

COMMENT

I'm very optimistic. I'm hoping, by faith, everything will come through.

SALVATION ARMY ANNUAL GIVING REPRESENTATIVE DAN MILLAR, ON WHETHER THE ANNUAL KETTLE DRIVE WILL HIT ITS \$650,000 GOAL.

Ringing the bell for the Sally Ann

Standing by a kettle, I saw the Christmas side of Hamilton

ROBERT HOWARD
The Hamilton Spectator

The best thing I did this Christmas season was ring the little bell for the Salvation Army.

By "best," I mean the most interesting and the most fulfilling and the most gratifying and the most eye-opening.

I "manned" (there must be a gender-neutral term) a Salvation Army kettle for a dozen hours or so the last few weeks in a supermarket and outside a liquor store. My last "shift" was to be Friday night outside the Dundurn Street LCBO. I was expecting it would be (understatement) "busy."

I have long admired the Salvation Army and the work its members do. I also volunteered to add to my list of experiences — a bit like skydiving when I was young and had better knees and no children, but without the terror of climbing out onto a wing at 2,800 feet. I just wanted to know what it was like to stand beside the kettle.

Eye-opening? Well, a lot of preconceptions got the heave-ho. The people who pushed coins and bills into "my" kettle did so with astonishing generosity and surprising personal modesty.

At Fortinos, I saw a very young couple, two children in tow and all of them wearing clothes past the best-before date. They looked, well, not well off. On the way out, the husband pushed a banknote into the kettle. "Thank you," I said. "Thank you," he said. "You guys helped us," he said. (Passersby assume those of us at the kettle are SA members. A lot of volunteers, including me, are not.)

That became a bit of a theme. People who appeared to be, well, struggling were often the ones who pushed something into the kettle.

"Thank you, brother, for everything," said one guy with dreadlocks and bad teeth. Another said: "Been on the other side. Least I can do."

A parent with a young child would very often take the opportunity of a Sally Ann kettle to help the youngster understand the idea of giving to people who have less. The least I could do was support that, so I always told the youngsters their gift had just made someone else's Christmas a little better.

Outside the liquor store on a Saturday late afternoon, I saw an old boat of a Chevy swing into the parking lot, disgorging five women who were clearly planning an evening out. Makeup, hair, eyelashes out to there and little dresses that would make a monk miss a step. They laughed and chattered into the store, coming back out not long after with paper bags in hand. The one with the longest eyelashes dug toonies and loonies out of her designer purse and turned on her heel. "You girls give some money to this boy," she announced. "He's out here shivering." I was, and they all did.

Then there was the slightly tipsy gentleman at the LCBO who came out, a carton clasped to his stomach, and said: "Merry Christmas, Santa. You give me hug?" he said. (I was wearing a Santa hat. So shoot me.) A hug? Sure. With the box between us, but a hug nonetheless. He dug out a \$20 from his pocket, said something that may have been Greek for Merry Christmas and slid into the passenger seat of a truck. (I was very glad he wasn't driving.)

A lot of people, of course, walk by the kettle. I do. Some apologized — "I gave all my change to you guys at the last store" — and others were preoccupied. It didn't matter to me: No one can answer every call and it's impossible to know how, or how generously, people have given in other ways.

Others would push in a few coins and offer an apology: "It's all I've got on me." I always told them what I, in fact, know: Every penny helps, every nickel, dime and quarter adds up.

One woman had a bag of change; she said she saved it all year. I spilled some of it and both of us were on our knees picking quarters off the floor.

One man walked out of the store, came back and pushed in a folded stack of \$20 bills.

So, with only the barest minimum of time doing this thing and no qualifications, I offer my theory: Hamiltonians are generous, more generous than people from many if not most other communities, because so many of us have been there — on the "other side" — or know someone who has.

Hamilton is, as a colleague observed regularly, a big small town. Most Hamiltonians are in some almost direct way connected to almost everyone else.

Poverty is not an abstract here; it's your sister or your cousin or your son-in-law. Hard times are not something that happen to "those people," but to "our people." Everyone in Hamilton has needed help or knows someone who has needed help.

There are so many lovely people in this city. It was a privilege to say thank you to a few of them.

Robert Howard is a member of The Spectator's editorial board and submissions editor.

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Mangiamo! Mangiamo! It's the Great Fish Feast

There are meals. There are feasts. And then there's Christmas Eve in an Italian home



PAUL BENEDETTI

Italians love a feast.

No matter what happens, the answer is always the same. A child gets baptized, the grapes are harvested, someone gets their pants cuffed — the response, always, is: *Bellissima! Mangiamo! Beautiful! Let's Eat!*

Holidays are the same — big or small. In fact, the Italians have invented entire holidays built around eating something. Anything! According to history, many of these events first celebrated patron saints, but it didn't take long to trade the clergy for the kitchen. There's the (and I am not making this up) The Fried Anchovy Festival of Cinque Terre, The Monterosso Tournament of Walnuts (use your imagination) and the famed Umbrian Sagra degli Asparagi or Festival of Asparagus, which is immediately followed by The Festival of Slightly Odorous Pee.

