

My Treasures



Treasures, we all have them, things that hold some special meaning. Perhaps there are more of them in my life than would be healthy, but each item connects me to a person, activity, or time that is special to me.

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Walking into my home office, you first see a collection of musical instruments, most hanging on the walls and the largest standing on the floor.

A mountain dulcimer with its slender and elegant hourglass shape adorns the room. My dad played several instruments, and Mom thought she'd like something simple to learn so she could play with him and his friends, something unique to her. We bought the dulcimer and gave it to her at Christmas in 2001. She didn't have it long; a year later, Mom was diagnosed with cancer, and a year after that, she died, but each time my eyes survey the

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room and land on the dulcimer, I think of her. When I take it down and play it, I smile.

Two violins grace the adjacent wall. Methuselah came to me in North Carolina in the fall of 1995. As a scoutmaster, I attended a District Camporee with the boys of my troop. The theme was a mountain man rendezvous. My next-door neighbor, Scott, was in charge of the weekend event and looked very impressive in Native American regalia. I went as a mountain-man fiddler and sat around playing music. A few days later, Scott came over carrying a black wooden violin case. He handed it to me, saying, "I've got something for you. If you can fix it, you can have it. If you can't, throw it away."

After I replaced the tailpiece and a couple of tuning pegs, put on new strings, and repaired the bow, it was ready to play. I showed it to Scott, and he said, "I just wanted to hear it played." Then he told me its story, "It's been in my closet for five years. I got it from my great aunt. She was in her eighties, and I was helping her clean out her house and get rid of things. When I rescued the violin from the trash pile, she told me she got it from her father, but he had never played. She went on to say she could remember her grandfather playing it when she was a little girl. He had gotten it from his father. Beyond that, she didn't know where it came from." We figured it had to date at least to the Civil War, but there was no label inside to tell who made it or when.

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Methuselah became my 'scout violin' and rode on the top of my backpack for several years and hundreds of miles. I played it on mountain tops in New Mexico and California, including Half Dome in Yosemite. I haven't backpacked for some time, but I still take it down to play it, and I think of Scott and other friends from my scouting days.

I haven't found the right name for my other violin, but it deserves one. A few years ago, I walked into a men's bible study and saw a violin case on a table in front of the regulars. Randal saw me and said, "Oh, I'm glad you're here. I found this in a closet when I was looking for a light bulb. I had forgotten I had it. It was my dad's, but I don't know why he had it. He didn't play the violin. I'm not even sure where he got it." He went on, "You're the only person I know that plays the violin, and I don't know what to do with it."

I opened the case, looked over the instrument, and tightened the strings. The bow needed to be repaired, but even with that, the sound was full and resonant. Randall asked again, "What do I do with it?"

I said, "It's in good shape. You can do whatever you want with it. If you don't want it, I'll take it."

He said he needed to talk to his wife first, and a couple of hours later, he sent me a text, "Congratulations, you are the owner of a

vintage violin.”

Randall brought the violin to our next bible study and gave it to me. After getting it home, I used a flashlight to look at the label that most violins have inside the body. The violin was made in 1925 by Ernst Heinrich Roth in Germany. A little research told me that Roth was a well-known violin maker and that his most productive period was in the mid-1920s. When I checked the auction house websites, I was able to find a few of his instruments from that period. The next time I saw Randall, I said, “In the interest of full disclosure, the violin you gave me might be a little more valuable than you thought.”

He looked quizzical, “What, \$500?”

I smiled and said, “Oh, no. I didn’t find any of his instruments that sold for over \$10,000. But I didn’t find any for under \$3,000.”

He said, “You mean I could have had a cruise?”

I chuckled, “You still could. I’ll give it back to you.” He said, “No, I want you to play it.”

Randall retired and moved away a few years ago, and I don’t have much contact with him, but a month or two ago, I received this text message from him: “Was practicing my banjo. And saw a paper with your name on it!!! How RU??? Still have the

Violin??" His timing was perfect, and I was able to respond with, "I'm sitting in a friend's garage playing music with him now."

