

Happy Birthday to You's

By Jerry & Tippy Case

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February 25, 1931 and December 16, 1937. Two birthdays, neither printed in a special color on the new calendars sold or given away each December. Our birthdays, which we remember and celebrate each and every year. We get cards from close friends and relatives, because those people care about us. Terrific!

July 5, 1958. We get cards every year on this date, too, from the same people who send the cards in February and December. Anniversary cards; Happy First, Happy Fifth, Happy Tenth, Happy Fifteenth—nice mushy cards from parents, slightly raunchy cards from old friends, extremely raunchy cards from certain Marriage Encounter friends who shall remain nameless. Again, terrific! Thoughtful and terrific.

And a passage from the Bible, spoken on our beautiful weekends; "And the two shall become one." We've all talked about that passage, read about it, heard and given talks about it and believe it with all our hearts. We all believe that all of us twos have become ones. A couple. Not just "two nice people living together," but one "thing," a new "thing," a new creation. So how come none of you send us a birthday card on July 5th? That was when "The Cases" were born.

You know who remembers? God. He keeps sending us presents, special-couple "thing"-one-unit presents. Gifts like joy, contentment, opportunity, feelings, sex. Lots of gifts that He first gave us on July 5, 1958, and has never stopped sending. And sometimes we wonder why He keeps sending them, because we're just as likely to use them briefly and put them away, or take them for granted. ("Oh, how nice God sent us opportunity again.") We misuse them, even abuse them, or worse, cast them aside for something with a bit more glitter, a bit more gloss, or with another, more popular designer's initials on them.

A truly great present is to be born a couple in America. The freedom we are presented with is truly extraordinary, thanks to the men who formed our country. (What, no women?) But we tend to go for the grotesque, the ersatz American Dream instead of the real one. There's a commercial in our area, maybe you've heard it, that urges people to bring in their gold and silver and exchange it for money. They have different slogans, like, "Good-bye old jewelry, hello new TV!" and, "Goodbye Grandma's silverware, hello new washing machine!" Now that's pretty gross, and we resist their blandishments. But it's only the truly grotesque that we do resist. Minute by minute, day by day, piece by piece, we do succumb.

A quick inventory turns up an electric can opener, 3 clock/radios, a Mr. Coffee, a stereo, a color TV, an electric yogurt maker, a hair dryer, an electric frying pan, a waffle maker, a blender, an electric toaster, a vacuum cleaner, a sewing machine, a tape recorder, a dishwasher, a clothes washer, an electric coffee grinder, a clothes dryer, electric drill, an electric saw, electric hedge clippers and an electric heater.

The Little Space Station on the Prairie. Thomas Jefferson and God must sit together and shake their heads; "They went for the fake instead of the ball." With this marvelous opportunity to be free, free to live out God's plan for us, we get ourselves enslaved to the peddlers and the merchants. Not just the appliance peddlers, but the clothes peddlers, the food peddlers, the real estate peddlers, the soap peddlers-all of them, and lots more. And we think of ourselves as non-modern world. Hah!

Another present: education. The opportunities we've had to go to school and to have our children receive an education. That's something we're really grateful for. But sometimes it gets out of hand. Each of us, but mostly me, has at different times made schooling, lessons and homework so much of a priority that it cast gloom over the entire house. I've crammed information into our children's heads so thoroughly that I know the material better than they do; issued ultimatums and made rules that were impossible to enforce; instituted punishments that were much more restricting for us to carry out than for them to endure, all because every parent worth his salt insists that his children excel in school. But what are we teaching them, really? That Andy has to produce in order to get our approval and love? That Connie's marks are more important to us than she is? That success in school means a better job, a better job means more money, and that being a producer is what is most important in Matthew's life? Maybe we should spend more energy teaching them how to be lovers.

Another gift is a wonderful set of friends; and since Marriage Encounter that gift has another dimension to it. Now they aren't just friends-they're our family, our community and oh, how we abuse that present. We use them as third parties. We noticed with horror several times that there were sensitive subjects between us that we avoided until we were with friends. Then we'd just "happen" to bring them up, in a joking, off-hand, kidding kind of way, using the other couple as a kind of buffer, a sounding board, to keep us from getting too deep, too heavy. We're safe with them around, and if we really play our cards right, maybe they'll solve our problems for us, tell us what to do. Or we look to the community to heal us.

When we're down, when we're troubled, when we're in the pits, we go running off to our "family" when we should be in our own home, leaning on each other, bringing each other to life, using the gifts of our Sacrament to heal each other.

Or feelings, another present from God-two complete sets, from anxious to zealous. Hopefully, a gift that will add to our life, magnify and intensify situations, bring spark and zest to the way we relate. We generally misuse this gift. I like to be seen, by Tippy and everyone else, in a certain way-one part macho, two parts hard-bitten reporter, three parts gruff sentiment. Rye on the rocks. And some of the feelings God has presented come at the wrong time, or in the wrong intensity. I don't want to feel angry when I'm dying to look sensitive, or get sensitive feelings when I think it's time for Clint Eastwood to make an appearance. I listen too much to what the world says I should be and fight off what I am, what God intended, and who Tippy married. A gift ignored, or a gift resented.

