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The Act of Giving

Our readers share gift ideas in which the thought truly matters more than the price.

By Nancy Dorman-Hickson

Everyone appreciates the thrill of a lavish gift--a sparkling piece of jewelry, a luxurious robe, or a rare first edition book. Yet thoughtful presents that uplift, touch, or honor us shine in our memory long after opulent objects lose their luster. We asked readers to share stories about special gifts they've given or received.



Robin Allen of Memphis best summed up the art of giving. "Choosing well-planned and thoughtful gifts is a great character quality," she says. "I am blessed that my son has that quality." After watching his mother struggle to keep her flowerbeds weed-free, her helpful son scouted nearby neighborhoods, taking pictures of different brick borders. "He made certain he could find the materials for each," Robin explains, "then asked me to choose which border I wanted him to build."

Hands-on thoughtfulness also defined the favorite gift of Karen Wheeler. "I was born in 1942, so the Christmases were far different than today," says the Quinlan, Texas, woman. "Each Christmas, Granny's gift to me was to take my dolls--I got one each year--wash and starch all the little clothes, repair anything that needed fixing, and dress them all up. On Christmas morning, there they all were, lined up on the sofa looking clean and beautiful."

Make It One-of-a-Kind

Personalized books, albums, or journals topped the gift lists of many readers. Amy Cline of Dallas loved the cookbook compiled by her mother shortly before Amy's graduation. "She sent several recipe cards to each of my seven aunts, two grandmothers, and my great-grandmother, requesting they each submit their favorite ones," explains Amy. "The gift represents the creativity and love involved in nourishing one's family."

Lilly Tijerina's took photos during a spring vacation to South Padre Island with her sister and her sister's three children. "At Christmastime, I gave her a scrapbook containing the photos," says the Lovettsville, Virginia, resident.

A Jacksonville, Florida, woman receives a reminder of one gift-giver's



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thoughtfulness every day. "Last year, my creative niece Angela made calendars for every member of our family," Harriet Courtney says. "Each month, she indicated birthdays and anniversaries for all family members. She also included a picture of each person, along with addresses."

Children's Treasures

Many mothers ranked creations made with blunt scissors, washable glue, and gobs of glitter as their favorites--long after the half-pint artists had reached adulthood. Nancy Moore of Willis, Texas, vividly recalls the book her son made about their family in the first grade. "It was stapled so that I could read it from back to front," says the mother of Aaron, now 21. "He had noticed that this is the way I read magazines."

Handmade holiday decorations hold a special place for many. "My sister-in-law bought foam ornaments at a crafts shop and put my kids' pictures in each one," says Karen Kochis of Smyrna, Delaware. "They were not expensive for her to make, but they were priceless to me."

Proud mother Abigale Geathers of Winter Park, Florida, recalls paper Christmas candles, green with yellow flames, made by her elementary-school age sons, now 19 and 20. Rebecca Clark of Salem, Virginia, remembers, "wonderful holly wreath ornaments that my girls made for me in first grade." She adds, "My children are grown now, and much to their horror, these ornaments always find their way to the top of our Christmas tree."

Priceless Jewelry

Some readers claimed jewelry as their best gifts-- but rarely mentioned precious gems or expensive metals. Thanks to a special gift, a Sulphur, Oklahoma, mother rose above the sadness she felt about her three daughters leaving home. "I was going through the motions of Christmas when my husband of 24 years surprised me with a sapphire ring. Three sapphires represented each daughter, and also the past, present, and future," Vicki Penner explains. "He usually gives me practical gifts such as a leaf blower or a mulching lawnmower, so this gift was out of the blue."

"The year that my grandfather died," explains Marjorie Millette of Daphne, Alabama, "my grandmother wrapped a pair of his cuff links for me. There was not a dry eye in the room when I opened that gift."

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Do Unto Others

Jo Womack's best gift came while she recovered at home from surgery. "My dear friend, Marge Klepinger, came over one day while I was napping and straightened up the house, made dinner for the family, and sat on the back porch swinging and reading until I woke up," the Hiram, Georgia, resident says. "Then we just had a lovely visit."

Elizabeth Nash explains how her future father-in-law "was there, giving his time and energy to help me, whether to fix my car or offer career advice. One time, after working all day, he came to my rescue when my car had a flat tire," the Lewisville, Texas, resident says. "The temperature was dropping, the jack wasn't working properly, but he got the car fixed, and then followed me home."

After Lucy Phillips's husband had surgery to remove an eye with a malignancy, the Monroe, Louisiana, couple couldn't afford the \$1,000 prosthetic replacement. "Our family, friends, and neighbors got together and had a fund-raiser with a barbecue dinner, music, and a raffle," Lucy says.

Food Favorites

If responses from our readers are any indication, food is the way to not only a man's heart, it's also the surest path to the hearts of women and children. "I absolutely love the Key lime cream-filled doughnuts from the Donut Hole in Destin," says Ellen Folkman of Crystal Beach, Florida. "My husband was there on business one week and surprised me with a dozen doughnuts!"

