

Nathan's Last Christmas, A True Story

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One of the great Christmas Gifts in my memory involved a man who gave a most treasured possession to another man who disliked it and had no use for it. But in the giving and receiving, they both rejoiced, and were brought together as never before. The story begins many years ago, when my "little brother" Nate was in high school. We both wore the Eureka High School general issue school uniform: old flannel shirt, Levis (without the optional tobacco-tin-sized-back-pocket-circle accessory), boots of one kind or another, and long hair. We all liked long hair. It was the very foundation of coolness at that time.

What's cool at school isn't always cool at home, and mom and dad's haircut policy was defined as "above the collar". We had the best dad ever, but along with many of his generation, he associated long hair with 60's counterculture, and rebellion against every worthy principle that our family tried to live by. Nate and I saw long hair more simply as rebellion against short hair. If a psychologist subjected Nate and Dad to that word association test, Nate's immediate response to "long hair", might be "low-maintenance" or "cool". Dad's would be something like "Charles Manson".

That type of perception-polarity was the source of conflict in our home every 6 weeks or so. At first mention that it was time for haircuts, we would take peaceful evasive action when possible. Soon came the public announcement that we could have our hair cut now by mom, but further delay would result in dad giving the haircut. Our suspicion that dad was some sort of reckless hair assassin was never tested. I would turn myself in at that point, Nate would hold out as long as he could. Nate liked long hair.

Fast forward almost 30 years. I find myself visiting my family in Eureka at Christmas time. I always feel comfort from the constants: The redwood trees are still there. The ocean seems unchanged. My parents still live in the same house. And Nate is also there. His hair is now the longest I have ever seen it. It is at least a foot beyond even the lowest collar we could conceive of as children.

The family's approval rating for Nate's hair is in the single digits. Like '0'. I recall a lunch where nearly every living blood-relative of Nate was in attendance. Over the course of the meal, each of us took a turn discussing how great he would look in shorter hair. He would "fit in" more. He would look more employable. And, of course, less likely to become a serial killer.

What we didn't discuss was the perspective from a 47-year-old guy with a lifetime streak of bad luck. What might long hair mean to a guy who was unemployed, unmarried, and living at home? A man who still dreamed young but lived old, who slept more than half of each day, to hide from the extreme pain of a debilitating back injury. He had lost so many things. Couldn't he keep just one thing he wanted? Just one thing that would help him feel like he was still "cool" ?

Apparently, that discussion was a private, ongoing one for Nate, until Christmas Day.

At first, Dad had no idea what Nate was presenting him with. He opened the small, white box, picked up a 12" piece of perfectly braided, beautiful hair and stared. Then, father and son embraced, as they hadn't done for a long time. Mom joined in. There were tears, but not many words.

Nate is gone now. When someone disappears from our circle of friends, we often remember them at their worst.. We remember an angry moment, a forgotten promise, or some other failure or disappointment. Nate had his share of character flaws. He would be the first to admit that. But my memories of him now include this episode of greatness from a guy down on his luck and constantly in pain. He took the only thing he had left, and laid it on the altar as an offering of peace. And that little bit of peace on this little bit of earth will be forever in our minds one of the finest gifts of Christmas.

Happy Birthday, Nate,
and Merry Christmas to all