

ODE TO FATHER JOE

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As written by
Mark Anthony DiBello

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Joe was given life, a gift from one Father to another father, on September 25, 1925. For Italian parents, traditionally, his birthday was nine months earlier; when one's birthday was marked not from the date of delivery, but from the time of conception.

...September 25th...good numbers. For the number's runners of that day, it would still be 9-2-5. The old-timers and the horse players will remember that wasn't some computer-generated bouncing ball, it was the last three digits of the New York racetrack betting pool.

At that time of year, it would be downstate at Belmont. Joe was born in Mechanicville, not far from Saratoga, but that race meeting wrapped up a month ago.

Joe's parents weren't gamblers, but if I was a bettin' man, I might think some from the neighborhood would have placed it with the numbers runner or ran it themselves down to Mary Tag's, the local grocery store run by the Tagliento's. But then again, Joe's birthday was no great event, so I'm sure no one ran down, and no number was sent. Nonetheless, Joseph Ralph was born.

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In his childhood, Joe was persecuted mercilessly for his name: Ralph. What an irony: Ralph, his father, didn't pay Joe the attention he deserved and Joe didn't deserve the attention he got for carrying his father's name.

Growing up, Joe's papa and mama had the apple of their eyes in Mark John, Mary, Josephine, Vincent, and Anthony the baby. Mark, John and Vincent were good-looking and athletic...Papa loved to watch them play...

...Joe was there too.

As for Mary and Josephine, they were beautiful girls. Mary was the life of the party and Josephine would be in the kitchen helping Mama with the sauce. Mama loved to have them around...

...Joe was there too.

When Anthony, the baby, was born, he was a beautiful lad and his mere presence seemed to entertain. Papa was pleased and Mama loved her "baby boy." ...

...Joe was there too.

Joe had three brothers and two sisters. Joe wasn't the oldest and he wasn't the youngest. So, with Joe's parents, Joe never got a father's attention inherited by the first born; or the rights given the last born and the love of being the "mama's boy." He wasn't the best-looking child and outwardly he wasn't the most blessed. At the time of his birth, Joe may have been considered thin and sickly. In the eyes of Joe's mama and papa, especially Joe's father, I'm sure he made Joe feel like he measured up to nothing.

Joe was going to be a rock in a hard place. He would always have an older sibling that he was supposed to serve and support; and a sibling, younger, that he was expected to watch over.

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In grade school, Joe never quite made the grade. In reading, his teacher once asked him to read aloud, but Joe was quiet and shy. Joe equated reading with speaking...

...Needless to say, Joe didn't like to read.

No, Joe wasn't book smart. But he was smart enough to know there was more to life than books and smarter yet, the life of the man he could identify with most could be found in the Good Book.

In writing, Joe didn't like writing; writing only meant other people reading. And Joe was too quiet and shy to have other people read anything he wrote. Besides, eventually the teacher would soon ask the student to read Joe's words aloud. And to Joe, that equated to his having to speak...

...Needless to say, Joe didn't like writing.

In arithmetic, Joe liked arithmetic. Joe was good with numbers. Numbers spoke for themselves: one plus one equals two. No one needs to say it--it's just the truth. Joe liked numbers because arithmetic is a language that speaks for itself. One plus two is three. That's just

the truth and Joe always liked to tell the truth...

...I need to say: Joe liked arithmetic.

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In high school, especially Mechanicville High School, when you called out the three names: Tony, Johnny or Joe...hundreds of guys turned around. So, if a girl named Maria, Josephina or Christina, said she had a date, a sweetheart, or was going to a formal with a boy named Joe...odds are Joe would get to go...odds are...

When it came to the talk of a girlfriend or marriage, of course sisters Josephine and Mary wanted the best for Joseph. While Joseph was the best man anyone knew in town, for a girlfriend to become a good wife, to such a good man, would be a pretty big step...and Joseph was the most patient person any man or woman had ever met. Patience is a virtue, and a patient Joe would need for his wife to be like the Mother Mary and be the most virtuous woman anyone known to earth had seen yet.

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Years have long-since passed. Mama and Papa are gone. And Joe's brothers and sisters have all moved. Joe must live alone in the family's upstairs apartment at 105 Saratoga Avenue.

Fraternal friends gathered in the Sons of Italy lodge below. Where there is a bar, a pool table, a jukebox, and a dart board...And the brothers and sons would play Bocce ball with the neighbors. From the upstairs porch, the clothesline doubled as a perch for the pigeons.

There's even a home for an Edsel Ford in a garage housing old license plates, a tool bench, and a well-rounded variety of hubcaps. And naturally, Papa once had his pride and joy: next to that shiny, metal ball of a fountain, was a small, chicken-wired vegetable garden. The Mechanicville River even had its run of the place.

