

Snapshots of grace: capturing the sacred in daily life

Funny how a single picture can change everything.

In the tiny town of Bovey, Minn., four years into World War I, an old man peddling foot scrapers knocked on Eric Enstrom's door.

Eric was 43, a Swedish immigrant who had bought land, opened a photography studio and raised his kids to speak perfect English. He fed the peddler and studied him. There was something striking about the man, a gentle strength in his deep wrinkles and straggly beard.

Sitting before a loaf of bread and a bowl of porridge, the peddler closed his eyes and dropped his head into his folded hands. Eric flashed his bulb and pressed his accordion-like Bellows camera.

Poof!

"Grace" was born, the picture that has been hung in kitchens and living rooms across the world, a call to gratitude, a symbol of faith that is both sturdy and hushed.

Eric had long embraced its meaning, leading his family in grace before every meal. His third born, Warren, tagged along on fishing trips and photo shoots of Minnesota's Scenic State Park. Warren watched his dad shoot panoramas, turning a slow circle that seemed to sweep in every detail.

When Warren departed for England to serve in World War II, he packed a 116

camera. "I took quite a few," he said, "but not as many as I should have."

The photographer's son can still see the bus he rode when the Nazis captured him and the machine gun fire that granted him an exit three days later.

His favorite war-time snapshot - a black and white that is missing from his album but vivid in his mind - shows a uniformed Warren sitting by the entry of a small Austrian church right after the war ended. "I look pretty happy," he said. "Oh, God, the war was over."

Warren went on to work as a construction superintendent, and throughout his life, "Grace" was never far from him. He was once given more than 200 pictures and he framed every one before sharing them with friends. His wife embroidered the image. "She won first prize in that category at the Texas State Fair," he boasted.

Decades later, when she passed away and Warren began receiving food from Meals On Wheels, a volunteer noticed the picture in his room and was inspired to feature it in a promotional postcard.

Today Warren is 95, one of five or six residents at Juliette Fowler Homes in Dallas who hung a "Grace" portrait in his apartment to make it feel like home. He's given talks about the photograph and hands out a "Grace" brochure to everyone who will accept it.

Promoting the picture gives him purpose. "I think that's the most pleasant thing I've done," he said, "except my wife and I went to Hawaii once."

Isn't that how grace works? It comes as a flicker, a sprinkle of the sacred. But at any moment, any one of us can capture a shot of it, creating a permanent record, a legacy that inspires generations.

Last weekend brought our first snow of the season. I woke and grabbed my camera, shooting the old oak that had been made new. Friends exercised the same impulse, blogging in their pajamas. Deep down we understood what Pope John Paul II wrote to artists, that beauty is “an invitation to savor life and to dream of the future.”

The holidays can be dizzying, but we have the ability to press pause, to wade through scattered wrapping paper, grab a camera and process the world through its grateful lens.

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