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Our Cardboard Christmas Tree

Commentary by Senior Master Sgt. Eric V. Reynolds

PATRICK AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. –Holidays are tough for me. I used to love Thanksgiving and Christmas, but some difficult times fell upon my family and I found myself separated from the joy I once knew. Maybe you find this season difficult as well, or maybe you are a sucker for Hallmark-esque Christmas tearjerkers like me my wife. Either way, I'd like to share a little story about how my hardened heart found some healing after great tragedy.

Christmastime was always a very special time for me, with many fond memories of decorating with my mother. She would always make cocoa and we would put up the tree together and sing our favorite songs. I tried my best to keep that tradition alive after getting married and hoped to pass it on to my kids. But the Christmas of 2016 was very different. Neither my wife nor I wanted to have anything to do with Christmas that year.

Six months earlier my infant son, Marshall, passed away. We saw our children as our most precious gifts, so the thought of celebrating without one of them was hard to bear. In our grief we kept putting off decorating, even though our other children were super excited about what they knew was supposed to be coming. My heart had hardened against the holiday. My older son knew my wife and I were having trouble and couldn't celebrate this season, but he didn't want the rest of the family to miss out. So he decided to help. He came up with a plan and went to work trying to recreate the magic he remembered from previous years.

It started with a cardboard tree. He cut out a six foot tall tree from an old cardboard box, then colored the entire thing with green crayon. He even made a yellow paper star for the top. The other kids joined in and created paper ornaments to put on the tree. But that's wasn't enough for him, so he went to the next level.

It was now sometime around the middle of December, well past when we traditionally decorated. I left for work very early one morning but had to run back to the house to retrieve something I had left behind. As I quietly snuck back inside careful not to awaken anyone, I was confronted by a strange scene. My 7-year-old son was struggling to put together our seven foot tall artificial Christmas tree while my wife and the other kids were still sleeping. Once he noticed I was there he looked at me like I imagine a burglar would look at a cop. He was shocked and a little scared, not knowing how I would react to his endeavor.



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In that moment, my brittle heart shattered. I was reminded of the joy and hopeful expectation we often have in our youthful innocence. I was reminded of the most precious gift I ever received -- the love and acceptance of my holy father, through his son Jesus Christ. I was reminded of my responsibility to live and to love. I was reminded to give. So I told my son it was okay and I would help him finish setting up the tree when I came home after work, even though I really didn't want to. I resolved to not let the joy of the season escape from my kids' lives just because of my own grief.

I still grieve, and probably always will a little bit. But holidays have gotten easier since I made a transition. Now, instead of trying to recreate the memories of my youth so I could relive those joyous moments, I am trying to get better every day at giving back to my family and others. My hope is that they would have some memories worth cherishing and looking back on when their tough times come. I know I've certainly needed them.

If you find yourself down this time of year, try doing something different. Don't worry if you can't get home for the holidays, or if you don't have someone special to celebrate with. Make this year about giving to others. There are so many lonely, hurting and over-stressed people out there just trying to make ends meet, keep their family together or even make it to the next day, let alone to the New Year. So give, serve, pray, or do whatever you can do to help bring a smile to someone else's face this time of year, whether they choose to celebrate Christmas or any other holiday. You'll be surprised how soon the smile comes back to your own face when you know you had a part in bringing joy to others.