Since home is where the heart is... this was the place Joe called home... So, Joe lived right in the heart of the city of Mechanicville.

So, Joe abided by the law, respected his elders and paid his taxes.

So, it must have tore Joe's heart out when the city informed Joe they wanted to tear Joe's house down... This way, the proposed highway could welcome some new neighbors.

And so, they stood, Joe's neighbors-- Joe at their side--voting one and all, until the whole assembly bellowed: "Poor, Joe...Sorry, Joe...So long!"

Joe's boyhood home, a place where spaghetti cooked on the stove; where Mama and Papa's sons and daughters once ate; where Joe's brothers and sisters lived and played; Joe's home, his place to lie down and rest, was completely demolished.

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Now, during this time in his life-- this is when Joe contemplated his priesthood. The decision... decisions...on marriage, family, work and the priesthood....Was he going to get married and raise a family working 9-to-5 for a living or was he going to live to work for

God for the rest of his life?
The decision he would make this day
will last his lifetime. So, for Joe,
it was only natural to pray on it,
think about it, and look ahead.

Joe is a man who first and foremost
follows the Ten Commandments. The
First Commandment reads: "Thou shalt
have no gods before me." So, for Joe,
there was no question that whatever
life he would lead; the first rule
for Joe, in his life, would be to
follow God. And for Joe, a follower
is a leader who knows where he is
going. And Joe's single, foremost
goal in life is to be a follower or
a servant...a servant to a Master.

So, as I forward through what may
be the years in Joe's life, let me
divide it down to day-by-day, and take
it one day at a time--and this one
day, one day only, would be a Friday.
For Joseph, this may be, may be a day
in the life.

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For Joe, the day always began before
dawn and always ended exactly at
eight o'clock--give or take no
minutes...eight o'clock--lights
out!

It's 4:00AM and Father Time in all
his days had never gotten Joe out of
bed with an alarm clock. Joe only
used it for back-up. Joe carried a
great "clock in his head," a
horseplayer, I know, once said.

Joe had lots of clocks; simple clocks,
some with numbers, some with hands.
And Joe usually had a clock set five
minutes fast. Often times the one
clock set five minutes fast would be

used to watch over, so to speak, the clock that told the current time. Joe, for a simple man, liked to be "ahead of his time."

And it was always a clock, never a watch. For him, a watch was too glamorous and grand. For Joe, his time was not "at hand." Joe, himself, is a simple man, but didn't lose track of his time. Joe counted on the time in his life. Even in his retirement or when he would retire at night; Joe liked to mark the time. Time, the hours in a day, proved to Joe that God was in control.

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As you may know, for Joe, by 5:00AM, he had already prayed, showered and shaved. Joe could already hear the pleasant song of the morning birds. For Joe, that meant time for those creatures to partake. Joe liked all the animals, but I think he liked the birds because they were gentle, well-travelled, and are the music makers of the Animal Kingdom. They were appreciative of Joe for him showing them such caring.

Joe was also fond of dogs because many people had one and Joe was always loyal to them--and perhaps, perhaps to a dog--Joe looked like man's best friend.

Flies, now flies Joe had a problem with them. Joe admired Joe DiMaggio and prided his swatter swing after that of the "Yankee Clipper," but our Joe's hitting streak for flies wouldn't so soon end. He'd often spend the better part of the hour swatting'em. Joe never killed another creature, but with flies, I don't think he

could handle not knowing what to feed or how to take care of them...

...And at the very least, for me, I didn't get tricked into thinking he was perfect.

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A lot of people...people...some people...okay a handful of people would give Joe gifts: clocks, and clothes, and icons. However, for one: Joe, didn't like to accept things...and "...thou shalt not make any graven image" is Commandment Number Two. Nonetheless, graciously he did so as to honor them. But most of what Joe got never left its box. He thankfully placed everything in a drawer or in a closet.

When Joe considered his priesthood, Joe was the kind of man who didn't like to wear a priest's white collar. Joe didn't like wearing a black jacket, let alone wearing an ornate robe. Not to mention, the color black was too funeral-like and formal.

Joe never judged a man by the clothes he wore, Joe himself, would dress like a homeless man until he gave you the shirt off his back. Joe would walk the mile in another man's shoes before he did that. I was told Joe was the only guy who...if he wore a new shirt...it was forty-years-old.

Joe could've been a man who wore a lot of different hats, but he'd just as plainly stick to a mended baseball or fishing cap. Joe, he liked to wear hats, not because he was losing his hair--he knew no vanity--but because if a person noticed his baldhead, he didn't want the added attention.

