

# Maintenance



Myths

!!!



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## The Squeaky Wheel Lawrence Merl

I continue to meet interesting people at the VA Home in Fayetteville, Arkansas. I met another one the other day.

One of the things I do at the home is try to encourage the nurses, housekeepers, and other staff at the home. After spending 8 months in the hospital myself, I have come to realize that it is a tough job to care for those that are ill and dying. So, when I get a chance, I tell them *“Thank you!”* and let them know that if no one

else appreciates them, I do! I think it takes a special person to be able to care for sick people. I know that not just anyone can do it. I also consider these veterans as special people who need care at this time in their lives.

I was talking to one of the nurses and she told me that most of the people at the home were appreciative, and that she enjoyed her job. Her dad had been in a VA home, and she saw how badly he was treated. So, she took a pay cut to come and help the veterans! I know that it is this kind of attitude that makes the difference. Anyway, she told me of one man that was the most cantankerous that she had ever met. She said that he complained about everything and treated people very badly. She told me that his own children didn't like coming to see him because of his complaining. She said that she was told that he even treated his wife, who is no longer with us, rather rudely! His name is Lawrence Merl.

I was interested, so I went and introduced myself and told Mr. Merl that I was writing a book and was going to put stories of veterans in it. I told him that if he had an interesting testimony that I would include it.

I then tried to tell him about Jesus. He got really mad and told me he wasn't interested and told me to leave and not come back!

Well, it takes more than that to discourage me. I have learned that there is a reason people are mean and cantankerous. *I was that way, making fun of God and running people off that didn't agree with me!*

I am so glad that God didn't give up on me!

Next week I went back into his room, introduced myself and started talking about his need for God!

He got really angry again and said, "*Weren't you here last week! I thought I told you to get out and don't come back!*"

I said, "OK, but I am going to pray for you!" He yelled, "Don't pray for me!"

When I went back the next week, the nurse stopped me and cautioned me about going to see him. She said, "*I don't know what you said to him, but he is really mad. You better not go in!*" Well, I decided to pray for him and wait for another open door. I was convinced that God wanted to save him, and it was up to me to figure out a way to reach him.

When I went to church, I told my pastor about him. He suggested I buy him a gift and give it to the nurse to give to him. While praying and thinking about this, I mentioned him to one of the

young girls at church. She told me that she would draw a picture, and I could see that he got it. I thought that was a great idea. So, I mentioned it to other children at the church. Soon I had a bunch of pictures.

I started feeding them to the nurse, and she started taking them into his room.

After a few weeks, she told me that I could go in and see him. She cautioned me, *“But don’t say anything about God!”*

So, I went in. I reintroduced myself and again told him I was writing a book and if he had an interesting story, I would include it in my book. This is his story.

He told me that his life was rather ordinary. I asked him how old he was, and he told me he was 94 years old. I then asked him if he had been in World War II and tell me of his time in the service and this is what he told me.

He said that he had worked at a military base in Texas called Kelly field, before World War II. While the war was going on he went to England as a Civil Service employee and worked at a secret base repairing and getting aircraft ready for the invasion of North Africa. After about thirteen months, he went back to the States and was drafted and ended up as a Seabee in the Navy. He became a diesel

mechanic and went to Guam and Midway Island. He spent about two and a half years in and then got out.

He then went to the University of Denver and got a master's degree as a Social Worker. At some point he told me he met his wife and that she was a Social Worker too. He was on the teaching staff at the University of Minnesota for several years. He then said he retired when he was about 50 but later said he quit. He told me that he wasn't lazy and went back to work as a delivery man "*in the winters of Minnesota*". He spent the rest of his life doing that. He moved to Northwest Arkansas and did delivery there. When I told him that I had worked at Sparks Hospital in Fort Smith. He knew of Sparks and of Saint Edwards Hospital because he had delivered stuff there.

I asked him what he had learned over the years that he might want to pass on to the next generation? He talked about his quest to make things better for the next person. I think that this is why he developed a griping persona. He told me that he learned that "*the squeaky wheel gets the grease!*" He told me that he eats lunch with three other men and that one day the saltshaker was empty. One of the men just pushed it aside. He said that wasn't the solution, so he told an attendant and she traded the empty one for a full one. He

said that if you didn't tell people what was wrong that they wouldn't change. I made the comment that it is not what you say but how you say it that makes the most difference. He continued to praise the person that was a rebel and said that it was this rebel spirit that led to the founding of our country. I told him that there were two types of rebels. Those that were against anything except what they wanted and those that were interested in rebelling to get things done right. He agreed with that.

