

12@12
The Element of Surprise
December 1, 2016

It still stands out. It probably happened when I was 6 or 7 years old. My room had a window that was right at the front entrance of the house. If someone was doing something at the front door, I knew it. And on that night, December 24th, boy, was there someone doing something at the front door. Out of the dead of night there was a bang, bang, bang—a pounding on the door like I had never heard. And then a thundering voice: “Ho, ho, ho!” as I jolted out of bed. This was no dream. Standing outside my window and knocking at the front door was St. Nick. Soon my brother and sister were awakened too, and my parents took us to the front entry. And there he was: white beard, red coat with white trim, and big black boots. And best of all, presents in hand for all of us.

What a memory! Years later we would find out who it was—a friend of my parents who wanted to bring a little fun into some kids lives. But you can imagine what we must have looked like. Dressed in our little pajamas, eyes as big as saucers, there before us was the man we had already been told didn’t exist. My parents were in on the whole thing. But, of course, they did not tell us what was going to happen; had they done that, it would have ruined the whole affair. That night is a memory, one of my favorite childhood memories, for no other reason than it had a huge element of surprise.

I grew up in California, about 4 hours from the Magic Kingdom. My family made regular trips to Southern California to see relatives, but Disneyland was rarely in the cards. But every once in a while, while traveling along I-5, and always when we seemed to least expect it, my father would make the turn—the turn off the freeway onto Disney Way. The grins on our faces in the back seat when we realized where we were headed were probably worth the price of admission for my parents. I know that because years later with my own kids in the back seat, I looked in the rear view mirror and saw their faces light up, when I did the very same thing.

Giving gifts is a great, isn’t it? But giving gifts with the element of surprise—that is even better. Sometimes giving a surprise gift involves a

price tag. But some of the best surprise gifts can't be bought at Macy's, Best Buy, or Bass Pro Shop. I want to share with you three such surprise gifts today.

The Surprise of Mercy

It was December 20, 1943, a rookie bomber pilot, 2nd Lt. Charlie Brown, was returning from his first mission. Only one of his four engines was fully functional after a raid on a German factory. Of his ten crew members, there were only three who had not been wounded. Brown himself had been hit by shrapnel and had momentarily passed out before regaining consciousness. His tail gunner was dead. Blood was splattered all over the plane, and the plane's sheet metal was riddled with bullets, in some places literally ripped to shreds. And to make matters worse, the return course Brown had been given took him right over a Luftwaffe fighter base.

Standing by his plane at that base was Franz Stigler, one of Germany's best pilots. He had already shot down two B-17 bombers that day. One more and he would win the coveted Knight's Cross, the highest award a Luftwaffe pilot could earn. Spotting the low-flowing B-17, Stigler entered his cockpit and took off in pursuit.

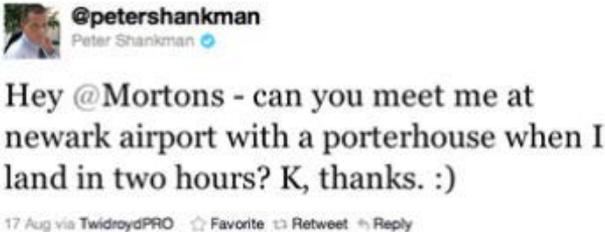
Within a few moments, Stigler caught up with Brown's beleaguered bomber. This would be an easy kill. But something happened at that moment. You might call it mercy. Stigler had never seen an airplane in that condition before. He flew from one side of the bomber to the other; it was a dead duck in the sky. He couldn't bring himself to shoot it down. But what would he do? He knew if someone saw him pull away, or worse yet escort the Allied plane to safety, he would be court martialed. But he did it anyway. He had to do it to keep his humanity.

Brown's plane, thanks to Stigler, made it back to England. Brown would never forget the German fighter who preserved his life. And so some 45 years later, he began to search for Stigler. It took three years, but to his surprise, he discovered that Stigler had been living less than 200 miles from him for decades. A meeting was scheduled. And when the two met, it was Stigler who reached out for Brown and gave him a hug, later saying, "I love you, Charlie."¹

That’s quite a story of the gift of mercy. It’s about as dramatic a story of mercy as there is, largely because it came completely by surprise. I know that Christmas is supposed to be about “Peace on Earth, goodwill towards men,” but I think if we are honest, often times we find ourselves at war with others during Christmas. We fight people in traffic. We fight people at stores. We argue with family members about this or that. We draw battle lines with those who have long been our enemies. And sometimes, we find ourselves in the perfect place for the kill, to put that person in their place. But what would happen if like Stigler, we saw a wounded warrior more than an adversary, and surprised him or her with the gift of mercy?

