

Two wrongs can make a right



My grandfather was a storyteller. I imagine that's where I get it from. No matter what we were discussing, Grandpa Richert always had a story that illustrated his point. Especially in heated arguments, those stories were deployed the way he played the right bower in euchre – thrown down hard, voice raised in triumph, certain that no one could trump him. And as far as he was concerned, no one ever did.

Grandpa's repertoire of stories was not endless. For a child who liked novelty, that was a little frustrating. Forty years later, though, I'm grateful, because the constant repetition drilled his tales into my head, and recalling them now brings him to mind, as my memories of him slowly fade.

One story in particular has stuck with me across the years, though not necessarily in the way that Grandpa intended.

Grandma and Grandpa were born and raised in southern Indiana, and they lived there until they moved up to Michigan in 1932, searching for employment in the midst of the Great Depression. Down among the knobs that rise above the Ohio River valley, there is one particular hill on one particular road – a hill I have driven over many times myself. This hill is so steep, and comes to such a point, that the driver of a car approaching the summit from either side cannot see a car coming from the opposite direction.

Passing a car right at the summit – an experience I have had a few times – is surprisingly thrilling, an adrenaline rush. But Grandpa's story went a step further.

One beautiful spring day, he and Grandma and some relatives were out for a drive. Climbing the hill, they were laughing and talking, and Grandpa wasn't paying attention as he drove. As they topped the hill, they were passed on the right by a

car filled with other relatives, also laughing and talking and enjoying the day God had made, headed in the opposite direction.

Grandpa would pause here to let the reality of the situation sink in: They were passed on the right, by a car headed in the opposite direction. Which meant, for our readers outside of the United Kingdom, that both cars were in the wrong lane.

And then Grandpa's eyes would light up, and the corners of his mouth would curl up, and he'd throw the moral down: "That was the only time I ever knew two wrongs to make a right."

Like one of Aesop's fables, Grandpa's story was a compelling way to illustrate a universal truth without being overly didactic. It's a basic moral principle of Christianity that we cannot do evil that good may come of it. That's what we mean when we say that "Two wrongs don't make a right." All we do when we respond to a wrong by committing a second one is make matters worse.

I was in graduate school at The Catholic University of America before I realized that there was another layer to this story, one which Grandpa may never have intended, but which I think he would appreciate.

God's ways are not man's ways. He never does evil, but he can and does take our mistakes and sins and redeem them.

That's what happened that day on that hill in southern Indiana. Both Grandpa and his cousin were negligent; each was, to put it in moral terms, certainly guilty of a sin of omission against the Fifth Commandment. But God took those two wrongs and made it right.

Through his story, Grandpa taught me the lesson I needed to hear at age 12 about why I should never repay evil with evil. A little over a decade later, as I mourned Grandpa's death in 1992 and played this story back in my mind for consolation, he

taught me a deeper truth. Adam's sin and Christ's crucifixion were both wrongs committed by man, but through God's mercy, one undid the other.

Two wrongs can make a right – but only God can right our wrongs.

Scott P. Richert is publisher for Our Sunday Visitor.