

What We Hold Dear

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November, 2011

What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: 'tis dearness only that gives everything value. Those are the words of Thomas Paine, one of the Founding Fathers of our nation. During this Thanksgiving holiday when we gather round in gratitude for the blessings of this life while another year comes to a close, perhaps it's time to consider what we hold dear and what that says about who we are and how we want to be remembered.

We might reflect on Benjamin Franklin's list of virtues he developed in the 1730's, ones he felt were important guides for living--order, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, and tranquility. Franklin tracked his progress of living these virtues by using a little book of charts, making marks for each fault committed that day.

We could even go back to what we learned in kindergarten. "It's a hard life," my six-year old grandson says of kindergarten. Maybe so. My first grade report card certainly laid out a tall order. Not only were we to excel in Arithmetic, English, History, Geography, Reading, Music, Art, Penmanship and Citizenship, if we wished to succeed in life, we should be cautious, faithful, industrious, neat, honest, just, kind, true and courteous. And since good health is essential to satisfactory school work, health habits recommended included sleeping at least ten hours each night in a well ventilated room, eating proper food, bathing often and keeping hair and fingernails clean. Cleaning teeth daily, carrying a clean handkerchief and protecting others when coughing and sneezing while watching posture when sitting, standing, and walking completed the requirements.

The only negative checkmark on my card came during the fifth six weeks' period under the conduct section, Whispers too much. And so began my writing career which climaxed six years later with winning the Southeastern Michigan Scholastic writing contest. After submitting a poem to the contest sponsored by the Detroit News, I was awarded a copy of Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary. My poem, one I committed to memory and can recite to this day, was a mix of rhyme and rhythm about a dog named Tony. It was sent to New York for national judging from which I won nothing.

What we hold dear may be reflected in how we live our lives, what we give our time to, what we support financially and emotionally. Or it may simply be the list that shows up in our obituary, a list far too many of us in the autumn of our lives are compelled to read these days. My only hope is that my obituary doesn't say, "She was a really nice person." I'm of the persuasion of author Laura King who in her book, *A Whistling Woman is up to No Good*, says, "Nice has got to go."

In a play I directed about an Italian-American family by playwright Joe DiPietro, *Over the River and Through the Woods*, the character Nick Cristiano knows what's dear to his heart and states it in the first minute of the play, "Family, faith and food." Ah, that we could be so clear.

Should we consider the over two-hundred-year-old wisdom of Thomas Paine and look at what we hold dear as the only thing that gives value? Should we hold ourselves accountable to the edict of Benjamin Franklin's virtues--order, moderation, frugality, justice? Or should we simply go back to the things we learned in kindergarten--faithfulness, kindness, honesty? Our answers to these questions are as important a directive of our lives as any.

In this year when my son turns forty, my grandson six, and I enter my last year of a decade, I think it's time to reassess what I want to be remembered for and what I hold dear. One day we will all become just memories in the hearts and lives of those who knew us. What do we want those memories to be? Perhaps we should take Ben Franklin to heart, write down our values, share them and live accordingly. And maybe contemplate what's dear to our heart. And then remember those first grade words: be kind, be just, be honest, be true.