Joe wore glasses when his vision went bad--and to his brother he'd give you these--if it would help his brother to see.

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For Joe to continue his day, he had to have a calendar. Joe knew days would change and pass, but he was secure in the knowledge that another day, a better day, might come his way. Knowing the time and the day, Joe, he also had to know the weather.

And if it was in the cold of winter, he'd be the first one to shovel the snow. Then he'd shovel the driveways of family and neighbors--it really pained him to know that another human being couldn't get to where they wanted to go because of the cold or snow.

In the spring, an older Roman Catholic man once gave Joe a plant, but when Joe accidentally broke its branch, he felt a loss of innocence. It wasn't that he couldn't live with the guilt--Christ is the vine, and we are the branches--but for those who know Him best, a Bible says, Joe was divine.

If it was warm, he'd open all the windows in the summer because he'd love to let in the sun.

If it was autumn or fall and the colors in the trees had turned from green; he would rake up every leaf that had fallen. He'd imagine, as he looked at his sidewalk of pavement, how you might feel if you couldn't get to your garden.

And since Joe liked working with numbers, he'd like to know the temperature.

Joe loved the weather and temperature. He knew that he was a slave to the conditions and that it wasn't so much the "mother," but the "Father" in nature.

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By 6:00AM, Joe went to that place where everyone knew his name. I wouldn't say Joe was a nameless, faceless type that sat at a stool sipping a cup of coffee hours on end--no one is. Joe had a face; it was just concealed beneath his demeanor or a hat. And a name, Joe wasn't nameless...but, in an Italian town like his, calling out the name Joe swiveled more stools and heads than whiplash.

The diner still sits right near the railroad tracks. The memorabilia is typical in a place like that: locomotives, children's snapshots, and that first dollar bill.

Upon entering, it's odd, taking no chances, near-sighted diners' wave to others they can't even see. Even as the far-sighted ones lift their glasses to read the same news daily.

In the diner, the waitresses all knew Joe by his many first names: that of "Dear," and "Babe," and "Hun." Joe, once again, realized the many ways his name was so common.

Strangely, everyone there has a name, but no two last names were ever the same. And that same man would never be identified by that single last name

or in the same generation. "He's the grandson of a DiBello; a cousin of a Camerato; or the son of an Enzogna; someone will inherently say.

Joe distasted the smell of smoke like the chimney; or to hear the clang of his plate; or the cook's bell when it rings like the sound of the railway crossing.

But Joe liked to be in a diner that would have so little to do with food and so much to do with you.

And the engine that made that old locomotive diner run didn't take shovelfuls--it sometimes took cream or sugar and poured like black coal into a cup. But the spirit that made that old diner run--was, if you will, that familiar conversation.

Later that night, a dozen stools will sit behind a counter like disciples at a supper. And one tomorrow, next to a booth, sitting on a stool, will be Joe's hat, saving Joe's place. Soon, no one will ever remember Joe. Oh, people may say his name, not because once sat there an average Joe--but because just another, a not-so-average Joe, will sit there the very next day.

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For Joe, who covered a lot of ground but never traveled very far; he would walk or prefer to drive, but never take a train and God forbid get on an airplane. So, Joe cared for the life of his car. I think if Joe wasn't called to his priesthood or his profession, I think Joe might like to work in a garage and be a mechanic. A woman sees Joe wiping his windshield. She beeps. It startles Joe. She beckons

him to her car. "Clean mine while you're at it. God almighty it's dirty," she said.

She had extended her hand to pay Joe; Joe, on the other hand, completed his duty to clean the windshield.

As Joe walked into the station, to pay his debt, he noticed the tire of one of the cars, in repair, was going flat. So, Joe checked it with his gauge before settling up with Matt.

For Joe, there were four sets of laws to follow: The Laws of Nature, the Constitution, the "rules of the road," and The Commandments. So, when Joe heard the Lord's name taken in vain; it truly hurt him, just as he truly has a place in his heart for the lost and misguided.

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For Joe, his Christian commitment centered on God and himself as a person; but as for his relationship with his community, it began and ended in church.

Joe never missed God's calling on Sunday. Joe never, ever, called in sick. And I believe the habits and daily schedule that he held true to all week were solely to prepare him to serve God this day.

For Joe was a man who promised God the Fourth Commandment: that which is to... "Keep Holy the Sabbath."

For Joe, church was a home; it was the home of weddings and masses, funerals and baptisms.

In an Italian community or family, it seems for every wedding there is a funeral. Joe didn't grace many of the weddings; and if he did, he never stayed very long--too formal. Besides, God forbid, Joe would shoulder the blame if the couple were to ever divorce.