The Surprise of Service

You’ve heard of Twitter before, the web service that allows you to send out 140-character messages to followers in an instant. People like Peter Shankman, author and entrepreneur, have over 100,000 followers, so when they tweet lots of people get the message. Well, it was August 2011 and Shankman had just finished up a tiring business trip. As he was in the airport readying for his return trip, he hankered for a steak from one of his favorite establishments, Morton’s Steakhouse. That hankering resulted in this tweet:



Of course, he didn’t expect anything to come of it. It was just a fun way of saying what sounded really good in the moment. But someone at Morton’s, a restaurant chain that prides itself on its customer service, got hold of the tweet. They contacted the Morton’s nearest to Newark’s Liberty airport, figured out what flight Shankman was on, and met him at the gate. What was in the bag from the tuxedo-clad delivery man? A 24-ounce Morton’s porterhouse, shrimp, potatoes, bread, napkins and silverware.

To say the least, Shankman was shocked. He had just been surprised by some pretty great service. This was his follow up tweet:



@petershankman
Peter Shankman

Oh. My. God. I don't believe it. @mortons showed up at EWR WITH A PORTERHOUSE!

I think my response wouldn't have been much different. Being served when you expect to be served is one thing. Being served when you don't expect it is a whole different experience.² The Shankman story is a great example of the second surprise I want to suggest this Christmas: the gift of surprising service.

What is it that people would not expect you to do this Christmas? Let's consider the home front. Would others expect you to clean up the house? Would others expect you to volunteer to help with the Christmas decorations? Would others expect you to bring a great dish to the holiday gathering? Some of these things you may normally do. But what could you do that would be a surprise? You don't have to make a big deal about it. In fact, it's best if you don't. Just surprise someone by serving them, and chances are you will bring a good bit of unexpected Christmas cheer.

The Surprise of Generosity

Howard Cooper was 83 years old. He had owned his car dealership in Ann Arbor, Michigan for 47 years. It was time to retire. It was time to sell the business. Before the transaction was complete, however, he wanted to make sure that his nearly 90 employees knew they were appreciated.

So Cooper came up with a surprise "thank you" plan. He gathered all his employees together for what they figured would be his good-bye. But it turned out to be much more than a goodbye. He told his employees that to show his thankfulness for all of their efforts through the years, he was going to give a gift of \$1,000 to each of his employees. But that wasn't the end of his declaration. He said he wanted to give \$1,000 for

each year that a person worked for him. Now, that was significant! Many of his employees had been with him for a long time. One had been there 46 years. All said and done, at what was to be his retirement party, he gave away about \$1 million. Now that is what you call surprising generosity. His employees could hardly believe it.³

If you are like me, you love feel good stories like this, but you can hardly relate. Most of us are simply not in a place to show that kind of generosity towards others. That is true, but that need not keep us from showing generosity in smaller ways.

A number of years ago, psychologist Norbert Schwarz found that surprising generosity doesn't have to be very big to have an impact. He and his team placed a dime near a copy machine where they knew employees would find it. When the subjects who found the dime were surveyed afterwards, they rated their overall satisfaction with life substantially higher than those who did not find a coin. That's right, they were far more likely to say life was good after they had been surprised by nothing more than a dime!⁴

Two years ago at the December 12@12, I told you I had decided to surprise people with a little generosity. There were fourteen days left until Christmas when I spoke, so I went to the bank and got fourteen \$5 bills. Then over the next two weeks I gave away those \$5 bills here and there. Often for no specific reason other than to surprise someone with a little generosity. And based on the responses I got, I would say it was well worth the \$70 investment. This year I will do something similar. This time with \$10 bills. (I have to account for inflation, you know!) And I'm pretty convinced that it will be well worth it again. So how about you? What kind of surprising generosity will you show this, Christmas?

Surprising mercy, surprising service, and surprising generosity. Great gifts to give way at Christmas and at every time of year. I am not sure if you noticed, but these gift ideas are not really my own. They were given out a long time ago, when God surprised us not by coming down in glory, but by coming down as a baby, born not in a palace but in a stable, in a second-rate town. And when he came, he came as servant, who generously gave of himself, ultimately giving his life out of mercy for ours. So when we give these gifts, we not only do good by others,

we enter into the shadow of God Almighty, and that's always a good place to be.

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¹ Otteray Scribe, "[70 Years Ago Today, Two Honorable Men Met...](#)", Daily Kos, December 20, 2013.

² Yosult Usigan, "[Peter Shankman Tweets @Morton's Steakhouse to Bring Him a Porterhouse, Wish Granted](#)," CBSNews, August 29, 2011.

³ Eliza Murphy, "[Retiring Boss Surprises Employees with Big Thank You Checks](#)," abcnews, September 10, 2012.

⁴ Roger Dooley, "[Small Surprise, Big Mood Change, Neuromarketing](#)," accessed November 29, 2016.