

RENDERINGS OF AN ATTIC

My wife verbally informed me three weeks in advance of the scheduled clean out day. She circled it in red on the scenic calendar in my den. She circled it red on the church calendar I carry in my briefcase. She left numerous messages with the church secretary. I had to face it; a better opponent beat me.

The annual Ladies of St. John Rummage Sale for Foreign Missions preceded any governmental recycling program by years. Cut-off plastic milk jugs held tomato plants for sale by Judi Krautmeire. They reused plastic bags for bagging sale items. There were a few items that had become so familiar that several of the boys placed small wagers on the side as to who would get them this year. I remember seeing my carved wooden eagle lamp at Johnny Rondo's house one year. The next year it occupied the stand next to Milt Carson's sofa. The following year found it at Bob & Jean Colbert's place.

Once in a great while, something new would surface at this sale. It usually came about from one of two sources. Someone new arrived in town or someone cleaned out an attic. You see, attic

merchandise did not make the rounds as often as it occupied the upper dust collecting section of the house. Always more difficult to access, it had a relatively stable life up there. The garage generally wound up being the more common source for upcoming sales. So, while I had to put up a certain amount of resistance to such work, an attic offered new ground or new adventures.

Putting on my oldest clothes, I readied myself for the first hurdle in the adventure—opening the door to the attic without the steps coming down and hitting me in the head. Over the years, I've made numerous mental notes to fix that problem, but the visit to the attic is so rare that once I've completed whatever I had to do up there, the urgency to fix it drifts into seldom used sections of the brain.

Surviving the first hurdle of the ladder, I stepped up into a world of ... well, a world of dust. I turned on the flashlight to help me find the cord that operated the switch of the attic light. The shadows cast by the attic light, still today at my age, harbor eerie recollections of ghosts that survive only on dust and little children. Fortunately, I am neither.

The first box I encountered had the usual contents—old skates that no one in their right mind

would ever try to skate with, a jack in the box that I had when I was six years old (of course it no longer worked; that's what attics are for, aren't they?), and a cigar box full of baseball cards. I set the baseball cards aside for further reading in my den and left the rest of the contents in its tomb.

The next box contained various items belonging to my wife, so I took them down for the sale, relying on the well-oiled excuse of ignorance as backup. You have to give the illusion that you're doing a yeoman's job of cleaning out, or she might question your selections for leaving alone. I did likewise with several boxes containing items belonging to my children. Decisions on items of such ownership ultimately left one between a rock and a hard place. If you don't bring it down, your wife gets mad at you. If you do bring it down, your children get mad at you. So, I relied on ignorance again and let them hash it out.

Over in the far corners of the attic world, I found an old chest. If I had ever known what the chest contained, I had long forgotten, so it provided more fodder for an inquiring mind. Brushing the dust off the top, I opened it up and discovered contents that would delight a history detective for months. Since this had the potential of serious

decision-making, I brought it over to the light and pulled up an old box to sit upon.

My first selection comprised an old photo album. When I opened it up, half of the pictures fell off the page. No sheet protectors in those days, and the glue just wasn't the same as today's high-tech stuff. The recaptured images lacked the grandeur of glossy color and digitized detail. Those premiums came after the image entered your head and the quality varied with the limits of your imagination.

I carefully picked up the picture that fell the farthest distance away and turned it over to see my grandpa and his brother standing next to an old airplane. In the years following the war, they had operated a local flight school, as well as a farm. It reminded me of the story when they flew to the small town where many of my grandpa's relatives lived. The small towns rarely had landing strips, so pastures, if you knew the owner, often served as such. They had landed on the pasture of my grandpa's cousin and were coming to a stop when they hit a muddy spot. The plane tipped forward on its nose and bent the propeller. My grandpa unbolted the propeller and took it into the blacksmith's shop. He straightened it up and my grandpa bolted it back on

the plane. An unsophisticated repair by current standards, but they flew it back home.

Next, I came upon a picture of my great uncle sitting in the seat of an old bus. During the war, there were few young men available to help with work on the farms. My grandpa had arranged a deal with the army to use German prisoners of war from a local camp for farm labor in exchange for providing food for the camp. My great uncle would drive the old bus to the camp and pick up a load of prisoners to bring to the farm. He said one time the guard accompanying them had him stop at a gas station because he needed to use the restroom. Before he got off the bus, the guard handed his gun to one of the prisoners. When he came back, the prisoner handed the gun back to him.

