

Tomatoes and Grocery Sacks

by Cammie Corlas Quinn

In my bedroom closet, I keep a brown grocery sack that my dad gave me years ago. My father died in 2003, but I plan to keep the sack for the remainder of my life.



My dad was a gardener, a factory worker, and a maintenance man. I don't recall him ever buying me a traditional gift. Though he earned the family income, my mom always baked the birthday cakes and shopped for the books, movies, decorative sweatshirts, and other presents I still own today.

My dad's gifts to me were not the kind you buy in malls. He was more comfortable in gardens and hardware stores. He grew his gifts in the garden behind the house. During the warm months of the year, whenever I made a trip back home, he would inevitably point me to a large cardboard box of tomatoes, endive, and onions that he had gathered for me. I rarely took more than a few. My family doesn't eat many vegetables.

On one of my trips home, my dad discovered that we needed paper grocery sacks. We use them to line our kitchen trashcan. Paper sacks, however, are not sold in retail stores. You have to order them from wholesalers. The only other way to get them is to collect them at the grocery store, a few bags per trip depending on how many groceries you buy. Whenever I came home to visit, my dad would proudly present me with an armload of paper grocery sacks he had collected, one by one.

I never made much fuss over his efforts. After all, they weren't lavish gifts. I can live without tomatoes or grocery sacks. I never properly thanked him for tying the tomato plants to the poles, watering the plants, pulling the weeds, and nurturing the tomatoes until they were plump and red. I never voiced my appreciation for the times he folded the sacks after his trips to the grocery store and placed them in a stack for me, one by one. Yet year after year, despite my indifference, he continued to give me the same gifts. He did it because he cared about me. To him, I was worth the trouble.

My dad died at age 73 in 2003. Without ever saying it aloud, my dad taught me that the value is not in the gift itself; it's in the love that gave the gift. If gifts could grow or shrink in proportion with the love that gave them, I might see a grand reorganization of my possessions.



I hope to properly thank my dad someday in Heaven, but until then, I will follow his example by giving gifts from the heart—even if it's just a tomato or a grocery sack.

And his mother used to make for him a little robe and take it to him each year when she went up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. (1 Samuel 2:19 ESV)