

Gift-Giving Detox

by Terri Trespicio

This year, take a look at what and why you give—and rediscover the heart and soul of the season



FROM THE HEART

You don't have to spend a lot of money to make your holiday exchange worthwhile.

The family holiday extravaganza had officially reached its limit. Between my two sisters, my mother, and me, the teetering towers of brightly wrapped boxes were enough to make us more than a little bit embarrassed of ourselves. For us, this over-the-top exchange had been pretty much the norm, as appalling as it might be. None of us could afford it, and yet we simply couldn't resist.

Finally, after 30 years of near-gluttonous gift-giving, we decided last year that enough was enough. In a shocking break with tradition, we made a pact to try a gift-free Christmas. While this move sprung from a place of fiscal responsibility, we also needed, I think, to prove that we were more than what we gave to each other. We needed to know that we could find other things to fill our time that morning than tearing open packages like a bunch of 10-year-olds.

And we did. We prepared and enjoyed our favorite foods, played with the kids, and even organized our own beer tasting. But I'll admit it: The whole no-gifts thing took the air out of my tires a bit. My inner child sulked. It's not that I needed a ton of stuff, but I felt I was missing out on something so basic, so elemental to this time of year. Part of me envied the shoppers weighed down with bags and lattes, bloated with booty. I knew I wouldn't be suffering their hangover debt, but I felt like I was having to sit this one out—and I didn't like it.

In light of this disappointment, I realized that I had to rethink or at least question my ingrained gift-giving tendencies. By coming at the annual exchange with a little more perspective, perhaps I could enjoy more with

less. In fact, Buddhist teacher Sylvia Boorstein, Ph.D., author of *Happiness Is an Inside Job*, says that we have much to gain by taking a closer look at what's behind our itch to give, to outdo ourselves yet again. It all starts, she told me, with "asking yourself what's motivating that need. If you're clear about that, then you can give in a way that's honest and simple." Fair enough. It seems that I (along with my sisters, my mom, and everyone else caught up in merchandise mania) needed to find out what's behind that tendency to blow cash on exorbitant goods in the name of holiday spirit. Is it the urge to play Santa Claus and make everyone's holiday dreams come true? Is it an underlying assumption that somehow, if we find the ideal present, all would be right again? I hoped that, with a little introspection and expert advice, I could get some answers.

The Ego Trap

It occurred to me that I had gotten a little too caught up in the idea that what I gave reflected on me. Talking with Boorstein helped me see this all the more clearly. "The perfect gift" is not the key to holiday bliss, she said, and to layer expectations on it is to set ourselves up for serious disappointment. In the Buddhist lexicon, this tendency to cling to the idea that things need to be a certain way or have a certain outcome is called "attachment"—and it keeps us from being able to give freely and simply. Somewhere in the dark corners of our subconscious, we may even believe (as I have) that spending a little extra will smooth over problems, heal rifts, or even compensate for guilt or neglect in a relationship. I've done it myself: piled on

more-than-necessary offerings in the hope that more stuff would fulfill a deep need in that person's life (when it probably amounted to just more clutter). One thoughtful item probably would have sufficed.

Upping the ante on this sentiment are the "do this" gifts—the ones that impart a subtle wish that certain behaviors change. ("This will help you be more organized, you big slob.") Ditto for the quid pro quo offerings. ("I get you something nice; you think better of me.") No matter how you slice it, ego gets in the way. Part of giving, says Boorstein, is being able to let go of any expectations. (If they never read the book or wear the sweater, so be it.) "In order to experience the joy of generosity, you can't be overly attached to any particular outcome," Boorstein explains. "You never want to give with the intent that someone give back to you or be beholden to you in any way." She advised me to think of the gift itself as a true, uncomplicated expression of my feelings for that person—nothing more, nothing less.

Okay, so by consciously removing myself from the equation, I can communicate my affection toward others openly, without strings. But it's not like I live in a vacuum. It's one thing to take stock of ourselves and see our motives clearly, and another to ignore what society tells us. The internal pressure to please others is only compounded (even exploited) by the "Buy! Buy!" messages everywhere. "We're manipulated by the culture, and we have to think creatively to counter it, to avoid being overcome by it," says Boorstein. "The antidote is to take a moment and be honest and wise with yourself." This doesn't mean hid-

ing out in your basement until New Year's. It's about staying true to your budget and keeping your Santa fantasies in check as you shop (for instance, a set of handcrafted mugs is fine, but you don't need to get the dishes and the silverware, too).

No matter how savvy we are about consumerism, though, it's tough not to be swept up by it—with disastrous results. My personal rationale for overspending always comes back to some sort of self-flagellating, deeply Catholic imperative to give and give at your own expense. My friends and loved ones deserve these things, I think, and if financial insolvency is the cost of true generosity, then so be it. I mean, it's Christmas right? (Or Hanukkah, or Kwanzaa, depending on what you celebrate.) But as I've learned the hard way, starting the holidays in the red isn't the best way to inspire abundance, in ourselves or others. In the end, it's just not at all generous to give what you can't afford. "A wise gift is one you can realistically make," says Boorstein. "And that doesn't mean giving \$100 if you only have \$20."

Ultimately, I need to see the holidays for what they are. Not some extended shopping binge hopped up on steroids, but an opportunity to honor the people I love with gifts from the heart—and sometimes the simpler, the better. "Remember that the honoring comes from the wish to give, and is not measured by the magnitude of the gift," says Boorstein. In the end, I've realized that when we focus more on the practice of giving than on the end result, we rid ourselves of residual guilt, regret, amped-up expectations, and debt—and reconnect with the true spirit of the season. +