

Bridging 40 years

The letter and Christmas card arrived from the States on January 5, 2021. When I opened it, I discovered several pages of hand written correspondence.

The first few lines read: “Hi Fr. Tracey. I haven’t seen you in a really long time – probably since you were at St. James (Gulfport). Fr... at St. John’s in Gulfport has a Christmas tree with ornaments to select. I said a little prayer and picked an ornament. I selected you. I hope you are well and enjoying your retirement.”

Suzie went on to tell me about how she and her husband, Bobby, were married thirty-nine years. She told me about her children; how they were now grown and successful in their chosen professions and that her youngest daughter was getting married in February.

As I continued to read her letter, I became more aware that there are some folks that you never forget. They make such a lasting impression on you. Even though it had been over forty years since I last saw both of them, I can still remember them visually back then and especially, remember her maiden name.

Sometimes, it amazes me that in a lifetime, one meets hundreds if not thousands of people. Some are fleeting memories and confined to absent-mindedness. Others spark a sense of curiosity and I wonder where they are now and what has happened to them since our last encounter. And then, there are a few that stand out whose names are etched in the secret undeleted compartments of one’s brain. Then, few become lifelong friends that become part of the inner circle of true friendship.

Every morning, I browse the obituary column of the Mississippi Coast newspaper to see if anyone I know has died. Sometimes, I recognize a name; other times, names and experiences become a passing blur.

After receiving Suzie’s letter, I sat down and started to write to her and her husband. A gap of over forty years was a great chasm to fill but I tried to update them on what has been happening to yours truly.

So often, we plan to keep in touch and stay in touch. But so often, other things muscle themselves into our lives demanding attention and space with the result that something or someone we promised to keep in touch with becomes relegated to the forgetful corner of our lives.

Then, sometimes, there comes along someone like a Suzie, that surprises you; that lets you know years can be bridged; that lost contacts can be resurrected; that persons who seem to have made an initial impression on you; all of a sudden, surfaces to remind you that some things and some people are never forgotten or can be forgotten.

In a few days, Suzie will receive my bridge-building letter all because she said a little prayer on Christmas time and plucked an ornament from a tree that happened to have my name on it.

I know that, if I ever return to Mississippi again for a visit. I will surprise someone. I will have travelled four thousand miles to bridge a gap of forty years just to renew old acquaintances. After all, as the song asks, “Should old acquaintances be forgotten?”