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One Christmas when I was 13, my father, a florist, summoned me to his tiny shop in the Paradise section of Philadelphia. Those were the days of department store Santas, geographical closeness of family, church bells tolling blocks away, and the scent of real, handmade Douglas fir wreaths decorated with pinecones and clusters of red berries on every row home. I am proud that I had something to do with those wreaths.

"Watch," my dad said. He weaved branches of fir into perfectly shaped wreaths. Soon he placed a bundle of loose branches on a workbench next to his, and said, "It's time for you to make the wreaths of Christmas."

I don't recall how many wreaths I made that first Christmastide. I do know that many of them found their way to a front door in Paradise. A front door without one of my pop's wreaths was like a church without a stained-glass window.

Symbols are signs for the soul to see qualities of God. The Christmas wreath transfigures a front door the way fire does night; it celebrates the love, the goodness, the joy of the season.

One day when I was working the front of my dad's shop, a businessman who owned the neighborhood department store came to purchase his usual six wreaths — he had been buying Christmas wreaths from my pop for 17 years for the doors of his and his children's homes. He would always pull out a wad of bills as thick as a club sandwich to pay for them.

"Bundle me six door wreaths, son," he said, "and tell your dad to send me a bill."

"Gee, sir, my pop told me strictly cash for the wreaths."

"Just tell him it's for Dick Crean."

I went to back of the shop and told my dad.

"It's okay," he said. "Business is running bad for him."

That was the last Christmas I saw Mr. Crean. His business folded and he moved away.

My pop never got the money for the wreaths. When I asked about it, he simply said to me, "It's not the money that counts. It's the people."

I never forgot that.

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On Christmas Day, Pop and I headed for Mass. Christmas Mass was always special: The altar boys wore red cassocks and white surplices; organ music resonated off the walls, the alleluias of the choir swelled through the air; the scent of incense escaped from the sanctuary; the church was filled to capacity with mothers and babies and old folks and young and everyone in between.

After Mass, I noticed a Douglas fir hanging on the front door of the rectory. I wondered if it was one of the wreaths I had made.

Nah, it was too perfect. It had to be from my father's hands.

My father caught me looking, turned to me, and said, "Yes, it's one of yours."

These days, the tiny flower shop in Paradise is gone, as is my father. But the Christmas wreath remains an uplifting symbol for me. I worked with my pop making wreaths every Christmas for 30 years. Whenever I see a Douglas fir wreath decorated with pinecones, clusters of holly berries, and a red bow hanging on a door, a sense of goodness, generosity and connection wakes in me.

The memories of making the wreaths of Christmas are still so sharp they feel physical; they promise me that I will always be blessed by a usable past, a wellspring of lessons from which to draw, a strong faith, permanent and indelible, to turn to not only in the way my father lived his life but in the way he transferred it to me. It is one of the reasons I have never misplaced the wonder and awe of my boyhood with my pop in his little flower shop in Paradise. This memory — this presence — is a point of infinity, a reminder always of what really matters.

[B.G. Kelley is a frequent contributor to Soul Seeing. You can read all Soul Seeing columns at NCRonline.org/columns/soul-seeing.]

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