

Is there nothing new under the sun?

Returning to the joy of Christmas by buying “Nothing New”

Has Christmas become more burden than joy in your home? Is Advent filled with more stress than peace, calm, and a spirit of anticipation? Listen in on one family’s e-mail discussion on Christmas gift giving. This probably won’t work well for families with young children, but for those who have teens or young adults, it might be worth a try.

from Mom - Nov. 28: *Dear Brian, Heidi, Dacian, and Aaron, Heidi brought up an idea today that I would like you all to consider. She remembered the idea of a "moneyless" Christmas and was feeling drawn to it because of the commercialization of Christmas. I imagine living in NYC accentuates this experience for her. Would you all be willing this year to give gifts that require little or no money for our nuclear family? This is not an absolute in that you might have to spend a little money to buy supplies or ingredients for something but would try to keep in the spirit of simple, creative, homemade gifts. This would not apply to the extended family since they might not be ready for such a countercultural idea. Also, would it be important for everyone to "buy" into this idea or could someone opt out but the rest do it? Jim and I are willing to do this, in fact welcome the idea, but want you all to be comfortable with what we do. Think about these ideas and let us know.*

from Dacian - Nov. 29: *Me? I feel pretty skeptical about the idea, I don't think any of us every really spend loads of cash on anyone to begin with, and the best part about Christmas is going out and finding the most inane gag gifts you can find. (Can anyone say screaming rubber chicken?). I certainly don't have much in the ways of arts and crafts up here in Chicago, nor will I be home long enough to make the patented chore gift a viable option. I always felt this was a cop out gift to begin with. I really enjoy giving gifts, and watching people's reactions more than the actual receiving of the gift and I don't really see that happening if everyone is just giving each other coupons for setting the table and what not.*

from Mom – Nov. 29: *Dacian, you make some good points especially about your personal situation and not being crafty (in the art sense) and not having much time at home to do things. On the other hand, as much as I love our cute screaming chicken, there are only so many novelty gifts one can use. In my continuing effort to simplify my life and unclutter the house, I'm not keen on people buying gifts which will sit around unused. Perhaps a compromise would be that those who have the ability and creativity to do homemade gifts would be free to do so, while those who don't feel so inclined, needn't feel obligated. This also would mean that there would be no hard feelings or guilt if someone bought a gift but got a moneyless gift in return (or vice versa). It might be that you think of a creative homemade gift for one person in the family but not for another. I think that's fine. How does THIS idea sit with you?*

P.S. One prompt to help you with ideas for me is: What could I save mom the trouble of doing? or, What does mom really love to do with us kids but I don't usually like to do (read, play RISK)? or, What has mom been asking me to do but I've been putting off?

from Brian – Nov. 29: *Actually, the idea of a moneyless gift is a false label. Assuming that time is money and we all spend our time with a mix of work and leisure, the time to create a homemade gift or to do an activity can actually be pretty expensive depending on the wage that the gift giver can command. Say, for example, one gift giver makes approximately \$30,000/year. Assuming a 40 hour work week and 52 weeks of work a year, the hourly wage breaks down to about \$15/hour. Lets assume that the activity or creation would take 3 hours and the person otherwise would spend \$30 on a purchased gift. In this case, it makes much more sense to purchase the gift assuming that the recipient receives equal benefit from either the activity or purchased gift. Some people in the family have a good deal of free time. Others have much less free time. Your proposal of time contribution*

Christmas gifts inherently favors those who have more free time. This is not to say that a gift of time (previously mis-labeled "moneyless gift") is a bad idea. I think, however, that we need to really explore the true costs of these time gifts. Maybe a solution would be for those who prefer to receive a gift of time make this known and provide suggestions of what such time contributions would entail so that gift givers can decide for themselves what type of gift makes sense.

