

Over the course of our lives, what we find is that we are given many different things; from people; to pets; to gifts and talents. Very often many of them bring us enjoyment and happiness, but it's also true that when we give to others what we've been given, it can bring about such good and growth in our souls and for others. The key is not burying it or tucking it away, but giving it away.

For Jennifer Gentelsk and her family, that entailed a difficult decision with a friendly, loving dog they thought was going to be a part of their family.

Jennifer, who writes for "All Creatures" magazine, writes about sitting on the porch with her coffee one morning. She'd snuck outside, inching the sliding glass door open so as not to wake anyone. Her husband, Anthony; daughters, Grace, 13, and Genevieve, 11; and son, Joseph, 6, were still asleep in the cabin they had rented in the mountains near Asheville, North Carolina. The day before, they had driven 10 hours to get here, with Luna, their 75-pound Lab-bulldog mix, sitting on Jen's lap, and Joseph telling endless knock-knock jokes.

It was her fortieth birthday. And she needed to be alone for a bit in the morning.

Three years earlier, her mom had died right before her birthday, after an eight-month battle with malignant melanoma. Jen missed her with an ache that went through her bones, through every part of her. She didn't want to celebrate. Was this going to be how she felt on every birthday, she wondered?

A banging on the sliding door startled her. Joseph was awake. She went inside. The girls were up as well. "Happy birthday, Mom!" they said, slurping their chocolate vacation cereal.

On their way to Cedar Creek Stables to go horseback riding, they saw signs for a lost dog. "That's so sad!" the kids said. "What if Luna got lost?"

Anthony dropped off Jennifer and the girls and went to explore the nearby town of Lake Lure with Joseph. Several hours later, Anthony met Jennifer and Anthony at the stables. He had a strange look on his face. "We got you a birthday present," he said.

“It’s in the car.”

“

Where’s Joseph?” Jen asked

“He’s in the car, with the present.”

They walked around the corner to where the car was parked. Jennifer saw Joseph’s beaming face first. She peered in the window. There was a medium-size brown dog sitting beside him. When the dog saw Jennifer, it wiggled excitedly.

“Can we keep him, Mom? Please, can we?” Joseph asked. The dog licked his face.

“We were heading into town when we saw this dog running along the side of the road,” Anthony said. “I pulled over to check on him, and as soon as I opened the door he jumped in.”

“Is this the lost dog?” the girls asked. Jen thought of the pictures on the signs they had seen earlier. Nope. This was not that dog.

Metal glinted on his collar. “Look!” Jennifer said. “He has tags.”

Anthony shook his head. “It’s just the name of a shelter. I checked.” Jen plugged the shelter name into her phone. It was an hour away from where they were! All they had for food in the car was a bag of pistachios. The dog looked at her, ears perked, tail wagging, as Jen opened the bag. She offered him a pistachio, then another. He nudged her hand for more. “Let’s name him Pistachio!” Joseph cried. The girls agreed.

“Calm down, everyone,” Jen said. “I didn’t say we could keep him.”

On the way back to the cabin, Jen called the shelter and left a message with her name and number and the ID number on the dog’s tag. She turned to pet Pistachio. The kids were smiling ear to ear.

“He ran all that way to get here,” Jen said, not wanting to get their hopes up. “I wouldn’t be surprised if he runs away from us, too.”

Sure enough, Pistachio raced into the woods behind their cabin. He came back, though, and played with Luna. They dashed around the yard until Pistachio had enough and crawled under the deck.

That night, Pistachio slept in Luna's crate. When Jen went to get him in the morning, he leapt and spun in joy. Jen texted a picture to her sister back in New Jersey. "Dog jumped in the car on my birthday. Shelter tags. Kids in love."

She texted back, "Is this Mom's idea of a birthday gift?!"

They drove to Chimney Rock State Park for a hike. They left Luna in her crate and, over the protests of the kids, Pistachio outside.

"What if he runs away?" they cried.

"Then it wasn't meant to be," Jen said. "He's a runner, guys, and he won't be happy penned up inside all day." Jen asked herself is she trying to convince the kids or herself? Pistachio was a sweet dog, and she wanted to think of him as a birthday gift, a sign that her Mom was with God.

On the hike, all the kids talked about was Pistachio. How had he escaped from the shelter? How had he run so far? Would he be there when we got back?

They went to an ice cream shop on the main road. While they were waiting in line, Jen's phone buzzed. The shelter. She stepped outside to take the call.