David and I thought about making a couple of classical guitars. We both played the instrument, and he was also one of the finest craftsmen I've ever known. We talked about it but hadn't done anything about it. Christmas of 1994 was a Sunday, and I saw David at Church. I smiled and said, "I don't have to make a classical guitar. Vanda gave me one for Christmas." My lovely wife knew I'd never get around to making a guitar, even with David's help. So, she bought a beautiful Washburn, a much finer guitar than I would have bought for myself. It is the guitar I used for years as I tucked my two youngest boys into bed. The same guitar I play for my grandchildren now.

I was volunteering at the local hospital as a music therapist. I entered a patient's room and saw several family members. One of them saw the guitar and told me they had been a family folk group. Only a little intimidated by that, I began picking the guitar and heard a female voice exclaim, "Oh, she has a lovely voice." The intimidation melted, and we were friends, brought together by a guitar. Shortly after that, I gave her a name, Voadulce, sweet voice.

With my love of Irish folk music, Vanda thought a Celtic harp would be a nice gift. We had just moved into a large house in

Simi Valley, and we had room. It was a wonderful Christmas with all six boys still at home. We opened presents on Christmas Eve, and when I unwrapped the harp, which was pretty easy to identify — they had kept it hidden, but no real mystery after it was in the room — Hugh said, “Just for the record, this does not go on your backpack. I’m not going to carry it out of the hills when you hurt yourself.”

Six or seven years later, our second youngest son, Owen, was very ill. He couldn’t get food to go down, and he was slowly starving. We tried one doctor after another until someone at Cedars Sinai finally found that his stomach valve wouldn’t open and there was no motility in the esophagus. Surgically removing the valve and making a new flap valve from part of the esophagus should allow him to eat. Now we just had to wait for the insurance approval. After some time, I called the hospital and asked if they had a date. They were waiting for approval. I said, “My fifteen-year-old son weighs less than 80 pounds, and he can’t get food into his stomach. What are the signs I should watch for so I’ll know when he is going into organ failure and is going to die?” There was a pause and then, “I think we should just admit him tomorrow and figure out the insurance later.”

As we drove into Los Angeles, I could tell he was frightened. I asked, “Would you feel better if you knew that I’d be sitting beside you playing the harp when you woke up?”

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His body visibly relaxed, and he said, “Yeah, that’d be nice.”

My wife looked at me with a worried expression, “I don’t know if they’ll let you do that.”

I looked at her calmly, “They’ll let me do anything if I don’t ask.”

Dad sang and played several instruments, but it’s the banjo I most remember. I have two of his banjos, but the Gibson Mastertone is my favorite because of its resonant sound. Mom and Dad spent winters in Arizona for a few years to get away from the zero-degree weather of Northeastern Oregon. Several times Dad would take me to a jam session, code for a bunch of older people who play music together, usually somewhat badly. I’d play the fiddle while Dad picked the banjo. I can’t think of a time I felt closer to him.

Tomorrow, I hope to finish the restoration of my Great Grandfather’s concertina. He died eleven years before I was born, but I have his squeezebox. I have seen pictures of him as an old man playing music with others. When I was a teenager, I’d play with the old instrument, and I’m guessing my cousins did the same because when it finally came to me, it was in a cardboard box and not in one piece. I’ve repaired the valves and reinforced the buttons. Tomorrow I’ll put in a couple of screws to secure the last piece.

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I look forward to making music and thinking of the stories I've heard about my grandfather's father. I'll celebrate my heritage as I create a legacy for my children and grandchildren.

PAINTINGS

The walls of my den are home to more than instruments. Scattered among them are a few paintings. One of them was painted by Oliver Barlow, a dear friend of my youth. We weren't the same age; we weren't even in the same generation. He was already eighty when I was born, and while I know he was young once, I really can't picture him as anything but a squat older man with a fringe of white hair. In his long life, he had been a craftsman, a house painter, a musician, a geologist, a custodian, a horticulturist, and a businessman. He was an athlete who enjoyed wrestling, boxing, swimming, and tightrope walking. He quit ice skating when he was 80 because he was afraid that he was getting brittle and might break something if he fell. He was an avid fisherman until the age of 86, when he said, "The stones were becoming slicker, the banks steeper, and the trails longer."