from Mom – Nov. 29: *Brian, you also make some very good points although I beg to differ with you that some people in the family have more free time than others. I'm sure you were not referring to ME as having free time since even though I don't have one full time job I do have at least 5 part-time jobs and 5 volunteer jobs. Everyone knows that part-time jobs equal more than one full time job since you have some slush time if you only have one job. Part-time jobs require one to go in several different directions thus taking more mental effort and coordination. I want to hear from Aaron and Heidi on this.*

from Dacian – Nov. 29: *Besides, aren't the "moneyless gifts" really the ones that take up useless space? Let's say I went and made you a popsicle stick ornament. You'd feel as though it was necessary to keep it, because I spent a lot of time gluing the glitter on. On the other hand, let's say I bought you a book I thought you might like. The book would get used, whereas the ornament would go in with all the rest of the clutter you've collected throughout the years. I for one see the purchased gifts as being much more practical and usable than the gifts which are doomed to become slivers of sentimentality.*

from Mom – Nov. 29: *"Slivers of sentimentality"? – now that's a turn of phrase worthy of an author. Perhaps you should write an ode to your mother since you are so glib with gab.*

from: Aaron – Nov. 29: *I think you guys are missing the point that Mom's trying to make here. I think the moneyless Christmas idea is fundamentally an attempt to escape from the net of materialism and consumerism that has a tendency to overwhelm people during the holiday season. This is more a way to prove that we can live outside of this tendency than it is of economic resources or time constraints. And yes, I too love to receive traditional presents but I am willing to say that I will give this a shot so long as everybody else wants to do it.*

from Brian – Nov. 30: *My point is not to say that we shouldn't do it, but simply that referring to it as "moneyless" is actually incorrect and that all gifts cost money, even gifts of time. That's why I suggested the compromise that those that have ideas of "time" gifts for themselves simply make it known to others that's really what they would like.*

from Heidi - Nov. 30: *Phew! Finally getting around to replying to all of this. When I was talking to Mom what I was thinking about was all the day-after-Thanksgiving shopping rush and thinking that I want to find a way to sort of step out of that mentality (although hopefully I was never in it). And I think Aaron got the idea right – this isn't about making popsicle stick presents but about trying not to add to the rampant consumerism and the retailer's approach to Christmas.*

So here's what I propose: A Christmas in which no one buys anything new. Not moneyless, but not creating demand for new things either.

Things could be bought at thrift stores, eBay, at used bookstores, from a friend, etc. I would even go so far as to say you COULD buy something new if you thought the place the money was going was somewhere valuable -- i.e. buying something from the artisans part of overstock.com sends money to people who are not so much a part of the commercialization of our holidays, or buying something where the money goes to a charity.

I'm not dead-set on this idea (I sort of like finding the perfect present and it sucks if you think you've found it and then realize there's some stupid RULE that's going to keep you from buying it). I guess I'd like to think of it more as a challenge than a regulation. What if we all try our best to find

presents we think people would like the most, but also see if it's possible to do that without adding to the buy-buy-buy xmas mentality?

from Dacian - Nov. 30: *I suppose I'd be willing to bend a little, but if I want to spend some money on one of you I'm gonna go ahead and do it! In some cases it's just not practical to get someone something that is used. Again, back to my book example, if I wanted to get mom a book that had just come out, I'm gonna be pretty hard-pressed to find it used, not to mention the fact that unless you are buying something specifically created for the Christmas holidays, I doubt you are "buying into the rampant consumerism". I've purchased new books on many occasions throughout my life. If I had spent all my time trying to find them used, I would have wasted a lot of time. Unless you are planning on purchasing a life sized motorized singing Santa, I don't really see how buying mundane and normal gifts is any different from buying a gift for someone on any other day of the year.*

from Mom – Nov. 30: *Dacian, since you used the example of books, let me point out that libraries are one of the great social inventions of history and last year Dad put my name on the reserve list for DaVinci Code enough ahead that it was ready a few days after Christmas. Also, I'm happy to report that recently I've bought a number of used books on Amazon. They don't have to be out long before Amazon has a used version. Mine have always come promptly and in good condition. Regardless, I'm glad to know that you're willing to go along, "as you see fit." I think any of us may find the perfect gift and decide to buy it even if it costs money because we just know the person would really like it. I'm OK with that but will still make an effort to stay in the spirit of Heidi's proposal as much as possible.*