"Hi...is this Jenn?" It was the adoption coordinator, who said she had received Jen's message and looked up the dog's file. "He was adopted by a couple last year. They're from a town outside Asheville. But the last paper in his file is a complaint from some neighbors saying that he wasn't being taken care of. So if you would like—I mean, we don't usually do this, but given the circumstances, he's yours."

Jen went back into the shop and told her family. The kids practically melted with relief.

"Yay! Pistachio! Let's keep him!"

They all sat down with their ice cream. Just as they were finishing, Jen's phone buzzed again.

"Jenn? I called back because I just talked with the former owner, the man who adopted Pistachio. The dog's name is actually Hammer."

"Hammer?"

"Yes. If you ask me, Pistachio is a much better name. Anyway, he did adopt him, so officially I have to tell you what he said. You can do with this information what you want. But...he would like the dog back." She gave her the man's information, saying again, "I just officially have to tell you this."

Jen pictured an unkempt dog pen, cement floors, Pistachio on a chain. Had he been adopted as a guard dog, given the name Hammer and then run away first chance he got?

Jen told the kids and Anthony. "Mom! We can't bring him back there!"

Jen felt uneasy about taking a dog that had a rightful owner. But what kind of place would he be going back to she wondered. “First let’s see if he’s even there when we get to the cabin,” She told the kids.

They drove mostly in silence along the curvy mountain roads. Pulling into the long driveway, Jen scanned the woods for Pistachio. No sign of him.

Then they turned the bend and the cabin came into view. They all let out a little cry. There was Pistachio, sitting lookout on the front porch. When he saw them, he did three spins of joy and ran to the car. The kids leapt out. Anthony and Jen shared a look.

She texted her sister, copying her niece, as the two of them volunteered at a dog rescue. “What should I do?” she asked.

Her niece answered right away. “Do not return him to that owner!”

The next afternoon, they were driving high in the mountains on the Blue Ridge Parkway when Jen got a message from an unknown number. “Hi, Jenn, this is the director of the shelter that Hammer is from. I’m calling because this morning his owners drove down here, and they were very upset. I spent a lot of time with them. They want him back. Please call me.”

Jen could no longer enjoy the beautiful views. She imagined angry owners yelling about their lost guard dog. Jen pictured a run-down home, where the dog was not loved. Back at the cabin, Jen called the shelter director. She told her her concerns. She listened. "I have been doing this for more than 20 years, and if I am wrong about these people, then I am in the wrong line of work," she said. "They really want their dog back."

Jen sat looking at Pistachio's owner's number for a long time before she finally dialed. A man answered. His voice was warm and deep. "We're so grateful you folks found him," he said. "My wife's been crying ever since he got lost on Monday. We were out of town at a funeral, and when we got home there was no sign of him. He's always come back before. He waits for us on the front porch."

Jen arranged to meet at their house. On the way there, the kids took turns holding Pistachio on their laps, telling him what a good boy he was and how much they would miss him.

Jen was nervous. She'd gotten a good feeling from Pistachio's owner, but what if they showed up and the place was horrible?

"Looks like it's just up this road," Anthony said, turning at a wide-open field. Jen took a deep breath. Pistachio stood and tilted his head. The kids, even Joseph, went silent. A few minutes later, they took a left onto a paved country road. And then there was the house. Lovely flower gardens. A big, sloping yard that ended in a creek. Plenty of space to run. Jen couldn't imagine anywhere better for a dog, especially this dog. Pistachio whimpered when he saw his owners waiting for him on the front porch.

"I think this is his home, Mom," Joseph said.

"I think so, too," Jen answered.

They opened the door and Pistachio leapt out and raced to his owners. They crouched down and let him lick their faces as he wiggled uncontrollably. They laughed and held him close.

Jen and her family stood back and watched, knowing this was right. The owners told them again and again how thankful they were. They got back in the car, this time without Pistachio, and started the drive back. Jen thought about how Pistachio had been a gift. Not a dog to keep, at least not for long, but a dog with a message she needed to hear: It's time to let go. You will be okay.

The next morning, Jen sat on the deck as Luna explored behind their cabin. She could hear Anthony and the kids chattering in the kitchen. "Goodbye, Mom," Jen whispered, taking in the blue sky above. "I love you. I miss you." Then Jen stood up to join her family, thinking about the home that Pistachio had returned to, the home that was more beautiful and loving than anything Jen could have ever imagined.

Jen's decision wasn't easy; but ultimately through what she did, both Pistachio was better and his family was at peace. But so too was Jen at peace, knowing she did the right thing, and Pistachio coming into her life so she could finally let go of some of the intense pain that she had been carrying in her heart over the loss of her mom.

