

Stamping out burning ducks & other “practicalities”

by Jim Newell

Ever see a man with a green beard? Read on.

Once you're a parent, you never stop being a parent, no matter the age of your children. Dorothy and I found that out long ago. We also discovered when your children are old enough to become your friends, the joy is nothing short of wonderful. We have four middle-age friends who once were babies in our household.

I want to tell you about just one. Not because he's our favourite, because he isn't. We have no favourite. It's just there are so many stories about each, and I happened to be thinking about Dave this morning.

Practical joker starts at an early age

Dave is a character. He always was. As a child he was a practical joker and he hasn't changed in 50 years. One time when he was a little boy he tied all the family's tooth brushes together with white thread – it went un-noticed until somebody tried to pick up a toothbrush. Another time he stuck pin holes in the toothpaste tube - when we squeezed, toothpaste came out in every direction. You probably know other kids who did the same thing.

Dave had his own priorities. When we lived on the air force base at Chatham, New Brunswick, our house had a deep ditch at the end of the lawn next to the street. In the spring, when the ice melted and then the weather turned cold, the resulting ice in the ditch made a wonderful place for a little boy to take a running slide as he returned home from school for lunch. Unfortunately, the ice was also thin enough so that somewhere along the slide, he would break through and get soaked.

After Dorothy scolded him enough times that he should have known to stop, she told him one more time and he would be spanked. He figured the fun of the slide was worth the spanking – not only once, but a couple of times. Eventually the ice disappeared and that ended the problem.

Speaking of spanking, I stopped doing that to Dave when he started putting rocks in the back pocket of his pants. When an eight year-old can outwit his father, you have to love him.

The big kid says “Boo!”

As an adult, he didn't change. Halloween is his favourite special day. Dave always dresses up in some kind of a scary costume and stands inside the door and waits for trick-or-treaters. Sometimes he stands behind the big bush beside the door and waits for them to come out and find him standing there. He's the biggest kid of all.

When he worked at Manulife Financial as a programmer, somebody asked him what he did at Manulife. He told them his job was to stamp out burning ducks.

Eventually he explained ducks have large flat feet so they can stamp out small forest fires before they become large ones. If the fire gets too large, the ducks catch fire. Dave was the go-to man when other programmers could not repair damage to a particular program. His job was to repair the damage by solving the problem too big for anybody else in the department. Thus he was stamping out burning ducks. Is it any wonder people leave a conversation with him shaking their heads?

Dave's latest practical joke involves his beard, a beard that at one time reached his belt buckle. It is now only about six inches long and bushy. This year, he got tired of having children point him out when he happened to be in the mall by calling him Santa Claus. His solution: dye his beard green. The dye could be washed out and reapplied from time to time, but it certainly was an eye catcher. His wife just sighs.

That's my son. I think he has his mother's genes.

PS: If anyone wonders what Dave will think when he reads this, worry no more. He already has read it and approved. His comment: "Go for it."

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