So it is no surprise that Christmas follows the same pattern. Instead of the Twelve Days of Christmas, we celebrate the Twelve Meals (and Assorted Snacks) of Christmas. And of these, my favourite has always been Christmas Eve. Officially this is known as the *Cena della Vigilia* — the dinner that ends what used to be a pre-Christmas vigil and requisite fasting. Today, few people bother with the no-meat rule before Christmas mass, but not surprisingly, the tradition of a giant all-fish dinner survives. In some parts of Italy this is called the Feast of the Seven Fishes, but at our house only seven kinds of fish seemed a bit skimpy. As my brother would say, "What? Are you teasing me?" No, at our house, we

Most sea creatures, while being exceptionally ugly, are also disgusting. They are covered in hard shells, sharp fins, spiny points, or just slime — which is nature's way of saying, 'You should not eat me. Really.'

really go for it. We will eat every manner of sea creature. It doesn't matter if it has a shell, claws, gills, fins, scales or tentacles, we'll eat it. If it lives in the water and doesn't wear a bathing suit, it's fair game.

Of course, this kind of dinner involves tons of work. Most sea creatures, while being exceptionally ugly, are also disgusting. They are covered in hard shells, sharp fins, spiny points or just slime — which is nature's way of saying, "You should not eat me. Really." Italians laugh at this. Don't forget, these are the same people who routinely eat chestnuts and think nothing of using pigs to hunt fungus buried in leaves. Nothing escapes.

I remember my father and mother toiling away in the kitchen for a couple of days before Christmas Eve, up to their elbows in fish. All week the talk would be peppered with the musical sound of calamari, vongole, polpo, merluzzo, aragosta — and my personal favourite, scungilli or sea snail. Hell, I would clean fish for a week just to be able to walk around the house using the word. As in, "Hey Scungilli Head" or "Oh yeah? Scungilli this!"

Anyway, once you clean everything, then you have to argue about how best to prepare it. Everyone has a family tradition, a regional dish, a secret recipe. So we just did it all — we fried it, grilled it, stuffed it, steamed it, stewed it and sauced it. When you're done, you have enough fish to feed the Portuguese standing army for a week and your house smells like Lake Erie on a really hot day, but it's all worth it.

So this year, like every year, we are carrying on the tradition. There's still a lot to do, but things are better now. I don't spend hours and hours standing over the sink cleaning squid — a nasty job at the best of times. That's because of the two greatest inventions of the 20th century — manned space travel and pre-cleaned squid.

And, of course, we split up the work. My dad is gone but my mom is still game, though at 84 and weighing about a hundred pounds, she is sometimes a bit smaller than the lobsters she's supposed to wrestle into a pot. She still likes to prepare something, but now, all "the kids" and their families pitch in, each making a dish or two. It shares the work and ensures that EVERYONE'S house smells for the entire holidays.

So tonight we will sit down to the Great Christmas Eve Fish Feast and it will be perfect because, in the end, only a few things in life really count.

We're together.

We're eating.

All is well.

Paul Benedetti lives in Hamilton. He is a former Spectator reporter and now teaches journalism at the University of Western Ontario.

And lo! A child is saved from a brutal death

A young boy is returned to his family and a writer sees echoes of the nativity story

THOMAS FROESE

KAMPALA, UGANDA It's late at night at the Ugandan-Kenyan border and a little Ugandan boy is about to disappear forever.

Moses Kaloulou, all of seven years old, is crying hysterically. Not that he knows what's going to happen, that he'll likely soon die at the hands, and knife blade, of a witch doctor. All he knows is that it's late — about midnight now — and very dark, and that some hours ago he was taken by strange men.

A border patrol officer looks. Something is wrong. That boy on the back of that motorcycle-taxi is crying wildly. The boy looks Ugandan but the driver, Kenyan. The driver sees he's being watched. He's nervous. In a panic, he lets the boy go and takes off into the night. Moses' life is miraculously saved.

This is the feel-good story of the year for me. I'll never forget hearing that voice on the phone: "We think we've found the boy." Now it's Christmas, that celebration for children, a time that's as good as any, maybe the best, to think of it all.

