

Also by Mike O'Mary

The Note

A story about the power of appreciation



Wise Men and Other Stories

by Mike O'Mary

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Dedicated, with love, to my mother, Barbara



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Wise Men

When I was in the second grade, I played one of the three wise men in the St. Elizabeth of Hungary Christmas play. I was the second wise man—the one that brought the frankincense.

I enjoyed being one of the wise men. It was a pretty easy part. The first wise man says, “We are the three wise men. I bring you gold,” and that serves as the cue for the next wise man who says, “and I bring you frankincense,” and so on.

We also got to wear robes. I brought a bathrobe from home.

But the main thing was that you were a “wise man.” There were bigger parts—Mary and Joseph had pretty substantial roles, and even the innkeeper and shepherds had more lines—but being a wise man was quite a distinction. You had to carry yourself with grace and dignity. You had to look wise.

That’s why I was a little confused when I learned that Mike Walston had also been designated a wise man.

Mike Walston was the poor kid of the class. As it turned out, most of us at my old school were pretty poor, but we had not yet seen enough of the world to know it. What we did know was that we were better off than Mike Walston.

We knew because we started each day at St. Elizabeth's by going around the room and telling Sister Julia what we ate for breakfast that morning. It turned out that Mike Walston seldom had breakfast. When it was his turn to answer, he'd stand up and smile a big unself-conscious smile and say, "Nothing." After the kids laughed at his answer a few times, he stopped smiling, but his answer didn't change. As it was, Mike Walston was singled out as different, possibly ignorant, and, generally speaking, not a good person to associate with. All I knew was that the honor of being designated a wise man had been diminished by my having to share that distinction with Mike Walston. And to make matters worse, he was the head wise man. He was to present the gold.

We began rehearsals right after Thanksgiving. We three kings would stand in the wings during most of rehearsal, Mike Walston first, me behind him, and Joey Amback, the myrrh guy, behind me. When it was time for us to enter, Mike Walston, being gold, would lead the way.

Unfortunately, Mike Walston was having trouble remembering his lines. ("We are the three wise men. I bring you gold.") And, of course, every time he stumbled during rehearsal, the class would laugh at him. I only made matters worse by making faces whenever he messed up, causing the class to laugh even louder.

As we got closer to opening night, Mike Walston was still having trouble. Many of us speculated that Sister Julia would have to make a switch, and that I, being frankincense and the next wise man on the totem pole, was the likely candidate to move up. So when Sister Julia asked me to stay after school the day before the performance, I was prepared: if she felt my talents were better suited to the role of head wise man, I would, with all due grace and dignity, accept the promotion and present gold to the Christ child on opening night.

But that's not what Sister Julia wanted. Instead, I heard these shocking words: "I want you to help Mike Walston remember his lines when we perform the play tomorrow night."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"I want you to practice his lines with him before you go on stage," Sister Julia continued, "and if he forgets his lines when he kneels down by the baby Jesus, I want you to kneel down beside him and whisper his lines to him so the audience won't know he forgot."

I said I would do it.

Sister Julia dismissed me, and I walked home that day in a daze. This was not the way it was supposed to be. Nonetheless, the next night, I did as Sister Julia told me. Mike Walston, Joey Amback and I showed up in our bathrobes, somebody from the props department handed us cardboard crowns covered with tinfoil, and then Mike Walston and I went right to work on his lines: "We are the three wise men. I bring you gold."

He did it fine offstage when he was relaxed, but I was afraid that once we got on stage, he'd freeze. I was prepared though: if he froze,

I'd kneel down beside him and bail him out. If nothing else, my friends would know who was the hero and who was the goat.

The play went on and we watched as the innkeeper turned Joseph and Mary away, they shacked up in the manger, and the sheep and goats and cows gathered around. Mike Walston and I went over his lines once more while the shepherds did their thing, then it was time for our big entrance.

Mike Walston led us across the stage toward the Star of Bethlehem and the manger. With Mary and Joseph looking on, Mike knelt in front of the baby Jesus and—didn't say a word. He froze. I was about to kneel down to help him, but just then, he glanced up at me and smiled a big smile. Then he turned, looked at Mary, and spat out his lines in the same matter-of-fact tone he used when he told us about breakfast: "We are the three wise men. I bring you gold."

I was stunned. There was a fairly long pause before Joey Amback gave me a nudge. Then I remembered where I was. I knelt down next to Mike Walston, turned to Mary, and said, "And I bring you gold."

I couldn't believe my own words. I was the frankincense guy, but I had said, plain as day, "I bring you gold." There was a shocked hush over the entire church basement audience—broken only by a few nervous coughs—until Joey Amback knelt next to me and said, "Yeah, I bring you gold, too."

Then the whole audience roared. The third wise man had bailed me out. Life in the second grade would go on. I would not have to spend my remaining days standing against the fence during recess. And Mike Walston would receive kudos for his fine performance.

The lesson stuck with me. Years later, when my boss was having trouble and there was talk of replacing him, I remembered the Christmas play and lent him a hand. Sure, I wanted to move up, but not at all costs. There's room for compassion in this world. I know firsthand that the wisest of wise men stumble once in a while. And when that happens, it's nice to have somebody around who will cover your rear.

