

Recalling a Christmas of contrasting emotion



My late Grandfather was gifted with his hands, not a skill I've inherited!

Most Christmas Days blend into each other, perhaps particularly in the years between adolescence and parenthood.

But those special Festive Seasons of one's childhood, and now, for those of us who are parents, take on additional significance because of the excitement of presents being opened by little hands and wide, gleeful eyes.

For me, one Christmas from my single digit days stands out, due to experiencing emotions which couldn't be more removed from each other yet were only separated by 10 or so hours.

In the wee small hours of December 25th, 1988, six months after Ray Houghton put the ball in the English net and just weeks before the first George Bush became US President, I was awake. In hindsight, I blame the glut of Christmas Eve fizzy drink!

As I lay tucked up, wishing that night would end and the day of days would come I heard some scuffling from above which I assumed was coming from the roof.

I sucked in the air as deeply as I could, slowing down my excited heart rate. I truly believed the man in the red suit was on the roof and our presents were en route.

As the scuffling continued above me, I eventually fell to sleep, not realising that in actuality the noise that had given me a palpitation was emanating from the attic as my Dad and brother put together the greatest Christmas present I ever received.

Morning came. There's wrapping paper everywhere, and more than one stocking has been emptied – remember that this was a house of six kids, two parents and the greatest Labrador in all creation, a gentle giant called Huggins. It was blissful and disorganised chaos, as brothers and sisters checked out what the other had received. And it was great fun.

My present was in the hall, just feet from our glittering Christmas tree. I had to keep my eyes closed as I emerged from my

room, literally opposite where my present stood. I took my customary short steps out of my room, opened my eyes, and gasped – I think only my Fisher Price garage had come close to drawing so excited an emotion out of me on any other Christmas morning.

Santa Claus had truly delivered this time around – for at last, at long, long last, I had a desk all of my own – with a drawer, and a shelf and a chair.

I'd always liked writing and drawing, the latter in particular. Solitary activity has appealed to me throughout my life, and now, as an uncle and subsequently as a father, I've found myself returning to sitting at a table, drawing a picture and then colouring it in.

Now, rather than sit at the kitchen table or on the floor, I could sit in my room and draw. So imagine my delight when I opened the drawer to discover a sketch pad, paints, crayons and colouring pencils. I loved my desk with such immediacy that I ate my Christmas dinner that very day. I couldn't have been happier.

I used that desk in my childhood home right up until I graduated from college 14 years later. It's now in the use of a nephew of mine in Limerick, who has grown up with an even more voracious appetite for reading than I.

One man who was particularly pleased with my love of books was my Grandfather, James Keyes, who had extolled the virtues of books and reading to all of us in our formative years. And I owe him, and indeed my other Grandad, Terry O'Hara great thanks for inculcating that particular virtue.

My Grandad Keyes was a manual genius. A shepherd in Curraghmore Estate, the seat of Lord Waterford, Grandad once took apart a chainsaw with my brother (he who helped construct my desk) and put it back together without the use of any handbook.

He was a skilled craftsman and produced many beautifully made crooks (walking sticks), a gift handed down to his son, my Father, but sadly not a dexterity which I possess.

He cut my hair for several years. He brought me on walks with his sheepdog Bob, and a Saturday afternoon not spent in his company was a strange one indeed. He was the 'gentle' in gentleman. And I adored him.

Grandad had been in and out of hospital for a good deal of that year. As a nine-year-old, I didn't understand the nature of his illness, but I knew he wasn't well. But being a nine-year-old, I hoped he'd get better.

At tea-time on Christmas Day, my Dad returned to our house and had some bad news. Terrible news.

Grandad had gone to meet Holy God in Heaven. A day that had begun in elation would end in tears. Lots of them.

It was my first experience of grief. Heartbreaking, gut-wrenching grief. This man, this wonderful man, who'd been a part of my life for as long as memory had served me, was gone.

But he's never really gone. For whenever I'm within reach of the place I grew up, I can see my Grandad, smiling, walking up

the road with Bob to give my Dad a hand with something. He thrived on being busy – and that’s something I definitely did inherit from him.

And when I visit my nephew in Limerick, and see my greatest ever Christmas present still in use a quarter-century later, that makes me smile too. Great memories, just like great people, never fade.