In the Gospel, a man goes on a journey before leaving money to three servants. One is given five, another two and a third one, each according to his ability. A talent was about 75 pounds of silver, or wages for 16 1/2 years. It's a lot of money; but it also required a bit of work to carry it around and to figure out what to do with. He goes at great lengths to hide what he has been given.

So why is that servant called wicked? Was he worried the markets might tank and just playing it safe? Not at all. The point is that all we are given; our talents; our life, our being; our powers of the mind; our will; our emotions; our unique gifts, these are from God. And they are meant to become gifts. And we are meant to give them away. If we cling to them, they serve our own private egotistical needs, and ultimately they won't lead to happiness but just emptiness. As for "everyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich," it means to the one who has the divine life, and knows how to make it a gift, that in turn will make their original wealth increase. As for the one who has not, even what he has is taken away," the paradox is that if we try to just cling to things, internalize them, use them just for ourselves, in the end we lose.

So the question is what are we clinging to? Are we giving it away?

Consider a few things I think we can cling to, both tangible and intangible.

For some, it's like Ebenezer Scrooge - clinging to our money and possessions leading to greed. Do they consume us? Do we get preoccupied with more stuff or do we have a proper balance?

Maybe it's certain emotions. Think of the Pixar film "Inside Out"; when one emotion got too powerful, it prevented true growth. Some cling to fear; for instance fear can be healthy. But even after shots start with say Covid, and we hopefully try to see more normalcy, some will be still paralyzed by what Covid has done to our mental state. Others might cling to anger over the past or resentment towards people and just can't forgive. Maybe grief has taken over and you're struggling with depression; grief has a role, and sometimes we just have to be sad. That is OK, But sometimes we feel like we can't ask for help when we're hurting too much with sadness, fear and anxiety, which isn't a good thing. We need to be honest and look at our lives and say is fear, anger, resentment taking too big a role and turn that over to God.

Perhaps it's control. Some people just can't let go of it; they micromanage people at work; they boss around a sibling; a parent might start out as well meaning but become a helicopter parent who can't let their kid make mistakes and grow up; or they don't view the marriage as a partnership but control the other person. Maybe God is telling us to let go of some of that control so others can flourish.

How about pride, the sin of the devil? Do we do work for our glory and cling to being recognized, or do we serve with a cheerful heart?

How about your unique gifts? I look around our parish and I see so many great people who do so much quietly without seeking recognition. Folks clean on Monday mornings; they count money; they use their talent to teach faith formation and pass on the faith to the younger members of the parish; they sing in a choir (remember those?). Dedicated teachers who work so hard for the kids. When I come home to the rectory, my mom, who wouldn't admit it, but is a great painter has a painting I have on my wall from a photo I took in fall of a waterfall in Mankato. I love looking at it because it brings me joy; it reminds me of her, and she painted it for me as a gift. Like the woman in the first reading who has gifts and talent; she

works for her family; she's smart and knows business and buys a field; she quietly does these things without recognition but for the greater good, so too do we use our gifts for that purpose too.

You probably know by now I have a wonderful dog, Emmett. But how he came to find me was pretty interesting. I had lost Kirby my large golden retriever to cancer two years ago. I went about six months; I briefly thought another dog was coming to be in my life, Vinny, but Vinny did good with me, but was so scared being off his farm. He'd have accidents, but was terrified to come to the church or meet people. His breeder came to visit and said I know this is hard, but I'm thinking he should probably come back with me. And then he was gone in just a week. And once again my home was silent; and once again I put away the dog bowls and toys. But out of nowhere, a family reaches out to me saying we heard you might be looking for a dog. I didn't think much of it at first, thinking how could this work out, or what is the breed, but as it turned out they deeply loved their dog, a friendly golden. But life circumstances made it very hard to keep him with schedules, and they wanted him to have more attention. So after prayer and a family meeting, they thought about a new home for him. They visited, it went great, they had me spend some alone time with him, and it went

great. And they made an incredibly selfless decision to have Emmett be welcomed into my home. He's done so much to lift my spirits; and I can say truly makes me better. But he also brings joy to the office staff; to kids when we visit classrooms; and also has a great time with his human friend Uncle Andy and his dog Heath who is his friend, who looks after Emmett if I'm out of town or off taking photos. All of this joy though came through an act of love, and I am so grateful for that family. Their act has been increased in love again and again in the many daily things Emmett has done for me and for others, but it began with giving away someone very special to them. Such is the divine life; such is the gifts from God. As we say at Saint Joe's school, God is good, all the time. So let us partake in that goodness by giving away the gifts God has given us, sharing them with the world so that one day we can stand with God in heaven, and have Him show us the people who are there in part because of how we gave away what God gave us