

Simple Gifts

by Helen Kornblum

My mailbox has been overflowing with holiday catalogs since October. Because of my background in editing and marketing, I tend to read the text describing the various products to see how the writer creates the brand for the parent company. Sometimes I chuckle at the psychological appeals used to make items desirable. Sometimes the organizer in me shudders at the manipulation used to make the public buy clutter. Here's a recent example:

“A decorative necessity for today's busy cooks....This trendy storage caddy is exactly what you need to keep all your menus organized. The ultimate gift!”

The storage box offered costs \$50 and is designed for display on a kitchen counter. A “necessity”? I doubt it.

Merchandisers have perfected the art of convincing us (well, some of us) that we need items that don't enrich our lives but rather look pretty, cute, or clever. Sales on these items often encourage us to give gifts that deteriorate into clutter from the moment they come out of a box or stocking.

Choosing meaningful gifts for loved ones and friends can be difficult even when we know something about their likes and tastes. We may misjudge someone's “need” even when we focus on their interests. Here's an example. I own three wine bottle openers. One corkscrew is old, probably part of my husband's bachelor kitchen. I bought an Oxo corkscrew a few years ago because it was easy to use. Last year, my oldest son gave me a modern opener that has been used once, when he demonstrated how it works. His gift was sweet and generous but it sits, still in its box, high on a shelf in a kitchen cabinet. It's too big for the drawer where I keep the others.

One of my sisters has a collection of penguins. She says she bought one figurine years ago during a trip. Her family misinterpreted the significance of the little fellow and gave her more penguins for other occasions. Many of them are ugly and unwanted. Oddly, she keeps them all on display even though she would rather use their display bookcase for books. When I asked her about donating them or at least packing them away, she said she would feel guilty doing that because they were gifts. I frequently tell clients that a gift is not meant to doom them to a lifetime of storage. It's okay to honor the giver but part with the gift.

My philosophy about gift giving changed several years ago when I read a comic quotation that said we spend the first 50 years of our lives collecting things and the next 50 years trying to get rid of them. So what's a good substitute for "things" in our society? Why not try experiences, services, and consumables? Gifts that give us the opportunity to learn, relax, or add to our aesthetic enjoyment can touch us more deeply than receiving another gadget.

This notion of gift giving to enrich the spirit isn't new. The first gifts of the wise men to the baby Jesus were frankincense and myrrh, fragrant resins. It's a stretch to equate a gift certificate or a gourmet food item to these early offerings, but the intent is still the same: honoring the individual.

Gifts to Honor and Delight (without creating clutter)

Recreation:

- * Movie passes, theater tickets, passes to tourist attractions, paintball passes, video game rentals, Netflix

Learning:

- * Certificates for specialty classes (now offered by Santa Fe Community College and other entrepreneurs); bead work, art, dance, gymnastics, photography classes
- * Magazine subscriptions related to particular interests

Memberships:

- * AAA, *** of the month club (available in 1-month, 3-month, and annual contracts), AARP, local clubs and networking groups

Services:

- * Massage and other salon and health services (spa, acupuncture, pilates), organizing services, garden consulting

Consumables:

- * Pre-paid phone cards, gasoline smart cards
- * Plants, flowers, wines, gourmet food items such as condiments, specialty coffee and teas, fruit baskets
- * Restaurant coupons

Donations

- * Local, national, or international charities and non-profit organizations.

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