The Stranger

(Selected)

A few months before I was born, my dad met a stranger who was new to our small Tennessee town. From the beginning, dad was fascinated with this enchanting newcomer, and soon invited him to live with our family. The stranger was quickly accepted and was around to welcome me into the world a few months later. As I grew up I never questioned his place in our family.

In my young mind, each member had a special niche. My brother, Bill, five years my senior, was my example. Fran, my younger sister, gave me an opportunity to play ‘big brother’ and develop the art of teasing. My parents were complementary instructors – mom taught me to love the word of God, and dad taught me to obey it.

But the stranger was our storyteller. He could weave the most fascinating tales. Adventures, mysteries and comedies were daily conversations. He could hold our whole family spell-bound for hours each evening. If I wanted to know about politics, history, or science, he knew it all. He knew about the past, understood the present, and seemingly could predict the future. The pictures he could draw were so life-like that I would often laugh or cry as I watched. He was like a friend to the whole family. The stranger was our storyteller.

He took dad, bill and me to our first major league baseball game. He was always encouraging us to see the movies and he even made arrangements to introduce us to several movie stars. My brother and I were deeply impressed by John Wayne in particular.

The stranger was an incessant talker. Dad didn’t seem to mind, but sometimes mom would quietly get up, while the rest of us were enthralled with one of his stories of faraway places, go to her room, read her Bible and pray. I wonder now if she ever prayed that the stranger would leave.

You see, my dad ruled our household with certain moral convictions. But this stranger never felt obligation to honor them. Profanity, for example, was not allowed in our house – not from us, from our friends, or adults. Our longtime visitor, however, constantly used four letter words that burned my ears and made dad squirm. To my knowledge the stranger was never confronted.

My dad was a teetotaler who didn’t permit alcohol in his home, not even for cooking. But the stranger felt like we needed exposure and enlightened us to other ways of life. He offered us beer and other alcoholic beverages often. He made cigarettes look tasty, cigars manly, and pipes distinguished.

He talked freely (probably too much and too freely) about sex. His comments were sometimes blatant, sometimes suggestive, and generally embarrassing. I know now that my early concepts of the man/woman relationship were influenced by the stranger. As I look back, I believe it was by the grace of God that the stranger did not influence us more. Time after time he opposed the values of my parents. Yet he was seldom rebuked and never asked to leave.

More than forty years have passed since the stranger moved in with our young family on Morningside Drive. He is not nearly as intriguing to my dad as he was in those early years. But if I were to walk into my parents’ den today, I would still see him sitting over in a corner, waiting for someone to listen to him talk and watch him draw his pictures.

His name? We always just called him T.V.

Do What Comes Unnaturally

(by Steve Patton)

***“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”*** (**Romans 12:21**).

I read on someone’s blog recently about an incident they experienced at a Starbucks drive-thru.  A woman thought she was being cut off in line and shouted all kinds of obscenities at this blogger (Susan).  Seeing the harried state of things in the face of the woman (red eyes, frizzed hair in a ponytail, glancing at her phone every few seconds – other indications of a worried, frazzled mom), Susan pulled up to the speaker and told the cashier she wanted to pay for the woman in front of her and to tell her she hopes she has a better day.  Susan watched as the woman had a long conversation with the cashier and paid her own tab.  When she got to the window Susan said, *“No takers, huh?”  “No,”* the cashier replied.  But the lady was overcome by her gracious offer and was totally amazed she would offer to pay for her order after the names she had called her.  *“Did you tell her I said I hope she has a better day?”  “Yes,”* the cashier answered, *“She said she already has.”*  As Susan pulled away, she said she began to cry, not because of the lady’s response but because God had answered her recent prayer to see others as He sees them - and to show some grace to others.

It is so important that we can do more than tell people how Christians act under stress.  We must learn to actually do it.  Changing other people’s lives begins by their observing changes in our own.  Peter said they may even think you strange for how you live your life (**1 Peter 4:4**), but some of them will appreciate that “strange” reaction and be moved by it.  Then the door opens to speak of why you are different and the power of the grace of God to change us.

Next time someone treats you badly, don’t do what comes naturally.  Do what comes unnaturally – react like Jesus.  Return good for evil and wait for the opportunity to bring a soul to the Lord.  Pray for such opportunities.  God will provide.  I have seen it happen many times.