

How to take the bite out of gift-giving — Wednesday in the Word

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My annual performance review — aka Christmas — is approaching. If you adjust for the fact I caught a cold last year, I expect my scores to be slightly higher with lots of room for improvement.

Being the family matriarch means I am the primary gift-buyer as well as the primary baker, decorator, hostess and social event planner. When Christmas dawn breaks, I know the contents of 95% of the packages under the tree, the stuff in every stocking and the food that will be set at each place.

When I became the oldest woman in the family tree, the success or failure of Christmas settled on my shoulders like a straight jacket.

I suspect I'm not the only one who wakes Christmas morning with the uneasy feeling that whatever I did — it was not enough. Whether I spent a little money or a lot of money or no money at all on gifts, it wasn't enough. If I bought gifts, I should have spent more time on home-made items. If I gave home-made gifts, I should have bought them. The gifts aren't right; there aren't enough of them or there are too many of them. They won't do. And it's my fault.

I want each Christmas gift to say: *"I know you. You are loved and valued and of infinite worth."* Yet, how can anything that can be wrapped and put under a tree transform the life of the recipient from misery to joy and from loneliness to belonging?

Those wrapped boxes send other messages instead:

“Here’s what I think you *ought* to want.”
“I can afford to give you this because I have so much money.”
“I’m broke this year.”
“I had no idea what to get you.”
“I’m getting this for everyone and you’re on the list.”
“This is what the cool people are giving this year.”
“I would really like this myself.”

While these messages are not necessarily bad, they aren’t the message we really want to send.

The best gifts say: *“I know you so well that I knew you would love this as soon as you saw it even if you didn’t know it existed.”* You know the gift is perfect when the recipient reacts with obvious, uncontainable joy. And that is your reward.

Yet giving such a perfect gift is rare. If you can give a perfect-gift 5 times in your lifetime, you’re above average. And if you can give a gloriously-perfect gift twice to the same person, you have accomplished the impossible.

Yet we matriarchs expect to perform this miracle annually. How can we possibly expect every gift to be perfect when we’re giving to the same people year after year after year?

No wonder Christmas feels like a performance review we’re destined to fail! It’s time to take the bite out of gift giving:

**I resolve to give ordinary gifts with ordinary love,
to receive ordinary gifts with ordinary joy, and
to leave the miracles to God.**

Henceforth, I resolve:

1. The only burden an ordinary gift needs to bear is sending the message: “I have not forgotten you. You still matter to me and I love you.”
2. I will not expect to equal — let alone top — last year’s gifts.
3. I will be satisfied if the recipients express ordinary gratitude, and thrilled if they express ordinary joy.
4. I will not expect the recipient to reassure me my gift was perfect (when it wasn’t).
5. I will be grateful to receive ordinary gifts that show ordinary love.

Now if only I can remember this on my birthday.

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