

# The Vintage Voice

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## Stranger On The Train

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I have always enjoyed biking, sometimes using my days off exploring trails in and around Ventura County. The incident I am going to share with you happened a few months before my retirement. I decided to spend a few hours biking along the California coast toward Santa Barbara since the trail follows the train tracks. You see, I do enjoy watching and riding trains. Driving up to Ventura, where I usually began some of my biking trips, I encountered rain. At first I was disappointed. However, as the day progressed into the afternoon hours, the rain turned out to be a blessing. With my wife at work for the day, I came up with a most interesting second plan. By eleven o'clock that morning, I was boarding the Surfliner (Amtrak) in Oxnard on my way to Santa Barbara for a few pleasant hours alone. Arriving in Santa Barbara one hour later on such a pleasant day, with no rain in sight, I left the station and walked up State Street, visiting bookstores, conversing with an acquaintance, indulging in a cup of coffee uniquely called "State Street," and generally enjoying the gorgeous day.

Two hours later, back on the same train for the return to Oxnard, I settled down in an upstairs empty coach for a quiet trip along the familiar coast while watching the pounding waves. Within seconds, an elderly gentleman (I must stop saying that now!) came rushing down the empty aisle and sat down directly opposite me, even though there were no other passengers in the coach. Along with a happy smile, he was carrying a number of packages which happened to be gifts. Without any hesitation on his part, and not knowing me, he immediately proceeded to relate his story, including the reason he had come to Santa Barbara for the weekend.

For years he had been estranged from his son, having nothing to do with him or his family. (I never asked him why he and his son were estranged, it wasn't appropriate.) This meant he had never met his son's wife or his grandchildren. (What a sad commentary, since the son had lived through his late teenage years and his twenties "divorced" from his parents, living so close but separated by miles of misunderstanding. The son had married but his parents were never invited to the wedding. Children were born but grandma and grandpa, living in Pasadena, a few miles to the south, never had contact, even for birthdays and holidays.) After his wife's death, and realizing he was not immortal, my friend felt called to connect with his son and family. A phone call a few days before the visit was greeted with joy by the son, so the father jumped on the train in Los Angeles and went to Santa Barbara. He noted that on the trip north he felt reluctant about getting off the train. What if his son was not there waiting on the platform? What if we didn't recognize each other? He swamped himself with a host of questions as the train drew closer to the station. However, everyone was there to greet him as he reluctantly stepped down onto the platform.

His weekend had gone well, filled with conversation, some reminiscing, good food, and a trip to the Danish community of Solvang in the Santa Ynez Valley. He was overjoyed to the point of tears as he continued to relate his story. He had waited for this sacred weekend with doubts but he was now returning home with a new purpose in life. I felt privileged to be the first person to hear such good news.

At one point, however, he returned to his old self: “We had a good time,” he said, “but it is up to my son to invite me back again. I called him first. Now it is his turn.” Sounds familiar!

As the train rolled on down the coast past the small vacation community of La Conchita, I reminded him that maybe he should wait for a few weeks, and then, if he didn’t hear from his son, call again and invite himself for another visit. Or he might write to his son and daughter-in-law, thanking them for such a good weekend. Another suggestion was to invite his son and family to visit him in Pasadena. “Someone needs to take the first step,” I said. Hopefully his son would call first. After a few moments of silence, he announced that those ideas might just work. He would think about them, since he knew he wasn’t getting any younger.

While the train stopped in Ventura he talked about how lonely he had been since his wife’s death over a year ago. This past weekend had offered him hope and, especially, a reason for reaching out further to his son and family.

As the train drew closer to the station in Oxnard, I stood up, shook his hand, and let him know that the past hour had been an eventful time for both of us. It had not been the quiet, serene trip I had anticipated, but the outcome had made my day. Remaining seated, surrounded by presents, he thanked me a number of times for allowing him to share his story. He never asked me my name, nor did he ever ask what I did for a living. I never volunteered. I was simply there, sitting in the empty coach, and he needed to share his story of good news with an available listener who might be interested. I have often wondered who he would have spoken with if I had not been available, since some would have been put off by his sudden intrusion.

Stepping off the train, I felt there had been a purpose for this sudden trip to Santa Barbara. I stood on the platform waving to my momentary friend as the train moved on. Yes, there was a purpose for that morning outburst of rain.

As I drove home, I thanked God for allowing me to spend the past hour with this gentleman in need. It was one of those precious moments in time when you know God is in control.



The Rev. Canon Alfred H. Smith is retired and living in San Diego. He is the former rector of St. Columba’s Parish, Camarillo, California. In retirement, he serves as a reader for the KPBS Radio Reading Service and is an Honorary Assistant at St. Bartholomew’s Parish, Poway. He and his wife, Stephanie, have two children and five grandchildren, living directly across Interstate 15 in Scripps Ranch. He gardens, writes, spends time with grandchildren and travels.