As for funerals, Joe graced every funeral. Outside of church, it was the only formal public gathering Joe faithfully attended; but he never stayed very long--too dismal. Besides, he knew the deceased wouldn't be disturbed by his presence.

Joe didn't like change, he accepted it...the inevitable...Joe realized change meant nieces and nephews, goddaughters and godsons would move away. Change meant insecurity and Joe was a man who used his good habits and routine as security: dates on a calendar, the time, the change of seasons and temperature, family and tradition. But mostly, Joe also knew that change meant family and friends wouldn't just move...one day, they'd pass away.

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By 9:00AM, like a factory whistle or a train whistle, or the whistle of an organ pipe; the blessed man is the one who delights in his work. For Joe, the work whistle, delightfully, went off in his head well before 9:00AM.

Mechanicville had a definite Italian flavor to it and even if you were from the Polish side, the men from Mechanicville worked in the paper mill or for the railroad.

One choice might be the mill. The mill might work, but Joe's brother Vincent was employed there, and Vincent didn't like the work. Besides, in the mill, if Vincent were the tree: tall and strong...

...Joe would be the paper: weaker and thin. Slim was popular and bold...known to drink a beer now and again. Pencil-thin Joe would eventually always have to carry Slim's load. See, Joe never touched a drop. And Joe knew Joe better than anyone else, and Joe knew Joe wouldn't fit in.

And if Joe were going to punch the clock, it would be as a bean counter for American Locomotive.

The rare exception would be the men, like Joe's brother Johnny, who would work for the GE plant in Schenectady.

Joe might have kept track of GE's assets--except for the fact Johnny had stock in GE--it's just that GE had no idea Johnny's storage shed was so stocked! It's funny, Thomas Edison tooled around with less at the start and he started the company!

For Joe, the word on where he might work would bring with it good news and bad news, and in this case, they were both the same: he might go work for his baby brother, Anthony. The problem was Anthony had drive and he would drive Joe crazy!

Anthony, the entertainer, also turned out to be quite the entrepreneur. He had moved to the country to start a newspaper and he could use Joe to keep the books and records, and balance the finances, which Joe would do everyday,

diligently collecting coins from the racks, rolling them one-by-one, and then depositing the cash into the bank.

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Joe, himself, seldom got to travel to a neighbor state. He didn't like to leave his hometown. He never took a train--too fast...and never, ever, considered flying in an airplane--too advanced. For Joe, he was satisfied driving to the post office daily or forwarding a piece of mail.

He liked to look on a map to study, and see in his dreams, all the places the envelopes mentioned. For Joe, he was content to hear of the distant travels of co-workers, friends and family members.

Now, if someone were ever to forward you a box or a present, Joe would box it so professionally, it would take you a week to unwrap the packaging. It was his duty. He simply wanted it to arrive safe and protected.

I think the reason Joe took such pride in the mail was because it was a branch of the government. At birth, Joe was an Italian. In church, Joe was a Christian. At work, he was a servant. But Joe was also a true American.

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By 11:00AM, Joe was ready to take a break and head off to beat the noontime rush.

The favorite part of Joe's day was going to lunch. And it didn't take a genius to figure out why. You see, the restaurant was serving the lunch special--and what made lunch so special

for Joe--was that he got to spend it with me.

Joe was a quiet servant who loved to laugh and live in peace. And till the day I die, I'll never forget that one time we went to eat...

The waitress pours Joe a steaming, hot cup of coffee. Joe takes a quick sip, but the hot brew is too much for his lips, so he sets it down next to himself.

Mark hands Joe a piece of paper, but it slides from Mark's hand. Joe's reflex is to reach and rescue it; but in doing so, he spills his coffee directly onto his lap.

Joe wants to rocket from his stool, but his reserved nature seems to chain him to his seat. His face contorts, but he refuses to let out a peep. That is--until he instinctively grabs the glass of ice water and douses his lap with it. Now, he launches from his shoes. The battle for Joe is to not scream, but a war rages within.

Mark knows Joe is okay. He is slightly amused and blatantly shocked at Joe's outburst. Joe's face and body continue their meltdown for a comedic moment.

Now that's what I call a "cup of Joe"; as if the mere fact that it happened that way wasn't funny enough. And it didn't take a genius to figure out why I loved going to lunch...the reason I loved to go to lunch was because I loved being with UJ so much.

Mark and Joe sit across from one another in a booth. Joe slides Mark a menu. Joe looks over a menu as well. Mark asks, "What are you going to have?"

Joe answers, "A couple of plain hotdogs, I think."

Mark replies, "Sounds good. A turkey club for me."

When the hotdogs arrive, they are smattered with ketchup and mustard. Joe looks disappointedly at his meal. He glances for the waitress; then, seemingly with shame, Joe looks to Mark. Mark can't help but to feel helpless as he wonders.

