

It's the thought that counts

Christmas was always a big deal in our house. My father loved surprises. He loved gift-giving, and he put his whole heart into it. Every year he would gather his four children together, and we would go on a shopping blitz for my mom. We'd scour the local mall looking for the perfect blouse, the dress that was just the right shade of pink, the necklace that went with everything. We were so excited when my mom would open her gifts. He did this every year without fail. Even during years when his small business was failing, he always managed to scrape up enough money to do our shopping-for-mom blitz.

His zeal for gift-giving rubbed off on us. As we grew older, we started making our own gifts. By the time we were in our late teens and early twenties, there were some "serious" gifts being exchanged. We quilted, we cross-stitched, we made stained-glass windows. We baked, we photographed, we painted, we sewed. Gifts

had to be started at the end of summer otherwise you would never get finished in time for Christmas. But we didn't mind. We loved the activities that created the gift, but even more, we loved the expression on someone's face when they opened the gift. There was thought, and energy, and love in every step along the way.

Not too long after college, I had my first serious relationship. My boyfriend had just moved into his own apartment, so I was excited to help him make his sparse space a little more home-like. For his birthday a few months earlier, I had hand-painted a lamp and even wired it up for him. We were approaching our second Christmas together, and I was really excited. I was certain that this guy was "the one," and so I flipped into my "You're not going to believe what I'm getting you for Christmas" mode. After much thought on what the perfect gift would be, I settled on making him a quilt. But this would not be just any quilt. My grandmother had died a few years earlier, and one of the things she had left behind was an unfinished cross-stitched quilt top. "Aha!" I thought, "What a great gift! It's a practical winter-time gift, and because it's a piece of my family history it will convey to him how I feel about him!"

Christmas Eve arrived, and he suggested that would be a good time to exchange our gifts. "What?" I said somewhat astounded. "You can't exchange on Christmas Eve—it's not Christmas yet! You have to wait until Christmas morning to open your gifts."

He looked at me nonchalantly. "OK," he said. "Our family always opened them on Christmas Eve, but it's no big deal, we can wait until Christmas morning."

“Whew!” I thought “That was a close one. Whoever heard of opening gifts on Christmas Eve?”

So Christmas morning arrived and I was pumped. I couldn't wait to see his reaction when he opened his present, and I couldn't wait to see what he had gotten me. For weeks he kept teasing me about my present, telling me how cool it was and how much I was going to love it.

The big moment arrived. As he opened his gift, his face just lit up. “Wow!” he said, “this is beautiful.” I could tell he liked it. Then I told him the history of the quilt—how my grandmother had started it and so I considered it a special part of my family that I wanted to share with him. I teasingly told him that since it was a family heirloom, that if we broke up I would need it back—actually I was kind of serious about that, but I truly believed that I would not have to ask for it back.

Next came my turn. He told me to “close my eyes,” and he dashed out to his car to bring in my gift. When I opened my eyes there it was—a 32-gallon outdoor trash can. I must have looked a little stunned, because he quickly jumped in and said, “There's something inside, better open it up.” I was relieved. “I bet there's something very cool in here,” I thought. I reached inside and pulled out a little table lamp. I was somewhat speechless. This is just like the one I got him for his birthday—except it wasn't hand painted and looked like it was from the clearance section at K-Mart.

I don't have a clue what I said after opening his gifts. I'm sure I was polite, yet deliberately restrained. I'm also pretty certain that I did not hide my

disappointment. He quickly asked me what I thought of my gifts.

I think I mumbled something like, “They're nice, but I'm just curious how you came up with such 'great' ideas.”

“It was easy,” he said. “The other day when I took your trash out I noticed you needed a new garbage can, and I liked the lamp you gave me so much I thought you might like one of your own. Were you expecting something else?”

“Well,” I said, “it's just that you spent so much time building up what you were going to get me that I just am really surprised that one of my two gifts is a garbage can and the other one is a duplicate of a gift I gave you.”

He looked dejected, and I felt bad, but at the same time I knew we had hit upon our first big difference on how we looked at the world and a very big difference in our expectations for how you show your love and appreciation for each other. I truly did not feel I was being materialistic. I had grown up with the motto “It's the thought that counts,” and unfortunately I wasn't seeing much thought on his part.

Several more birthdays and Christmases came and went, and his gift-giving M.O. (mode of operation) stayed pretty constant. Only, as time wore on, I became much more vocal about his style of gift-giving. “It's just that I put so much thought into your gifts, and I feel like you don't have a clue as to what I would like.”

To which he asked, “Well, what would you like?”

I answered with probably the most stereotypical female answer ever uttered. “If I have to tell you, then it doesn't count!”

I was frustrated. “Guys never get that,” I thought.

“Well, how am I supposed to know what you want if you don’t tell me?”

That was the \$64,000 question. And I had the answer, but it was not one that he really understood.

“You’re supposed to know because you *know* me. You notice what I admire, you’re aware of my interests, you make mental notes when I talk about likes and dislike. When that fails, you pump my friends for information. That’s how you *know*.”

He had a fairly exasperated expression on his face, so I just decided it wasn’t worth arguing about. The fact that he wasn’t the most thoughtful gift-giver had a lot to do with the style of gift-giving in his family. I understood that. And I understood that this was one very small piece of his personality—a personality that I had fallen very much in love with.

It turns out that this guy was “the one,” and I did not have to ask for my family heirloom back. We married a short while later and proudly displayed the quilt in our guest room and the garbage can in the backyard.

For years I grumbled about the gift-giving. I teased him relentlessly. There are very few of our friends and relatives who don’t know the story of the “Garbage Can Christmas.” When he would talk about the wonderful gift he was getting me for Christmas, or my birthday, I knew that was code for “I haven’t a clue what I’m getting you, but I hope I come up with a good idea soon so I don’t get ‘the look’ when you open it.”

It’s been 27 years since the “Garbage Can Christmas.” I’m not sure when I finally started to let it go, but at some point in our marriage I realized that although gift-giving on predetermined occasions was important to me, it was not his strong suit. He was, however, pretty amazing in sharing his other gifts of kindness and generosity. He would be the first one up when he heard the baby crying at 2 a.m. He was the first one to volunteer to change the sheets after the stomach flu set in for both our daughters. He was the one who worked for endless hours out in the cold doing home repairs and car repairs. He takes his turn cooking dinner, he cleans, he rearranged his whole work life when our daughters were born, so that he would be there for them as they grew up. He tenderly cared for his mother when she was dying.

When I reflect on all of this, I think that maybe he is a pretty good gift-giver—because, after all, “It’s the thought that counts!”

—Pat (and Jim)

Pat and Jim have shared 27 Christmases together. Pat is actually considering getting Jim a new trash can and painting it red for Valentine’s Day!

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

—Matt 6:19-21”