

How My Mother and Bob Hope Taught Me the True Meaning of Christmas

It has been fifteen Christmases since my mother passed. But, I can't help remembering all the lessons she taught me – especially one regarding what Christmas is all about.

It was Christmas Eve, 1987. I was a young naval officer and I had been at sea nearly 100 days straight escorting U.S.-flagged tankers through the Persian Gulf in the largest convoy operation since WWII. On this particular Christmas, my ship, the aircraft carrier, USS Midway, was just outside the Strait of Hormuz, off the coast of Iran, while Iran and Iraq were approaching their sixth year of war with each other.

It was December 24th and Bob Hope flew aboard my aircraft carrier. Of course it wasn't just Bob. Oh no. He brought a bevy of beauties, with impossibly perfect bodies, with legs that never stopped, with perfect smiles and Big Hair. He came with singers and actors and beauty contest winners.

I was thinking back on previous Christmases while waiting for the show to begin. Christmas was my mother's favorite holiday and she always pulled out all the stops and all her Hummel Christmas figurines were paraded out and displayed, depicting nativity scenes and Christmas characters, like Santa and Rudolf. I could remember so many of my mother's perfectly orchestrated Christmases, but not all distinctly and separately. Many seemed to run together to where I couldn't remember which Christmas had brought me the Hot Wheels set and which brought me the blue blazer.

But thanks to my mother, there were Christmases throughout my past, when the world around me was still so very new and I had found heroes who caught footballs and swung bats, heroes who I believed were just and fair and played for the love of the sport. Those Christmases were white and cold on the outside, but warm and glowing on the inside. As I waited for Bob Hope's Christmas show to start, I felt so distant from the wonder of the season seen through the eyes that I had when I was waist high and my feet stuck straight out from the church pew when sat.

As I waited on the hanger deck, I thought of my childhood home and all the seasonal aromas in the house. Breads and cookies that spread their scented glory throughout the rooms and struck one in the soul with the first step inside from the winter wind. A smell that said "home" like no other, a smell that welcomed all to the glowing promise of the ancient hearth. A smell that welcomed Christmas. And other aromas as well. Aerosols that billowed from the bathrooms of the house, as it filled with too many elderly family females for the square footage of powder rooms, mixed with the mist of fogged up mirrors and invisible, but staggering, perfume clouds.

Eventually, the show got started with Bob leading the way. I was shocked and surprised at how talented and engaging he was, live and in person. The show turned out to be much better than I had expected. Bob Hope actually was a very funny man with a wicked sense of looking at the

world and twisting his words to make everyone laugh at their own worst weaknesses and gaffes.

But when the laughs were done, the reality of this Christmas and how far away it was from any of the Christmases I remembered - that reality crushed my soul.

After the show, I went to my bunkroom where I opened the presents that my mother had sent me. She'd sent a little u-do-it-yourself, put'em-up plastic Christmas tree. I had put the thing up in my tiny and crowded bunkroom. It was something that resembled the little Christmas tree in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. Pathetic in a cute sort of way. Mom had also sent a good couple handfuls of my old and faithful Christmas tree decorations, like the tiny clothes pin soldiers I had made back in first grade. I hung all those faithful, Elmer's glue-dried-and-dripping decorations, decorations that had tiny red pipe cleaners for arms and colored cotton balls for hats. I hung all those decorations on the u-do-it-yourself, put'em-up plastic Charlie Brown Christmas tree, and didn't care if anyone might laugh at it.

I sat - alone - opening brightly wrapped packages that contained the presents sent by my mother to represent the love and warmth of family. I sat and opened those bright boxes in the glare of the blinking lights of the put'em-up plastic pathetic tree. And in the flashing hues, I was suddenly swept with a loneliness so absolute, so profound and pure, a desperate longing that gripped my soul and squeezed and squeezed, until tears were squeezed from my eyes. And as I sat and stared amid the torn wrappings, so happy in their colors and cheery brightness, I cried.

I cried for the loss of those long-ago Christmases that were warmth and childhood. I cried for that forever fled long ago when I had sat between my parents at church on Christmas Eve, warm and safe and oh so large on each side of me, and sang the ancient songs of harking herald angels and mangers that were far and away. I cried for a world that needed men like me, in uniform, in harm's way, flung across the world, separated and gone away.

In the tear-blurred lights and at that moment, I missed my mother and my family as I had never before. I missed the staggering perfume clouds. I missed the fogged up mirrors. I missed the cooking smells. I missed each and every one of them in my crystal pure, absolute loneliness. It was the kind of missing that stripped away my outer man, shucking me like a husk, leaving only the naked little boy that still lived inside me, exposed and crying.

I believed in what I was doing. I believed in the duty I had as a US Navy officer. I firmly believed that societies grow and flourish only so long as there are those who are willing to sacrifice on their behalf. My mother had taught me this.

But theories and duty and abstract beliefs can be pretty inconsequential when a man is exposed to the icy winds of his little-boy loneliness. And in the winking lights of my plastic Charlie Brown tree, all blurred with my tears, I wondered if I wasn't on the wrong path. I couldn't help thinking that, when it came down to the brass tacks of life, there really wasn't a

whole lot else that exemplified the best of life than Christmas spent with Mom, Dad, and family.

But then, I also thought how someone as famous as Bob Hope – who was such an American icon – had traveled so far to give a show to me and my shipmates. How he and so many had given up their families at Christmas to come such a long way to reach out to men like me. Just to let us know that we weren't alone – not really – that we were all part of a society of shared hopes, shared dreams, and shared striving. Suddenly, I felt that I understood more clearly than ever the beliefs I'd been taught by my mother regarding Christ's birth and sacrifice: that our God had taken on the frailty and limited form of humanness, that He might share in human joys and pains and lonelinesses and deaths. I suddenly grasped with new insight what my mother had always said: it is in the wonder and hope and belief in the love of a God who would willingly share in the crushing mortality and limitations of His fleeting creations which is at the heart of Christmas.

My mother's teachings found their mark that lonely Christmas. I came to understand as never before what Christmas was for my mother. For Mom, Christmas was not in the glitter and props and material objects offered and received. It was not in rituals, half pagan, whose meanings had long been forgotten. Christmas, for my mother – and now for me – would always be in the warmth of family, in the hearts of loved ones and of those who one care's about. It would always be in the drawing together against the world's cold to share the warmth that only we can give to each other, and, together, to dare hope for a time when the world won't be quite so mean, quite so lonely, or quite so cold.

In 1987, in the Gulf of Oman, in the North Arabian Sea, my mother and Bob Hope helped me understand the true meaning of Christmas. I have never lost this lesson. I hope I never will.

And I hope that my future Christmases will have that magic that it once had when I had heroes and they were just and good, when the night was cold but the hearts that surrounded me were warm and big and oh so safe. And when the wonder of God's and my mother's love was the wonder of the world itself.

A modified excerpt from the book *Dreams of My Mothers* by author Joel L. A. Peterson