Mark hands Joe a butter knife. Joe grabs and clings to it. However, as distasteful as the hotdogs appear to him, he wrestles with option of scraping off the toppings. "If she went to so much trouble to bring it-- the least I can do is eat it," Joe said.

You see, some people serve 'specially for money...and some people serve for free.

The Fifth Commandment says to: "Honor thy father and mother." Joe honored his father by being there for his grandsons. Joe honored his mother by being there for her grandsons. But Joe honored my God, my Father, by letting me be his godson.

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At noon, for Joe, the work was never done. There was always someone who needed a hand back at the office or maybe in his church community--but most of Joe's time, it was spent working for, in one way or another-- his brother Anthony.

As with me, they had a special relationship. I, I was always needy. Anthony, he was always in need: "Joe,

I need this--Joe, I need that." And Joe, with Joe, Joe just wanted to be needed.

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Even if Joe thought about retiring, he wouldn't spend his life hunting or fishing. He never once went hunting like Italian men do. But, he did go fishing a time or two. But Joe was the kind of guy who didn't like to put the worm on the hook--he used a piece of bread instead. Joe never reeled in too many fish, if he did; he'd throw them back in. Joe, I guess, was like a fisherman of men--the joy he got from fishing was feeding them the bread.

The Sixth Commandment: "Thou shalt not murder." Joe didn't need to be told. It was plainly written on his heart, as if it were in stone.

See, givers love to give, and takers love to take. When it came to asking Joe for things, I usually set a hook. When Joe gave, it was honest--like throwing a dog a bone. And for me, there always had to be a catch. I was like everyone: selfish. Joe, he was unlike anyone: he was selfless. I should have read the Good Book, where we're told: "Who, if they ask the Father for a piece of bread, would be thrown a stone."

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If it's one o'clock in Upstate, New York, in August...

...then the August place to be was Saratoga!

In Saratoga, in the first place:
there were winners who bet to win.
In the second place: there were
those who bet a little, but wanted
to be in the right place. In the
third place: there were those who
didn't bet at all. They came for
the show.

Joe came for the horses in the show.
He came for the action and for the
gamble. Joe's reasons ran across
the board. He came for the people
and to honor racing's oldest place.
Joe came to "the sport of kings" for
the real kings of the sport. Joe is
here because Joe is a lover, a lover
of horses...and because Mr. Anthony,
the town barber, he got a tip on the
four.

Mark asks Joe, who's reading the
Racing Form, "Why don't you just
pick a lucky number or favorite color?
For that, Joe had a story to tell:

Two bettors are standing in the
paddock watching the jockeys saddle
up on their horses. The one guy,
who's a tipster, says to the guy
reading the *Racing Form*, "You know
the trainer of the number #1 told me
his horse is a sure thing."

The other guy looks down at the *Racing
Form*, surprisingly, "Really?"

The tipster says, "As a matter of fact,
the jockey of the horse also told me
he's a sure thing."

The guy with the *Racing Form* looks in
the paper with amazement, "Really?"

The tipster says, "Yeah. And believe
it or not, I think I heard the horse
himself tell me. I think I got it right

from the horse's mouth he's a sure thing!"

The guy with the paper looks down in shock, "Really?"

The tipster says, "Yeah! He's 99-to-1; I'm going to go right now and bet the house on him and clean up!"...

...Later, the race goes off and the tipster's horse comes in dead last. He sees the guy with the *Racing Form* holding a handful of cash. So the tipster asks him, "Who'd you bet?"

The guy answers, "The winner."

Just then, the horse walks by and the tipster yells to the horse, "Hey, what the heck happened?"

The horse comes over and says to him, "When you went to bet, your buddy showed me the *Racing Form* and when I saw how bad I was, I knew I didn't have a chance!"

You know Joe; he didn't fancy himself a big or heavy gambler. But to Joe the most agonizing part of a photo finish, when all he ever plunked down was a measly two-dollar wager, was the notion that his horse might have a negative effect on a bigger bettor.

Joe loved all the equine legends of this sport: Sea Biscuit, Man of War, Mr. Prospector and Secretariat. Joe equally loved the lesser-known names of the game, like: "Nanny Goat," "Jughead," "Fishhooks" and "Buttons." Oh, sorry, those were the names of some of Joe's buddies.

But Saratoga is more than the races... they also got some culture there: like the thoroughbred auction, high society, the Saratoga Philharmonic

and the racing museum. But no Saratoga meet would be complete until we met Joe's racetrack buddy...the one and only Louie "Buckets." Louie was deaf in one ear, which made it hard for him to speak and hear--which could only explain why Anthony would've taken us to the symphony.