I thought about what he said about "*the squeaking wheel getting the grease*". I think that is what attracted me to go and talk to him. Although, I had a different thought. When the nurse told me that there was one man that griped all the time, I thought, "*Now there is a man that could use some help!*" I figured he must be griping for a reason. My purpose was to find out what his problem was and see if I could offer a solution. "*The squeaking wheel getting the grease.*" The squeaking wheel here is Mr. Merl and the grease is love and attention!

Before I left, I told him that I was going to write down what he told me and bring it back and read it to him and get his opinion on it. That is what this is. The first draft. I am looking forward to his reaction and changes that I will need to make.

## The Squeaky Wheel (part 2)

After talking to Mr. Merl again, I read to him what I had written. He stopped me when I got to the part about the “*winters in Minnesota.*” It seems I misunderstood him. He had only worked for a few weeks delivering in Minnesota. He said that for twenty years he didn’t work a job. His wife wasn’t working either. I asked him what he did for income, and he wasn’t very clear on it. He later got a job with the Minnesota department of Public Welfare. At some point, he told me that his wife was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. He spent all his money taking care of her. She ended up in a nursing home and he had to make sure she was taken care of properly. I got the idea that he really loved her! I am pretty sure he felt the responsibility to make sure she was treated right. So, on this point he and the nurse I had talked to earlier were on the same page and had the same ideas! Both wanted to make the difference. They wanted to make change, not just for themselves but for others, too!

One of the most interesting things he told me was that when he was eighty, he got the delivery job in Northwest Arkansas. By then he had to work because of all the bills associated with his wife’s disease. He drove and worked at that company for 10 years, until he was ninety years old! He said that at one time they gave him an

award for safety. I think he said it was the driver of the year award. They named it the Merl Award, named after him. He said that he saved his money and when the owner of the company needed some equipment, he was able to loan him some money to help him out. The name of the company is “On Time Logistics”.

Mr. Merl also told me that he was born and raised in Dilley, Texas. He said he was a small child during the depression. He remembers that his mother had a 100 lb. sack of “Frito beans”. I did not know what these were. He said they were red beans but were not kidney beans. He said people would come to the door seeking help. His mother would load a small sack of these beans and give them out. He said he was raised to be socially conscious. He thinks that is what led him into social work later in life.

I went online and found “On Time Logistics”. Like most companies that have an online presence, there was a section called, “Contact Us.” I sent an email to them to find out if what Mr. Merl said was true and if they knew him. Later, I got a call from the owner of the company. He said that what Mr. Merl had told me was true. He also said that he had lost touch with him and wanted to come visit him. I gave him the information. I hope they have a good visit!

What is interesting about this interaction is that all three of us heard the “squeaky wheel”. The Nurse heard and understood the need for older veterans to get good care during the last years of their life. Mr. Merl heard and understood that to get change he needed to complain. I heard about a man that complained all the time and decided to make a difference.

The squeaky wheel gets the grease is a good maintenance truth. However, it is not true. The expression should be “The squeaky wheel ***needs*** the grease” When a wheel starts squeaking, it needs to be greased to remove the friction and allow it to move smoothly. The squeak is because there is a problem. The problem is friction and the answer is grease. Unfortunately, many times the “squeak” is ignored until the friction causes the wheel to fall off or seize up! As a maintenance man, as well as a Christian, the correct response is to listen to the squeak and fix the problem!

I continued to visit Mr. Merl on a regular basis. I would witness to him at times and sometimes he would listen, but most of the time he would tell me to talk about something else. Eventually he let me pray for him before I left. I always prayed for God to open his eyes to see the truth about God’s love and of Jesus dying to save him from his sins and eternity in hell.

As time wore on, I would bring the young people from the church by to sing and play their instruments to him. I remember one time I told him I was going to bring the young people by to sing and asked if he would enjoy it. He said it would be all right but that he had a “tin ear.” I had heard that expression before. People from World War II used it. Because of the use of metal in making of planes and tanks and guns, the population all donated their iron and metal. So many things were made cheaply out of tin. The expression “tin ear” refers to the inability to enjoy music. I told this expression to the young people, and they were excited to come and sing to the man that had ten ears!

As time went by, Mr. Merl and I became good friends, I would tell him about my job and my adventures at the Fort Rock Family Camp. I would also read to him the things I had written. I would also pray for him as I left. He died the other day. As far as I know, he never made a public profession of faith in Jesus. My hope is that he listened, and that God softened his heart. Just maybe he trusted Jesus before he died, and I will see him in heaven.

The nurse has moved on also and I don't see her anymore. I remember that one of the last times I saw her and had asked her

how Mr. Merl was doing, she said to me, “He is treating me a lot better and hardly complains anymore!”

The grease was applied to the squeaky wheel. Let’s hope Jesus made a difference in his life! He has in mine!

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