

Voices from the Past

My father grew up in a large family. He was one of eight children -- so in my growing up years, I had several aunts and uncles and cousins on that side of the family. I have fond memories of our "big" family get-togethers at Christmastime. For an entire day this grand throng would cram itself into my grandparents' small wood frame house -- or occasionally into one of the eight children's houses -- and celebrate Christmas with good food, gifts, lots of old stories, and abundant laughter!

I remember on at least one occasion in my growing up years -- after an entire day of Christmas celebration with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins of all ages -- as I tried to go to sleep that night, in my head I could still hear my family's voices! I would close my eyes and clearly hear the happy bursts of laughter, the loud talking, and other noises of the day. It was very similar to the feeling one has after spending several hours in a boat on the ocean and then stepping back on land -- for the first few hours you feel as if you are still on the boat rocking with the waves. Similarly, I could hear the sounds of our Christmas party long after the party was over!

I remember just lying there... listening... wide-eyed and wondering about this phenomenon. How odd this was to me -- to still hear Christmas laughter, talking, and sounds. The party in my mind continued on for some time as I tried to go to sleep. I tried to focus on one particular voice in the crowd -- but I could not. I tried to understand some of the words being said -- but I could not. The conversations were always just beyond my reach.

Days like this were exciting days to a young boy. I would see cousins I only got to see a few times each year. I would see aunts and uncles who only were in town on special family occasions. The ladies of each family would pitch in and we would have a feast -- fried chicken and ham and all kinds of vegetables and casseroles... and fantastic desserts -- like my grandmother's Butter Roll (I can't explain it, except to say it was buttery, sugary, and melt-in-your-mouth delicious)! And finally we would have some sort of gift exchange. The most memorable aspect of the gift-giving was my grandparents... everyone would get gifts for them -- and since the family was so large -- by the time the gifts were distributed, my grandparents would literally be buried in presents!

Occasionally at these Christmas gatherings, one particular uncle would strategically place a tape recorder in the crowded room and just leave it running to record an hour or so of the general chaos. He kept these tapes at his house, and they were largely forgotten. Fast forward 35-40 years to the present day. Recently this uncle passed away, and as we were helping to sort through his estate, we found a small stash of these old recordings. Although some of these tapes were 35-40 years old, they still were in reasonable working order.

I located a tape player, and I was able to play back some of my uncle's recordings from the late 1970s and early 1980s. Amazingly, I heard the same sound on these tapes I had heard in my head as a young boy as I was trying to go to sleep so many years ago! Laughing, voices, noises - all in a happy chaotic mix. Very few of the conversations were completely understandable,

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although brief phrases could occasionally be understood. Imagine being in a small room with about 40 other people, and everyone is randomly talking and laughing at once -- loudly -- that is close to the sound on the tapes.

It occurred to me that several of the family members in these recordings are no longer living -- including my grandparents. It is so exciting to be able to hear their voices again -- even if it is in a confused chaotic din of sounds. But the recordings are true to the way I remember these occasions anyway -- a sort of happy, chaotic, loud, confusing, pleasant, warm mixture of family.

It is not every day one gets to re-live such memories from childhood, and what a blessing it is to be able to once again hear these voices from the past.

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