

When I was six my family lived in San Diego, California. It was a sunny place; very un-Christmas-like. We lived just blocks away from the San Diego Zoo and the mission at Balboa. Our yard was often filled with exotic sounds like the roar of a lion; trumpeting elephants and the call of the peacock as well as the beautiful tolling bells of Balboa. We didn't have much money back then, but my mother had a way of making Christmas special for us.

Dad had been looking for another place to live, further out from town so we would often spend the weekend checking on houses. I liked one particular house very much, because it had an upstairs, which fascinated me. They even had a life-sized cardboard cutout of Shirley Temple. Out in the yard, there was a pile of trash; junk left by the former residents. On that pile, I saw a handmade doll cradle. It was broken and dirty, full of leaves and rainwater, but to me it was a treasure. Only rich kids had such things. I knelt down beside it as children often do, to get a better look. In my heart was a deep longing too innocent to be described as covetous.

On Christmas Eve, my older brother and I were begging to stay up. "Just a little bit longer, please!" To no avail, for I'm sure my mother had a million things to do to get ready for the big day. She stubbornly resisted our pleas. Then she received a little unexpected help by way of a stiff breeze outside. The front door blew open, just about six inches or so. Mike and I stopped our pleading to look at it, eyes large and mouths open.

"See there?" Mom said, always quick on the uptake. "Santa is trying to come, but you two are still up! He can't come in while you're awake."

There was no more argument. We ran as fast as we could and jumped into our beds. Bright and early Christmas morning, we tiptoed back out to see what treasures had been left for us overnight. Oh, there seemed to be so much stuff beneath that tree. My brothers dived in at once, grabbing toys and showing them off to one another. I stood in awe, for there to my great surprise and joy, was the same little doll cradle that I had seen on that trash pile. My dad had cleaned it up, made a few small repairs and painted it powder blue. Mom made a small mattress and pillow, complete with embroidered sheet and pillowcase. A brand new doll lay on top of it all. I barely noticed the doll, though she could cry real tears and wet her diaper. I was overjoyed with the refurbished cradle, even though I knew from whence it had come. Long after I outgrew playing with dolls, that cradle sat in my room. When I was finished with it, Mom (one of the earliest recyclers) used it as a planter. Every time I saw it, I remembered that special Christmas. It has become one of my most cherished memories.

I treasure that memory because it reassures me that you don't have to spend a lot of money to make Christmas special. Sometimes a little imagination and a whole lot of love can bring the most joy to someone's heart. Isn't that what Christmas is all about?