By the end of the Saratoga Meet, Joe will have given it all back. Don't be mistaken, Joe was a good handicapper--not to mention when it came to racehorses--Joe was blessed. Joe would give all his winnings back, but he wouldn't lose it on the ponies...no...he'd cash his tickets, and with the winnings; he'd cover the losses of the losers he knew at the track.

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As you may know, by 2:00PM, Joe had longed to fulfill all his work duties. Weather it be an office, a home, a neighborhood or a church; man could hardly invent a new way for Joe to be a servant. Sinatra, one of Joe's favorites, once sang: *"I've been a puppet, a pauper, a piper, a poet-- a pawn and a King..."* Joe knew there is only one King on a throne, so he was content to be a "jack of all trades": mechanic, a mailman, maid and janitor. But Joe's twice daily task was his longing to, yes, clean out the garbage: dumps and dumpsters, waste baskets and trash cans. Joe knew that no servant could ever be greater than his master, so for Joe, what better way to carry the burden of the dirty, the discarded, the filthy, and the unwanted, than by being a garbage man?

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As you may know, Joe wasn't satisfied if his work wasn't done by the end of the day. Yet, usually by 3:00PM, his work with me was just beginning.

Now, me, if I had a passion, it certainly wasn't to be a garbage man. It was for fast times, faster horses, and the fastest women.

The Seventh Commandment is: "Thou shalt not commit adultery." Me, I was good at being an adulterer, I was just bad at being an adult. And you know Joe...God forbid!

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By 4:00PM, as you may know, to beat the rush hour, Joe liked to be back on the road, which doesn't explain why he would only drive, slow, on crowded city streets constantly going stop and go, stop and go, stop and go.

Joe figured, by the end of his lifetime, he would log over a million miles from places like church to home to home and back. To this very day, Joe has never exceeded the speed limit, which I suspect is why he never, ever, got so much as a speeding or even parking ticket.

Joe chauffeured all sorts of people around Mechanicville; everyone from "Tootie" to "Plucky" and especially his brother Slim. And the only selfish stop he liked to make for himself was to put everyone else's lottery tickets in.

Joe liked to play the lottery and the complicated system he had for picking the number was no more than a simple mathematical equation. See, the more

Joe won for himself--the more he was able to give to someone else. Which reminds me of a Christmas story I once heard Joe tell...

...Once upon a time, in New York State, they drew a three-digit number. With numbers ranging from 000 to 999, there's a thousand numbers to play.

But Joe had grave concerns; he needed big money for presents one holiday.

Joe usually played his birth date: 9-2-5, but only 50-cents or a buck straight.

So, Joe calculated he needed God's hand of fate. He soon figured: what were the odds that he would see 9-2-5 on three different types of plates? So, Joe said to himself...
"...I'll play it three times."

That eve, Nick arrived neither early nor late--'cause by all accounts, Joe never told a lie: Commandment Number Nine. The God's honest truth is: Joe's birthday number...9-2-5...

...was drawn that very night--in I'd say, just the "nick of time."

So, from 4-to-5...Wow! There's another number: 4-2-5. From 4-to-5 or 9-to-5... in Joe's life and in God's time--Joe was having the time of his life.

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By 5:00PM, Joe was able to check his own mailbox. Joe seldom got many cards and never a letter, once in awhile after Christmas or Easter and sometimes after his birthday. But mostly for Joe, people's motto when it came to gifts and well

wishes were always: it's the
afterthought that counts. Perhaps,
a distant relative or bulk mailer
may send a greeting--but no matter
the occasion, the card was always
belated.

Home...safe and secure. For Joe, he
was a humble, quiet servant who loved
everyone. Believe it or not, he truly
had no enemies. For Joe, in a way,
always being in the right place at
the right time made him feel safe--
and being on time was his habit--and
habit would become his security. But
what truly made Joe safe and secure
was his undying belief in the love
of God--and loving his fellow man
was part of that routine.

Joe loved people; he loved talking
to people. More so, Joe loved
listening to them. Joe loved being
with people, but make no mistake,
Joe hated, I mean hated, talking on
the phone with people. At the end
of the day, Joe's favorite company
was the nicest, quietest, most
peaceful man, God only knows, Joe
or anyone ever knew...Joe himself.

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By 5:30PM, as you may know, Joe
would eat his dinner. He'd hope
against hope his guest list might
include Sinatra, Dino, or his
favorite: Perry Como...maybe yes,
maybe no. So, Joe ate his macaroni
and listened to the radio he called
his "Marconi."

