

A Life Full of Riches

This material world constantly reminds me of what I don't have. But somehow I still feel wealthy.

By KARL R. GREEN

IT WAS EARLY DECEMBER 2003, MY FIRST SEASON AS A Salvation Army bell ringer, when I was confronted with the question. I was standing just outside the doorway of a Wal-Mart, offering a "thank you" and a smile to each person who dropped a donation into my red kettle. A neatly dressed woman and her young son walked up to the kettle stand. While she

searched her purse for some cash, the boy looked up at me. I can still see the confusion and curiosity in his eyes as he asked, "Are you poor?"

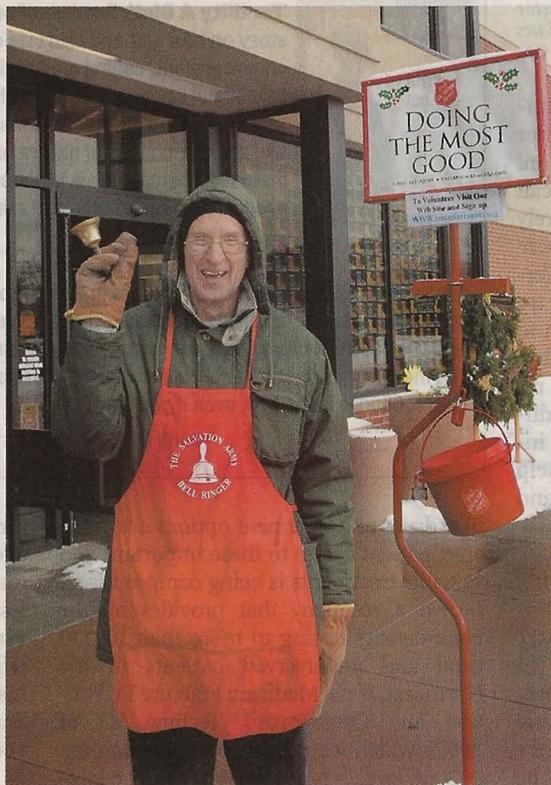
"Well," I stammered, trying to think, "I have more than some people, but not as much as others." His mother scolded him for the social no-no, and they hurried off to do their shopping. His question, however, did not leave me.

I've never thought of myself as "poor," but I can't deny certain facts. Every time I fill out my 1040 form, I fall into one of the lowest income brackets. In the past 35 years, I've taken just one vacation trip. My TV is a black-and-white set that someone gave me eight years ago.

Yet I feel nothing more than a passing whim to attain the material things so many other people have. My 1999 car shows the wear and tear of 105,000 miles. But it is still dependable. My apartment is modest, but quiet and relaxing. My clothes are well suited to my work, which is primarily outdoors. My minimal computer needs can be met at the library.

In spite of what I don't have, I don't feel poor. Why? I've enjoyed exceptionally good health for 53 years. It's not just that I've been illness-free, it's that I feel vigorous and spirited. Exercising is actually fun for me. I look forward to long, energizing walks. And I love the "can do" attitude that follows.

I also cherish the gift of creativity. When I write a beautiful line of poetry, or fabricate a joke that tickles someone, I feel rich inside. I'm continually surprised at



GOOD TIDINGS: *Stuff just doesn't mean that much to me*

the insights that come through my writing process. And talking with so many interesting writer friends is one of my main sources of enjoyment.

But there is one vital area of my life where I am not so well off. In a society that spends so much emotional energy on the pursuit of possessions, I feel out of place.

When I was younger, there was an exceptionally interesting person I dated. What was most important to her, she told me, was "what's on the inside." I thought I

had found someone special to share my life with. Then I took her to see my apartment. At the time, I lived in a basement efficiency with a few pieces of dated furniture. The only new, comfortable chair was the one at my desk. Shortly after her visit, our relationship went straight south.

The seemingly abrupt change in her priorities was jolting. It remains a most memorable turning point in my personal journey.

In contrast to relationships, stuff just doesn't mean that much to me. I think most people feel the same way—except when there are social consequences to not having particular items. There is a commercial on the radio that begins, "Everybody wants a high-end TV..." The pressure to purchase is real. It may be true that everybody wants a high-end TV. After all, nobody wants to be a nobody.

But I'm happy to live without one. In fact, not being focused on material goods feels quite natural to me. There are many people throughout the world who would consider my lifestyle to be affluent.

Near the end of the year, when I put on the Salvation Army's red apron, something changes inside me. Instead of feeling out of place economically, I begin to feel a genuine sense of belonging. As I ring my bell, people stop to share their personal stories of how much it meant to be helped when they were going through a rough time. People helping people is something I feel deeply connected to. While I'm ringing the bell, complete strangers have brought me hot chocolate, leaving me with a lingering smile. Countless individuals have helped to keep me warm with the sentiments of the season: "Thank you for ringing on such a cold day." "Can I get you a cup of coffee?" "Bless you for your good work." December is the time of year I feel wealthiest.

Over the past four years, I've grown to understand more about myself because of a single question from a curious child. As I've examined what it means to be poor, it has become clear to me what I am most thankful for: both my tangible and my intangible good fortune.

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