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About Vintage Voice

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VINTAGE VOICE



Something to Do

By the Rev. Fred Fenton

When I announced my retirement, parishioners were surprised. They thought I would have a hard time adjusting to life as a retiree. My wife said it took me “about five minutes.” Free of the demands of being a rector, I quietly settled into an enjoyable life of reading, writing, and travel.

Eventually, I began volunteer work on behalf of undocumented immigrants. I also accepted requests for Sunday supply. These activities enriched my life. They brought to mind a lesson I learned years ago from a stranger who appeared one day at the church.

A small, elderly man with a white cane made his way slowly up to the office door. Being a downtown parish, we imagined he wanted a handout. Instead, he was trying to find something to do. He was not a believer, he said, but had studied early childhood education at a community college. Could we use some help in the nursery? Intrigued, we gave him an interview. He seemed to be what he claimed to be: a lonely old man, legally blind, eager for human contact. We said our paid nursery worker could use a volunteer and asked him to come back the following Sunday.

Between services, I visited the nursery to see if our newest volunteer had shown up. There he was, seated in a rocking chair, with an infant cradled in his arms. The child's mother was thanking him for calming her baby, who had been crying. In the weeks to come, that scene would be repeated many times. John Lockett soon became a nursery draw. Mothers knew if the nursery worker had more than she could handle, John was there to take up the slack. An unhappy child could always find a haven in his lap.

Then one Sunday John didn't show. Everyone seemed concerned, not just the nursery worker. Several young mothers wanted to be reassured he was all right. I made a phone call. John told me he had been waiting at the bus stop when a bus went flashing by without stopping for him. He said this often happened. I was appalled. I offered to pick him up on the way to church. Anyone who has made an arrangement like that knows the perils involved.

The person may not always be ready, or have made other plans for the day and forget to tell you. John never disappointed me. He was always ready when I stopped by his apartment on the way to church.

Those weekly trips gave me an opportunity to get to know our nursery volunteer and hear about his life. John had volunteered for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War. He was a lucky survivor of that bloody conflict. He told me he never joined the Communist Party but was kept under FBI surveillance for years because Communists had been involved in the battle against Fascism in Spain.

Before she died, John's wife ran a corset shop at a shopping center not far from the church. John helped his wife run the shop. When she saw the FBI coming, she would warn John to slip out the back door until the men left. "How did she know they were FBI agents?" I asked. "Who else would wear topcoats and felt hats on a Southern California mall?" he replied.

When I offered an adult class in theology, John was one of the first to sign up. The evening meetings were held in a parishioner's home. Members read and took turns in presenting chapters from John Macquarrie's *Principles of Christian Theology*. Our blind friend contacted the Braille Institute in Los Angeles. They found a volunteer to record *Principles*, chapter by chapter, so John could listen to them in his apartment.

I was surprised and pleased by the quality of work by the class. I sent Professor Macquarrie copies of the outlines members produced for their presentations. Imagine my surprise when Macquarrie, who was Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford, wrote back to say he would be travelling with his wife to Japan for a speaking engagement and would like to stop on the way to visit my class.

The class was excited to meet him. They clustered about as soon as he entered the house. Happy confusion followed. Soon, I noticed our visitor was no longer in the midst of the buzzing group. Looking over their heads, I saw him sitting on the sofa next to John Lockett, engaging him in quiet conversation. This was no proud academic receiving the plaudits of admirers but a professor with the heart of a pastor.

The class met for about a year. John remained an active participant. Everyone loved his gentle nature and quiet humor. He was always the wise elder in the room, bringing a lifetime of experience deepened by living with his disability. We knew this could not go on forever. He was a frail, old man when he came to us. Still, it was a shock to learn one day, about two years after John first walked up to the church office to volunteer, that he had been taken by ambulance to the nearby Veterans Hospital. He was not expected to live.

It was one of the young mothers who called to give me the sad news. I rushed over to the hospital and found John in bed, with a baby on his chest. Mothers holding infants in their arms surrounded him. They were telling John how much he meant to them and to their children. The scene was repeated every day until he died.

Old age has its challenges as well as its rewards. It can involve loneliness as well as freedom from work-related stress. John's example shows us that finding something to do to help others makes a big difference. It can increase one's enjoyment of life and may create friendships that nurture and sustain us to the end.



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