An early attempt at colorizing photos found its way into my hands with a picture of Baby, a runt Golden Retriever, that my grandpa and grandma had on the farm. Baby was a ‘digger’, who, if she couldn’t be found, was sure to be at the bottom of a hole somewhere on the farm. My dad said they nicknamed her ‘Gator’, because sometimes all you saw was a pair of alligator eyes peering out of the hole.

At the back of the photo album, I found some old letters. In one of them, my dad had written to his sister one spring about everything that he still had to do to get ready for planting. He described an incident where he got up on the combine to start it for harvesting the winter wheat. He hadn't run it for three or four months, so he dropped in a fully charged battery and filled it with fresh fuel. When he hit the starter and the engine fired up, something came flying out the chute. Apparently, a possum had sought a winter haven in the combine. When the possum hit the ground some twenty feet away, he took off running and never looked back.

I'm not sure how these letters found their way back to our family's house, but I'm glad they did. In another, my mom had written to her sister about the time when they were out by the big pond on the farm feeding our ducks, Lucy and Ethel. She described a moment in which I was running down the path beside the pond away from her. Having just recently learned to walk, I followed Lucy and Ethel as they waddled down the path. With diaper enhanced little britches, I was indistinguishable from Lucy and Ethel from the rear as we three waddled together.

The second album in the chest had more recent family photos, including one of my dad, my mom, and myself sitting on a bench outside the house. My dad held Snoopy, a stray Beagle that they adopted. My mom held Hunter, a Cairn terrier and a fierce protector of house and home. I held Smoky, a stray cat that considered the farm her new home.

Hunter and Smoky held onto the more traditional dog/cat relationship. Snoopy, who was about as friendly a dog as you could have, and Smoky had a relationship predicated on a single swipe by Smoky at Snoopy's nose. It became immediately clear to Snoopy to keep his distance. Snoopy had a bit of wanderlust in him sometimes. When he would go into the neighbor's corn field, Smoky would follow him as far as the fence and then she would jump up onto the top of a fence post and watch him. Occasionally, she would look back towards the house as if to say, "Isn't somebody going to do something about him?"

My exploring momentarily stopped when I heard my wife calling me from below. I had the foresight to have a box of items ready to go at my side. When she called a second time, I descended

the steps with a box in hand and said, “You called me, dear?”

Seeing that I was still actively engaged in the clean out process, she said, “Yes, but never mind.”

When I reached the garage with the box, my wife dispatched me to get the pickup truck, back it up into the driveway, and start loading boxes that she had already sorted. Sometimes, as a pastor, it seemed like you always had to prod and direct your parishioners to get things done. In a strange, twisted sort of way, it felt good to not have that responsibility on certain occasions. To be on the receiving end of prodding and directing, almost felt good, within certain limits of course. The Ladies of St. John Annual Rummage Sale for Foreign Missions fell into such a category. To borrow the expression, “Don’t Mess with Texas”, this time of year, around here, it’s “Don’t Mess with TLSJARSFFM”. I suppose if you lived in Texas, it could be, “Don’t Mess with TLSJARSFFM in Texas”.

Having loaded all the sorted boxes, I started to head back to the attic when I saw Elmer White driving into our driveway. Using my deductive powers, I surmised he would need something pertaining to TLSJARSFFM. Correct in my

deduction, I gave him three extra empty boxes we had. Just before he pulled away, he leaned out the window of his pickup truck and said, “Do you want in on this year’s pool on the eagle lamp, Pastor?”

I answered, “I’ll need to pass on that this time, due to the SEC’s rules on insider trading.”

When I got back into the house, I took a detour into the kitchen for a light snack so I could continue my task with full physical effort. When I once again climbed the attic steps, I felt as though I had returned to a world of my own, a home within a home. Being careful not to bump my head for a third time, I resumed my place on the box near the chest under the light. At that point, the sun came out from behind the clouds that had been holding it hostage all morning. The sudden burst of light coming through the soffit vents added a different dimension to that small space in the attic. It was almost as if I had been given a window into a painting in progress. Could it be God rendering a work of art that said to hold on to the past; relish it; learn from it; use it as a light into the future? I believed that the Creator of all had let me know that the joy of life was here and that I should abound in its memories and that above all that I should thank him eternally for life.

And I did. Until my wife called me again for another box of attic renderings.