Neither of us is really at ease with the gift of feelings. Jerry treated that box as though it were ticking-something to be looked at, sniffed around, but in general to be avoided,

and to be wary of For me it was like Pandora's box I opened it and they all came rushing out and took me over. Too often I become engulfed by my feelings. I get carried away with my excitement and want to charge ahead, full speed, look out world. And I've left Jerry wondering where I went and how he can catch up Or else the world turns black, and everyone is mean. I've gone (what Jerry calls) "over the precipice" again, and it's hard to let him pull me back. We have to be in touch with our feelings, and share them, but if we're at their mercy they're controlling us, and the present becomes a millstone

He also gave us gifts of talents and skills that we're often awkward about even mentioning. We blush and shuffle our feet as though they were our own doing, our creation; and they're not. They're more presents from our generous Father. And we say, "Thank you," and turn around and use them for our own individual purposes. Or the world's purposes. We hurt with words, squelch with humor We get so wrapped up in our own talents that we don't see those of the people around us, or we ignore our talents and waste a God-given gift. And once we're into the world's plan with talents, coupleness goes out the window. I've used my hobbies as a refuge when I've felt unloved; I've withdrawn into them, sometimes, without even realizing it, and gotten so wrapped up in projects that you wouldn't know anyone else was in the world but me.

Another gift. . . physical appearance. The real present there is that God made Tippy look good to me, and He made me look just right to her Now that's a pretty neat gift-to know that when your spouse looks at you he or she smiles kindly and gets lustful thoughts. You'd think this would be one of God's presents that we wouldn't mess around with but noooo!! Bring in the \$15 barbers and the \$25 beauty parlors; line up the diets and the muscle-toners; march out the cosmetics and beauty creams, the deodorants and after shaves; and after we have the "old bods" stylized, sanitized and deodorized, well let's drape and adorn them. And the litany of the saints of the 80's begins: Sts. Sassoon and Sasson, St. Jordache, Sts Ann and Calvin Klein and he (sneaky devil) St. Laurent. Whatever happened to naked and unashamed? Whatever happened to the two people who once said, "You look just right to me"?

A huge present is the opportunity we have for joy. Our Father truly wants us to be joyful, to enjoy one another, and to find joy in our life together. But too often we opt for happiness instead. Peace and quiet make us happy. A funny movie makes us happy. Buying something pretty makes us happy. And happiness is neat, and brings a nice squishy feeling. But it's fleeting. And too often it's an abuse of a gift, a settling for something less, a substitution of what the world wants for what God planned. How about the times one of us has decided not to bring something up that needed bringing up, because we were going out that night and didn't want that spoiled? How about the nights we were "too tired to move," so we curled up in front of the TV instead of with each other? How about the times one of us has agreed to something without wanting to, in order to be agreeable; or times we made a fuss and argued over something that didn't really matter, just to have our own way and the smug feeling of being right? How about the comfort of staying put in a mood, whether it's feeling sorry for myself or drifting in a daydream that keeps me safely in my own world? Shake myself loose? "Real people" together? Sounds risky, is there a guarantee?

And, of course, the greatest present of all. Tippy for Jerry and Jerry for Tippy. Two individuals sparks of life itself, pleasantly packed, one in the 5'2" model with the smooth skin; the other in the 5'8" model with the moustache and muscles. And all those nifty options-humor, compassion, tenderness, zest, diligence, patience- an all but endless list. But on a given day either of us can begin to see their present as yet another appliance. "Make me comfortable, make me happy, make my life easier. Don't, for heaven's sake, assert yourself, question me, hassle me or upset me." The spark part, the essence of each of us, is ignored, and the functions become all important. We use each other like products and fervently hope no major breakdown occurs. Such an inconvenience would be difficult to bear.

We talked about community before, and encounter, church family. And by and large, to those people (you people) we do bring ourselves, for better or for worse. It's with others that we falter, uncertain that the "us" is good enough and caught up in "what will they think" and "how will we look." The present of "the Cases" appears, perhaps, silly, or unsophisticated, or behind the times, or square. So we tamper and fiddle and adjust, and do "the Cases" no favor. Sometimes one of us will look at the other and think, "Who is that?" And doubts creep in quickly then: maybe she wants me to be more .; maybe he wants me to be less . . . "Your present was nice, God, but look here, we've just switched this a bit and turned that a notch. What do you think?" And it's not hard to imagine what He thinks, is it? Sort of like Tippy must think about the hand-made shirt she made me that I never wear, because the collar isn't just right.

We set out to write about Matrimonial Spirituality, and aren't certain that we've done so. Maybe we can't nail down just what that is, but we're pretty sure we know when it isn't, and why it's fled God's plan is so simple-to present yourself unconditionally to him/her-that it appears too simple. We scrounge around for embellishments, and the world is all too happy to supply them. And we get suckered. And the more we embellish, the less we have. All we really need is us, together. And love.