle forming at the foot of my driveway that took in the entire road. All this was accented by the yellow "Flooding" sign already posted by town officials.

To say my pond could develop to such a size that it might be used

1. Kelby Hartson, "Storm Causes Closed Roads and Flooding," *Apple Valley News* (Apple Valley, CA), 11 Dec. 1992.

for recreational purposes would be an exaggeration. But still, I did catch my youngest son who was waiting to leave for his second year at Ricks College repeatedly using his boogy board to skim over the water after a heavy downpour. His Levis were wet and dark, his shirt marked; the dirty water foamed and coursed at the board's movement. The brown edges of the pond ebbed and moved much like they would had a car run quickly through. It was a moment of youthful exuberance.

So it was on this blustery day, the storm growing, that I was asked to work in the Angel Tree booth in the local mall. True, I had come in from the backyard wet and cold—where I had been cleaning those self-constructed dirt canals with my shovel to relieve water pressure off a second pond—to give a favorable nod to a second year in the booth. Why? Because, I am, . . . how should I say it? . . . available.

The Salvation Army's angel booth is situated in a small wooden enclosure beneath the large white Sears sign at the only interior mall in our valley. Situated just outside that store, it's a place where shoppers may sign up to donate Christmas gifts to the less fortunate children of our area. Being at this location, at the department store entrance, allows one to see folks in all forms of holiday cheer. For a few hours we do indeed become Salvation Army workers—those seasonal volunteers who are commonly ignored in December even when small bells tinkle and carols are left in the wind.

Gratefully, this year my wife joined me for our two-hour stint. To witness people move through the mall to this nondescript stand is to marvel at human goodness. An artificial Christmas tree stood beside the booth, angel tree cards dressing it. The small tree is impressive—filled with hopes and an adult trust. Turning from the tree, I think, how long has it been? I pause. I can't remember the last time I was gainfully employed. I wonder if this will be another Christmas when I increasingly use the term "semi-retired."

Am I retired or one of the large double digit numbers of California's unemployed the paper keeps writing about? No, I don't feel I'm in their official count. The paper reported that recent unemployment figures moved to the highest level in more than nearly a decade.

One article announced that "California's go-go business climate in the 1980s led to overexpansion, giving rise to the continuing wave of job losses through bank mergers . . . We have too many banks . . . and whatever, so we're taking that adjustment now . . ." Continuing, "At the same time California appears to have lost some of its competitive edge." Further encouragement is received from a leading economist who confirms, "We're clearly in unprecedented territory with the severity of this recession, both in terms of depth and duration." He boldly concluded, "It's

frightening."² Clearly, I am assured.

A lady pulls an angel card from the tree and places it on the counter where I assist her. I confidently show her how to complete the form, followed by instructions on how she is to return her holiday-wrapped package—with her chosen card taped to it—to this booth. She smiles and walks off. I file her commitment form in the red overstuffed three-ring notebook that is filled with orders. I am working, I tell myself.

Turning, I find an elderly woman just returning with an arm-load of packages. She kindly took more than one card from the tree days before. In fact, she took a half a dozen cards. She is full of seasonal cheer, but a bit breathless by her trek through the mall. She sets all her packages on the green counter top. Through it, one can spot the air of good will about her. As she walks off I see she is moving with a new feeling. There is a smile in her step.

For the next several minutes there is little or no activity. I sit on one of the folding chairs. People stop to look at the poignant cards for a moment and then continue on. Our booth has been placed each year next to the white-tiled See's Candies shop. But I note with some assurance that we are close enough to find holiday comfort in the sign that Beauty Nails is offering a full set of nails for only \$23. Surely, the economy is turning.

With this my second year of working at the booth, I find it a fulfilling community project. The activity of taking cards and returning gifts is for the most part well spaced. But then too I am refreshed when I count many happy customers leave Beauty Nails. Several patrons have emerged comparing brightly-colored finger tips. They pause for a moment near me and hold their hands forward for each other's critical gaze. I am grateful when I see smiles, a result of the high marks from each other's examination. They continue on as friends. Turning the corner, talking excitedly, they disappear from view.

It was during this same holiday period last year that I had been sincerely questioned by a well-intentioned brother-in-law regarding my circumstances. "What are you doing now?" he probed as we sat together on his couch after dinner and felt the heat from the fire he had just started. "You ride your bike—so what else do you do?" I paused, not sure how to answer and still retain some self-respect in this family gathering. He lamely withdraws from me. "I write," I say.

"You write! But what else do you do?"

Family members in the past have been more gentle and selective in their inquiries. Maybe this was a sign the family was going to question this non-employed member more aggressively.

2. Robert A. Rosenblatt and Stuart Silverstein, "State Jobless Rate 10.1%—Worst Level in 9 Years," *Los Angeles Times*, 5 Dec. 1992.

I found my dentist, who is also my stake president, asking the same kinds of questions. The first one came as I reclined in his dental chair. I could plainly see his head, glasses, and mask encircled by the bright overhead light that illuminated my face. Looking down at me, preparing for a tough root canal, he asked, "Are you still interviewing? I mean, are you still looking for work?" Reasonable questions, but thankfully he had more than one hand in my mouth, and I could not fully respond other than to mutter a noise of some kind. To date, I don't have an adequate answer to these honest questions. For several years now I have been out of the employment loop, the wage earners' circle, and as such have sharply and directly lost importance.

Then later still, after this community service at the mall, and still in seasonal form, we attended a wedding reception. The church hall was decorated in trees, ornaments, bows, and packages. I wandered to the table where the wedding cake was being served and saw that a former church co-worker was serving. I had not seen her in several years, not since being released as stake mission president. She was cutting and placing pieces of the cake on small plastic plates.

It had been some time since we last spoke, and in fact I hardly recognized her. But then I recalled she and her husband, who formerly flirted in real estate, owned several prominent fast food restaurants placed in strategic freeway off-ramp locations along the interstate. I believe in recent years they had done well. Quite well. Most of their extended family works in the restaurants.

As I moved closer to the table, she was initially surprised to see me; she had not seen me at the bank where I was once employed. I reached for a plate. She looked up, paused for a moment, and blurted, "Oh, are you still here?"