Mr. Barlow was a great man, but not because of his accomplishments (of which I have listed only a few); those are things adults would notice, and I was a little boy. No, Mr. Barlow was a great man because he carried candy. Every Sunday, as soon as the last hymn was sung in our little church, a line of children

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formed to shake hands with Mr. Barlow. As a child approached, he would reach into his pocket and hide a piece of candy in his large hand. When you shook his hand, you came away with a pink wintergreen lozenge and a very good feeling. I was too young to notice any of his accomplishments, but I couldn't miss his kindness, and I still remember how I felt the day he died. Finding an old man who had time to make a little boy feel special was hard.

I keep those pink wintergreen candies around in honor of Mr. Barlow (and to let my grandchildren think they're pulling something over on me when they raid the jar). Now, when I show kindness to a child, I remember the man who taught me how. I remember the little things that made this man great. And he was great; for it is a great man whose death is mourned by children.

Mr. Barlow was also an artist; my grandparents had one of his paintings above the fireplace for many years. It is a picture of my grandfather's farm where I grew up, and he painted it about a week before he died at ninety. Now, it hangs on my wall, and I look at it as I write.

Another painting that I love was painted by Edith Thompson, Mr. Barlow's daughter. She painted a beautiful desert scene as a graduation present when I finished high school. Growing up in the mountains, I always felt at home in green forests. Deserts

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were those places you sometimes had to go through to get to the next pretty spot. I'm still not a fan of deserts, but I love that painting; I know the love with which it was painted, and I cherish it.

GUNS

My father had guns all over the house, and I learned to handle firearms safely at an early age. I enjoyed hunting as a teenager and young adult, and while I haven't hunted for years, I still enjoy shooting.

My grandfather fought in the trenches of the Great War, and while my father saw less action, he served in World War II. I suppose their training and experiences conditioned them to look at guns as weapons for defense. I grew up with that mindset, but I gradually put that aside. I go shooting occasionally, but my guns are for putting holes in targets, not people. Are they still treasured? Oh, yes. Their part of my heritage, a part of who I am.

The Colt Bisley is a pistol developed in 1894. Mine was manufactured in 1899 and belonged to my grandfather. Granddad was a gentle farmer who lived at the foot of Mount Emily in Northeastern Oregon. Before he was married, he worked for the cattlemen's association, whose members let their livestock roam the mountain in the summer. Granddad lived in a little cabin on the mountain during the summer and cared for

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the cattle. This .45 was at his hip while he rode the mountain trails checking on the animals under his care. It's my favorite gun to shoot; it will always be important to me.

When my father was a teenager, his dad gave him a .38-40 revolver made in 1898. It's hard to find ammo for this pistol, but I reload cartridges so I can shoot it occasionally. It has antler grips in the handle made by my dad. I like to handle it knowing that other hands — hands of men I loved and respected — held it before mine.

Cartridges were expensive for a teenager, so Dad bought a cap and ball revolver. With it, he could use black powder and cast his own lead balls. The pistol is a .44 Remington Army, the sort that was used in the Civil War. I love the history of this gun and its connection with the past.

My grandfather bought a 30-40 Krag rifle probably in the 1930s. This was the infantry rifle used in the Spanish American War. The one I have was my granddad's personal hunting rifle. The stock was broken and mended with rawhide. Granddad was coming home from hunting on the mountain, and a belligerent bull stood at the gate, refusing to let him through. Granddad lifted the rifle and hit the bull in the head with the butt. The bull moved, but it broke the stock on the rifle. I still shoot this antique, and the rawhide patch has held securely for over half a

century.

QUILT

My wife is a quilter and does beautiful work with fabric. I watch her work with no thought of who the quilt may be for. One particular quilt was full of appliqued hearts, but I didn't pay much attention. One Valentine's day, she gave me a present. I unwrapped it and found the heart quilt Vanda had spent so many hours making. I was overcome. Quilts were for other people. I didn't expect a quilt of my own, and it had never entered my mind. I even shed a few tears. I thanked her and told her what a surprise it was.

She said, "Who did you think I was making a Valentine quilt for?"

I thought about it and realized it had been pretty oblivious. It is definitely one of my treasures.

Each one of these items connects me to a person. In one sense, these possessions are not truly treasures. They are windows through which my mind can see the people I love or whose memory I love. Those are the treasures.