

A lesson in humility

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [January 19, 2000](#) issue

When we Marty kids were in grade school, we entered any contest that pointed toward a prize. During those Great Depression years, we would have experienced great elation if we'd won even a bauble. But not then nor in any subsequent years of my life have I won a contest.

So deep were the childhood wounds inflicted on me by those who were better than I at writing 50 words on "I like Rice Krispies because . . ." that I have seldom entered contests during my adult life. We Martys are now so given over to the hermeneutics of suspicion that we don't even open the envelopes from Publishers Clearing House that shout, "Mr. and Mrs. Marty You Have Absolutely Positively Won \$2 Million Dollars!" Who wants to win so much without even having made an effort?

Given that bad record, picture our surprise and elation when a neighbor told that us we had won third prize in the Riverside Christmas House Decoration Contest. She was probably scratching her head in wonder as she surveyed our humble display, but she had read about it in the paper.

This led Harriet and me to delve into the mountains of newspapers that, mingled with Christmas wrappings, were destined for the recycler. We found nothing. Now I should explain that I don't believe anything until I see it in print. I know that the Bible says "faith cometh by hearing," but mine comes by reading.

But when more and more people told us about our win, we began, against all sense, to believe it. In the 17.4 years of our marriage I'd never seen my wife so doubled up with laughter as she was at thinking that we had won this prize! We live in a large white Victorian house in the wonderful town Frederick Law Olmsted designed in 1869. In the flicker of the original gas lamps, you can glimpse the house at night from the narrow winding road leading down to it. Most years its outside remains devoid of Christmas decoration.

This year, however, the youth group at our church sold huge green wreaths with giant red ribbons. We bought one, placed it on the door, and spent 5.3 minutes

winding greenery around the porch railing. Red candles lighted the front windows, as they do each year. How could the Riverside Recreation Department jury rate ours the third best in a town known regionally for residents' lavish Christmas displays?

Hubris set in: why only third prize? When you win something, we discovered, you get greedy and want more. Why not second? Next year, how about hanging two giant wreaths and winning first place? We phoned our children, who were surprised and amused: they had seen the thousands of lights on neighbor houses. "The committee has great taste, awarding a prize for such understatement!" one said.

The third prize was to be a gift certificate at Grumpy's, the coffee shop a few feet from Micah and Martin Marty's new studio. I was looking forward to using it. Then reality hit. The Riverside Recreation Department informed us that the winner was another Marti up the street. (Marti was and still would be our name, had an immigration officer not de-Swissed and then Frenchified it.)

All my life when good things happen to me I have been haunted by the fear that it must be a case of mistaken identity. Some day they'll find out who and what I *really* am. Now I learned amid tears of laughter that the Martys, these Martys, are not prize-winning decorators. The experience should keep me humble for another year.