Shawn Hinton remembers getting a "homemade bag of premeasured ingredients for a cookie recipe. I loved it," says the Virginia Beach, resident. "The person knew exactly what I liked to do most--eat cookies!"

Laurie Stokes sweetened her marriage with a special dinner for her husband. "For our first Valentine's Day after we were married, I contacted a restaurant that we enjoyed on our honeymoon and had them ship the same meal that we ate there," says the Columbia, South Carolina, woman.

Four-Legged Friends

For some, pets proved memorable presents. "While my husband has given me many more costly gifts over the years," admits Donna Shahbaz of Alexandria, Virginia, "the present that I still thank him for most often is the beagle puppy that was under my Christmas tree eight years ago. She has been my faithful companion and our greatest source of amusement."

Kristen Sanders's favorite gift came after she acquired pets. "[My husband] has definitely been the type of husband that takes his wife to a jewelry store," says the Toano, Virginia, resident. "But the gift I am most proud of is when he gave me several gift certificates from the local car detailer and put paw prints all over them. We have two Labs who are our children, and they ride everywhere with me."



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Traditional With a Twist

Gifts of music, photographs, poetry, and cards rate high with readers. "My son purchased a cassette by [country singer] Reba McEntire for me because of the song 'I'm a Survivor,'" says Fran Palmer of Carrlpton, Texas. "He said it was because I raised him and his brother alohe and also battled cancer. I'm a grateful survivor."

Phyllis Tampling of Prattville, Alabama, recalls giving her father a card for his birthday "telling him how much he meant to me," she says. "Shortly before he died, he told me that it was the most memorable gift he had ever received."

A Powder Springs, Georgia, woman treasures a vintage photograph. "My brother and I have very a few pictures from our early years," says Diane Luther. "The only surviving portrait of two freckle-faced, snaggle-toothed towheads is tattered and stained. For my 50th birthday, my brother and his wife had a reconditioned copy framed and shipped it to me."

Shane Bracewell and her husband planned to spend their 25th wedding anniversary in Ireland. "But our daughter announced her engagement, so we canceled our plans and gave our daughter a beautiful Celtic wedding instead," says the Deerfield Beach, Florida, resident. When Shane's own wedding anniversary arrived, her husband presented her with a silver-framed poem that he wrote, titled "Silver Sonnet." She says, "The sonnet told how being married to me was such a blessing."

Vicki Dudal of Grovetown, Georgia, recalls a story she wrote 30 years ago for a local newspaper about "the meaning of Christmas in our family and how it centered around our grandmother's special Christmas dinner." Two years ago, her cousin presented her with the same story, typed on parchment paper and framed. "This little newspaper article, that had been stowed away and forgotten, melted away decades in just a few minutes," says Vicki. "As we read it, we were those wide-eyed children, watching the flashing lights and smelling the aromas from the kitchen."

Happy Holidays

Michelle Ladwig of Rock Hill, South Carolina, recalls one tough Christmas soon after her husband was laid off. "We decided we were going to use a 2-foot fake tree for our Christmas tree because we already had it," she explains. "We were used to cutting down our tree every year with our kids, so it was a hard decision to make. One day, I heard a noise on my back porch. I opened the door only to see my best friend and her two children running to the car. They had left a Charlie Brown Christmas tree on our back porch that they had cut down for us. I will never forget it."

Louise Russell of Louisville also recalls a time when her family had very little. While they were out one evening, she says, "My aunt and uncle made a surprise visit and put nuts and fruit all over our floors." When Louise's family returned, they slipped and slid, laughing at the bounty spread in their path. "I will always remember the smell and the fun," she says.



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Denise Abshire recalls a memory of her father's devotion. "In December of 1965, my father was in the Air Force. We were at the end of a four-year tour in France," explains the Dickinson, Texas, woman. "All of our belongings had been packed and crated for shipment. I was very depressed that we didn't have decorations like everyone else." Even though her mother baked cookies and played carols, Denise refused to be cheered.

"When Christmas Eve arrived, I felt like we were having the worst Christmas ever," she continues. "I went to bed, sure that nothing good was coming in the morning. My father had already told me that we couldn't really have gifts because the packing was already completed." Determined daddies, however, always find a way to make the holidays shine.

"I got up the next morning and saw the most beautiful room in the world," Denise recalls. "My father had bought several packages of long glass ornaments in every color and hung them from the ceiling. The entire ceiling was covered with a rainbow of shimmering icicles!"

Denise's dad scrounged up presents from St. Nick too. "On top of one of the packing boxes was a small gift for my mother, a stuffed cocker spaniel for me, and a 2-foot red feather Christmas tree--not exactly traditional, but a tree nonetheless," Denise recalls. "I recently lost my father and this memory is all the sweeter. It was the best Christmas."

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