Joe never traveled each and every
highway; Joe, he ate it up and
didn't spit it out. And he may say,
in shy way: "No, oh no not me."
To say the things, he truly feels

and the words of one who kneels--
he did it God's way...and alone.

===

As you may know, for Joe, by 6:00PM...
like clockwork...

The phone rings. Joe walks to the phone
and answers it. The telemarketer says,
"We're collecting..."

Before the end of the night, Joe would
not say, "No" to a single soul. You
name it--Joe gave to it: The Disabled
American Veterans, The Coalition of
Police, and the Salvation Army--and
Joe was neither handicapped or in the
Armed Services. For Joe, the telephone
really disarmed him; his wit was the only
weapon he ever needed to be armed with.

===

As you may know, for Joe, a world
full of people was the thing to see.
Television was basically a vast
wasteland. At 6:30, half-an-hour
and that was that, just enough to
make you laugh...

...A half-hour sitcom and a variety
of those at that. Joe was the type
of guy who never talked about the
shows he watched, but if he heard
someone talking about what they saw
that made them laugh--Joe, he wanted
to be a part of all that.

One time, one time only, Joe did watch
a movie. A loving brother made him
watch "*The Sting*"...and sure enough,
next day, Joe was pleased to be a
part of the conversation when he was
heard to say: "How 'bout that ending?"

Normally, for Joe, half-an-hour and that was that--just enough so if Joe couldn't tell you a joke--you and he could share a laugh.

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By 7:00PM, as you may know, Joe would get ready for bed.

By 7:15PM...Brush you teeth and get ready for bed. By 7:30PM...Put on your pajamas and get ready for bed.

By 7:45PM...Say your prayers and get ready for bed.

By 8:00PM...Turn the lights off and go to bed...But Joe had noisy upstairs neighbors.

I know I only heard Joe use the word "I," for himself, twice his entire life. And the first and last time, his eyes were closed. The single, solitary thing I imagine Joe asked for Joe in this life...was a good night's sleep. The Tenth and final Commandment is: "Thou shalt not want, thou shalt not covet"...Dear, God... Joe just wanted Joe to rest in peace. I don't know when he finally fell asleep. I don't know what he would think. I don't know if he had a chance to dream...but I do know...

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By the way, so to speak, the building, Joe's home, that had stood there long ago--was in the wrong time and at the wrong place. The highway, the bypass, the one the city resurrected...find out: the surveyors set their sights off and the city made a mistake. Joe's home could've stayed standing; it wasn't in anybody's way after all.

Change...the growth of an old city,
an old city growing older...And still,
Joe was a man who kept the two great
Commandments: he would love God, and
love his neighbor.

===

Joe did have a sweetheart, and I'm
sure he cared for her. She may have
been his first love as they say.

Now Johnny, Johnny his brother--see,
in the Italian tradition a couple
names their first son after the
father's oldest brother--in this
case, Papa's oldest brother was Mark.
But Mama wanted the name John, so the
parents decided on Mark John. But
since Mama wanted her first son called
John--"Johnny" it was. Eventually
Johnny got the nickname "Dee." So,
everyone called him Dee. Now Johnny,
he got married. He married a woman,
with the initial "D," named Dorothy
or "Dot." And they had two children.
And they stayed married forever.
Now Anthony or Tony, Mama's "baby";
he would also one day be called "Dee."
Go figure. He married a beauty queen,
she was also named Dorothy, and people
called her "Dottie" or "Dot." But,
eventually, her children would call
her "Lots." She and Anthony had eight
children and they stayed married.

Now Vince, but he was nicknamed
"Slim." He got married. He married
a fun-loving woman: a woman nicknamed
"Phil." Go figure, again. They had
a child and they stayed married
forever.

Now Mary, Mary also got married.
She married a man with the initials:
EP. And Mary stayed married forever.

And Mary's name stayed Mary; she got a nickname..."Go figure," but she didn't like it...so she stayed Mary. And she had a child, but Mary's name remained Mary.

Now, now Josephine, the female version of Joseph, they called her "Babe." Babe married a man and they had four children.

Joseph, my God, Joe...he did have a girlfriend and I'm sure he cared for her, and she was his one and only sweetheart. He never again, ever, held hands with a woman and he stayed unmarried forever.

How could Joe love everyone if he devoted himself to only one? How could he be father to all if he were a husband to one?

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To me, "a man of the cloth" need not wear a collar and priestly attire outside of the church. To me, a priest may only look like a priest when he is preaching. Yet, I believe if a priest lays behind his priestly wardrobe he could better serve and fulfill God's intentions. You see, acting priestly isn't just about the loud words a man speaks, but the soft voice that spoke by a man's actions.

