

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

■ March 2003

The Wayward Wallet

The Rev. Ashmun N. Brown

It was a frightening moment.

I was planning to meet some friends for lunch. I had traveled to a nearby town on the interstate for a doctor's appointment, but returned in plenty of time to meet them at the restaurant. As I felt for my wallet, there was the terrible realization that it was not there. No driver's license, no identification, no Medicare card, no credit card . . . all, gone.

This has not happened to me very much. I tend to be a somewhat obsessive-compulsive sort of fellow, so that my wallet is usually checked out, along with my car keys, before I ever leave home. But there was no denying the fact that my wallet, which usually sits comfortably on my hip, was simply not there, nor was it in the truck I was driving.

I did meet my friends, apologized for being late, and requested a small loan to cover lunch. The First United Methodist minister came to the rescue, and I was his guest. Needless to say, I was not paying close attention to what was being said as we prepared our annual Ecumenical Easter service. My mind was on that wallet, wherever it might be.

I had stopped in a rest area, so I thought that maybe it had somehow fallen out of my pocket there. I called the Highway Patrol, and they were understanding and considerate and said they would have a patrolman drop by and check it out. They called back a few minutes later, no luck. It was not there, nor had it been turned in.

The doctor's office staff looked in the examining room, the lobby, everywhere I had been; again, no luck.

It is on such occasions that we become aware of how difficult it is to prove who we are. Without my driver's license, I could not even establish my name. Driving without it was technically a violation, so I had become a scofflaw. There was a sum of money in the wallet, and of course it, too, was missing. Perhaps it had become a motive for perfidy of some sort.

All kinds of scenarios began to form in my head. I could hardly blame a stranger, since to my certain knowledge I had met no one that morning. The rest area was virtually deserted. There had been two or three people waiting to see the doctor, and as I remembered them, they hardly appeared to be of the criminal sort. I trusted the medical staff. Certainly, with Medicare footing the bill, the cash in my wallet was peanuts.

Had I simply dropped the wallet someplace, and another person had picked it up, a person in need of sufficient money to buy the serum necessary to save his mother from a fatal disease? The amount in the wallet was exactly what he needed, and he thanked God for it as he sped to the nearest pharmacy and left with the necessary elixir. Well, who could blame him?

Or had it been a gangster type who had then assumed my identity and my credit cards, and began spending wildly in casinos and places not usually frequented by priests? In my next bill from American Express, would I find that my credit card had been used to buy a Saturday Night Special, which was used to rob a small mom-and-pop candy store in some blighted neighborhood? If the gun were traced, I would have some explaining to do to my bishop.

Or it could be a person addicted to pornography, and the itemized charges would be enough to shock a libertine.

I scarcely remember what I ate that noon. It was a buffet, and I am certain that I ate the fried okra. But it is hard to keep your mind on things when it is racing away, worried about the whereabouts of something as intimate as one's wallet.

I had forgotten the possibility that it might have fallen into the hands of a Klu Klux Klansman, and that my driver's license picture could end up on a public endorsement of white supremacy. My Voter Registration Card might have allowed such a person to vote for all sorts of unseemly candidates. Fortunately, there was no election taking place at that particular time, so far as I knew.

I think the greatest loss was that of the driver's license. That is how we are known in the world today. Without the license, we are nameless and address-less, and it is impossible to engage in such everyday transactions as cashing a check. There seems to be magic in the license numbers, so much so that people sometimes have the numbers printed on their checks. It saves time, I suppose. The only numbers I am able to recall are from my days in the Army. Those numbers were shorter than the driver's license numbers, anyhow.

My other cards were pretty predictable, I suppose, and most people's wallets contain them. A membership in AARP, of course, for those of us approaching middle age. Insurance cards to prove that my truck is insured. Without documentation, my criminal activity increases, since it is a "sin" to drive without the insurance card.

Do not think me rude when I report that I left the luncheon early. I decided to go back home and then carefully retrace my steps from bedroom to dining room to interstate to doctor's office, with a stop along the way at the rest area. My wallet had to be someplace, and if it was gone, I had a lot of work to do.

I went into my bedroom. I pretended to dress. I put the car keys from my bureau top into my left front pocket. I reached for my wallet with my right hand and . . . there it was, under a letter I needed to remember to answer. While I, in my imagination, had gone all over the country, the wallet had gone nowhere, and was safe and untouched.

I looked at my driver's license, just to make sure who I was. I was me.

Or was I? The real me would have had a lot more to eat that noon than fried okra.



The Rev. Ashmun Brown is Priest-in-Charge of St. Agatha's Episcopal Church in DeFuniak Springs, Florida. He is retired from the Diocese of Central Florida, and served as an attorney with the Federal Aviation Agency and with NASA. He was General Counsel for the University of Central Florida. He is an avid reader of detective stories and watcher of glorious sunsets. He and his wife, Rita, his cat, Deuteronomy, and her dog, Buddy, moved into a new home about a year ago.



445 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10016