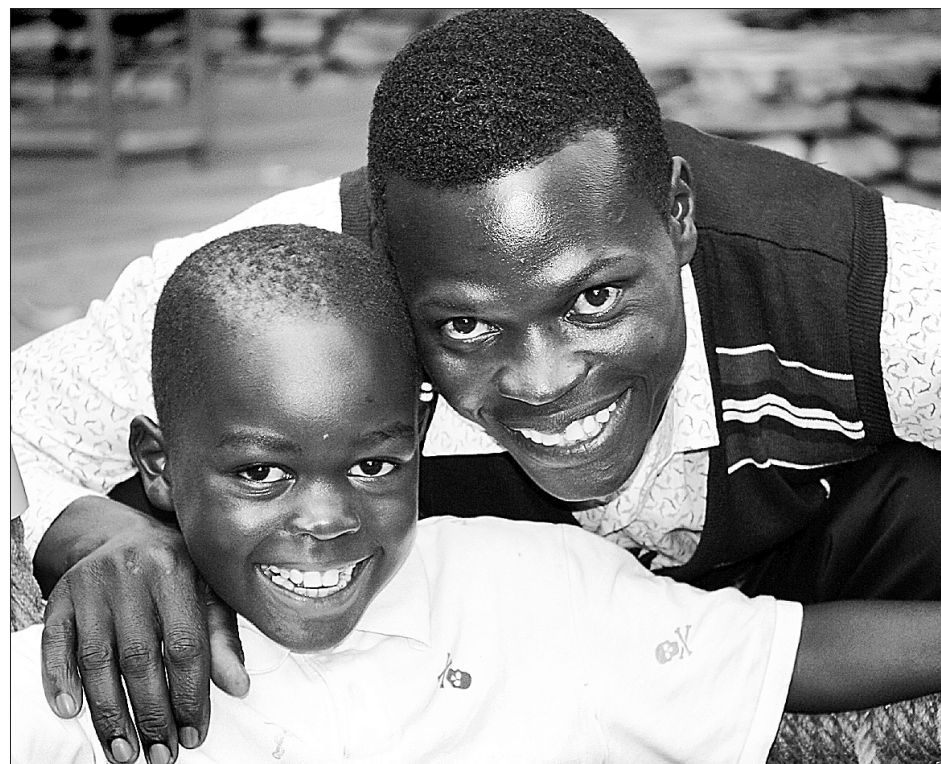
Remember when three-year-old Kienan Hebert was abducted from his British Columbia home in September? Remember the countryside anguish? The prayers from coast-to-coast? The amazement when he was returned by, of all people, his abductor? It was one of those truth-is-stranger-than-fiction moments.

Not long after, on this side of the ocean, Moses was abducted from his village. His father, Richard, is a Ugandan friend. I had just written about him for The Spectator, how my family pays school fees for Richard's children. Then his heartsick phone call to me: "Mister Thom! Moses is gone!"

In Uganda, this often means one horrible thing: sacrificial murder. The ritual, known as *juju*, is performed by witch doctors and supported by paying customers who believe the blood of a child has all kinds of power to bring fantastic success.

Despite a national campaign against this terror, in recent years ritual sacrifice in Uganda has run unabated. Uganda's Anti Human Sacrifice Task Force has been limited, especially in this culture of corruption.

In fact, if Jesus was a boy in today's Uganda, we might not celebrate Christmas as we know it at all. A few shillings or pounds or dollars in certain hands, a



THOMAS FROESE, SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Richard Kaloulou with his seven-year-old son, Moses, at a celebration in Kampala, Uganda, after Moses was saved from an abduction. Hundreds of Canadians had prayed for his rescue. The kidnapping of children has become a serious problem in Uganda.

blind eye and a turned back, and an innocent young life is easily snuffed out. God — if you believe this part of the Christmas story — would need another plan to save humanity.

It's unknown how many Ugandan children are being murdered. Some estimate that thousands have disappeared in the past four years. The BBC reports that 400 African kids have been trafficked to the United Kingdom alone, apparently for rituals there, before rescue by British police.

There are also good people in Uganda. When Moses vanished, we initiated our own Amber Alert. I gave Richard money for local radio ads. As with Kienan, people prayed. I contacted hundreds of Canadian friends, many in Hamilton, to join the Ugandans.

It was a municipal politician who eventually heard those ads and phoned to tell

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me Moses had been found, traumatized and now in hospital, but safe.

I wish this kind of story was just a dark chapter in Africa's past. But it's as true as Christmas. And if the story of that first Christmas indeed is true, then, really, it has less to do with the quaint postcard images we routinely see, than danger and fear and hardships we can't imagine.

It tells us that the Christ Child was supposed to be brutally slain, and that while his family escaped to the safety of this continent, to North Africa, many other children died in a murderous rage of a fallen king.

And isn't this closer to our own personal experience? I believe it is. Life can be full of joy. And pain. That's why Christmas is never just for the world's children. It's for the disappointed and lonely, the hurting and confused, those of us who, in a way, need to become like children again.

Then, even in a broken world, we can see beyond it and be held close, and told that, no matter what, nothing, but nothing, can ever get us.

Author and journalist Thomas Froese is a Hamiltonian who lives in Uganda most of the year. His website is thomasfroese.com