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Joe sits on a toilet, his face looking hollow. He is alarmed. He looks up. It appears to him Someone is calling his number. Like an ocean tide washing back a shell, a wave comes over him. He sighs a gentle sigh of relief, followed by a quiet smile of victory-- like Someone is calling his name.

Joe lived alone...Joe never did get married. Joe never did become a priest...Joe just up and died--alone. As a matter of fact, his last words may have been: "Lift me up." Joe could've died February 11th in peace...but I'll never know...I got there three days late. Instead of dying in his sleep, he had a heart attack on the throne of a toilet seat.

THE WAKE

Me, I used to always make Joe wait. And I, I was always late. I used to always speak too soon, but now I'm telling this story for Joe too late. For 40-plus years, it was always a minute or two, then half-hour, then an hour, but I was never a whole day late. The greatest regret I'll ever take to my grave was the same one Joe took to his... Excruciating, how excruciating it must have been for him to wait... That I made him wait, 3 days, for me in pain. I believe the thing Joe loved most about being early, or on time--was that God was always on time. God is always on time and for Him it's never too late....

Tomorrow...I said, "I'll speak to you tomorrow." Yesterday is gone, and today there may be no tomorrow. So, tell everyone, "I love you" and "God so loves you" before it's too late.

THE MASS

The nature of this gathering is to thank and worship the Lord for his creation and the gift of life given to Joseph....

If you came to "pay your respects" or if you came to see or speak to Joe--he is not here--just as the angels, at the tomb of Christ, said, "He has gone ahead"; so too, Joseph has gone ahead. If you wish to see anyone, see those here whom Joe loved and those who knew Joe. If you wish to speak, in prayer, the only one who can hear you are God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Joseph, the saint, has been made holy by his faith in Jesus Christ; and by Joe's good works, in service to his Lord, is in Heaven working for and worshipping the Father. He cannot hear your prayer....

If you wish to say anything to Joseph, if it be asking forgiveness or words left unsaid, or to say, "I love you"; please say it to Joseph's Creator and to one another. That is the way Joe prayed and lived....If you wish to honor Joe this day, please do so in Joe's way: Love God with all your heart, mind, body, and soul--and love your neighbor as yourself....

Please remember Joe this day by leaving here in the love of God; in love for one another; and in Christian love, goodness, righteousness and peace.... Please remember, he would have wanted it that way.

THE EULOGY

As you may know...Joe, in his heart, never liked to see a lot of people in one place, but he always had a place in his heart for a lot of people.

As you know, Joe loved to laugh and to make others laugh. Joe was a loving, humble, quiet servant who lived in peace.

As you may or may not know, when I was born, Joe was named my godfather. Once I learned he was Anthony's brother, I knew he was also my uncle. And because my grandfathers died when I was young, Joe became like a grandfather. Then, one day, I adopted Joe to be my father. Lastly, when Joe died; he became my "into eternal" reminder of my first and last father--my true Father--Father God: God the Father.

Someone once said, "The apple doesn't fall and die too far from the tree." So, I was born the child of my father... but my Godfather, my uncle, my friend, my father Joe...he's the man I'm dying to be.

THE BURIAL

The three-car procession of a hearse and a pair of black funeral vehicles, is as baron as the cold and blustery environment they traverse.

A nephew remarks, "If Uncle Joe were here, he'd have this snow shoveled by now."

The snow and frozen ice easily resemble Antarctica. As the funeral director exits the hearse, his footsteps crunch the snow and pound on the ice. He clomps to the gravesite to investigate the burial site. Awaiting his arrival is the cemetery's gravedigger.

The director notes, "Huh, that's odd! I've never seen that before...the ground is completely frozen everywhere, everywhere but the actual gravesite."

Joe never raised his voice until God spoke for him that very day from his grave... "Lord you died for me--I died for you," Joe will have said.

You know, God's always on time--never say that forever is just another day--by the time forever gets here, it will be too late. Rest in peace and amen.

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The one theme I began to see was that no one living or deceased; and no, no not one, not a single one, would appreciate him less and underestimate him more than me.

In Joe's life, on the outside, I would laugh, and on the inside, I would cry. If there were no eternity; I too, might well die, but knowing there is a Heaven, I simply smile.

I believe the most selfish act I can do this day is cry. I was happy when Joe lived. And I should be selfless like he was and be happy for him that he died.

Joe is no longer here, but this was a day in his life. Joe is not alive here, but this was the story of Joe's life.

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Father Joe...At the time of Joe's death, Joe was my father and I was his son...an only begotten son. This wasn't because Joe changed, but because I had. I had come to see God's truth as to who Joe was in God's eyes...

...And I ask you, as a testament--to see Joe as God saw him--and sees him this day: in the image of Jesus Christ.

THE END