from Brian - Nov. 30: *What about magazine subscriptions? This is inherently something that is relatively useless if purchased used.*

from Dad - Dec. 2: *Well, let me get into this discussion for once by saying that I have a "do-for" gift I would like to have for Christmas. I would like to have someone give me some personal and patient tutoring time with my computer. I'd like to learn how to use the various capabilities of Outlook better and in general get familiar with some aspects of my computer that I am not using or not using fully. I also want my usual Christmas sweater, and it can be new or used, hopefully gently so.*

from Mom - Dec. 2: *Well folks, if we're going to do this "nothing new" Christmas (or whatever you want to call it) I've started to think of what would make me especially happy to receive. In addition to the whole family playing Risk together (even though it takes a REALLY LONG TIME) here are some starters:*

- 1. I desperately need someone to tutor me in PageMaker*
- 2. I would love to have someone work with me to categorize all the books in the house and put them on appropriate bookshelves.*
- 4. A bigger TV for the basement, sort of like the oversize one Dacian has and insisted on taking to Chicago with him. Will trade.*
- 5. Someone to cook dinner on a couple of my nights to cook.*
- 6. An offspring going to a spiritual retreat.*
- 7. A window seat for the dining room made out of 2 cement blocks (covered in felt) on each side of the window, with a thick board, stained and polyurethaned.*
- 8. An offspring deciding to take up contra dancing on a semi-regular basis.*
- 9. A really good haircut that would make me look beautiful, be no trouble to maintain, would not frizz up in muggy weather, and could sustain the rigors of hot contra dancing. This last one is not only not moneyless but also impossible. Hey, I can still dream.*

from Mom to Dacian – Dec. 3: *Dacian, upon hearing your comment about buying new books, a friend of mine suggested that you buy the book, read it, then give it to me, thus making it “used.”*

from Brian – Dec. 6: *I'd be interested in a used audio set of the Star Wars Trilogy on CD. It's great for car trips. You might be able to find it at the library, but yes, it's illegal to copy it. So here's the question. If we're trying to avoid buying things new, where do we stand on illegal copying and burning? Another option is to buy it used. I'm sure it can be found used on eBay or Amazon.*

DECEMBER 25 - RESULTS

- One of the kids decided to get almost all his gifts on E-Bay.
- Another collected each family member's favorite songs and burned a CD for each of us.
- Since I (Susan) was pretty specific in the gifts I requested, I did get a personally made wooden window seat, PageMaker tutoring, and help reorganizing the books. Jim got computer tutoring.

Creative gifts that might give other families ideas:

1. a recipe box with favorite family recipes for one of the young adults
2. a box filled with contra dances for the new caller in the family
3. a framed diploma plus an offer to frame a favorite poster
4. a longed for book autographed by the author (This didn't meet the "nothing new" criteria but it was such a thoughtful gift, it didn't matter.)

Most ingenious uses of the "no money" or "nothing new" concept:

1. items bought on trips to foreign countries and thus not purchased with "U.S. money"
2. a CD that was bought, opened, listened to once, thus making it used
3. a previous year's magazine subscription that never materialized thus making it an "old gift"
4. a novel that had been borrowed from a roommate, who had borrowed it from another roommate. The issue of whether it still needs to be returned is in limbo
5. a list of recreational activities that don't involve videos, playing a video game, or going to a movie
6. a pedometer with a special label that said, "approved to meet Vogt gift giving criteria under the category of healthy living"

Gift that got the biggest laugh:

A library book packaged in a postage paid, addressed envelope with a promise to renew it the maximum number of times and then e-mail the recipient the day it needed to be put in the mail.

Lessons learned:

In hindsight, most thought it was fun to do this as a trial but they don't want to do it next year. Several said that since we never gave extravagant gifts anyway that we really didn't need this. Another child said he sort of counted on Christmas to receive things that he didn't have the money to buy for himself. One child felt it was a burden since he wasn't adept at making things and since his flight was cancelled had almost no time at home to do anything. We might do it again some time but will give it a rest next year. We agreed that this was basically an adult form of gift giving and that it wouldn't work with most families who have young children.