



Presents: Past and Future

when giving gifts, the thought really does count

Giving presents is a means of showing appreciation and that we care about someone. When the practice began is anyone's guess. In olden times it was often used to curry favour, an up-front offering in the expectation of reciprocation in future. Chests of riches were placed at the feet of chieftains and monarchs by visitors from foreign parts, not only to honour the potentate, but also in the hope of being rewarded at a later time. Lords would likely have received their titles and estates as a grant from their Liege, not just in recognition of services rendered and to ensure their continuing loyalty, but on the understanding that they would be called on to repay the generosity at their ruler's discretion and on demand. These acts were less to do with simple kindness than they were political expedience. Presents were given because protocol demanded it, and the specific reason usually dictated the value. A woman could not marry unless a dowry was paid to the prospective husband – sometimes in money, frequently in the form of livestock – and this had to be commensurate with the wealth of the bride's family. In all of these examples and more, anyone trying to do it on the cheap was asking for trouble.

It isn't like that anymore, of course; or maybe it is. A fair amount of thought still goes into choosing an appropriate present, but included in the selection criteria is usually the cost. This will be determined by any number of factors: the reason for the gift, be it a birthday or a reward of some kind; the standing of the recipient in respect to the giver; the availability of suitable items; and perhaps age might have a bearing. Another consideration could be the value of the present weighed against those given to a number of people at the same time, either to ensure fairness overall, or varying levels of deservedness. Unfortunately, the money factor is becoming a priority to the point where a simple display of appreciation causes more than a few problems. Past or present, it would seem that cost is the thought that really counts.

Manufacturers and suppliers know it does. They cash in during the perennial Christmas and Easter periods, intensifying their TV commercials and junk-mail advertising. An overwhelming host of choices bombard the public to spend billions on presents simply because it is that time of year again. People are quite at liberty to ignore the general hysteria, but most will go with the flow, despite knowing that it will severely affect the budget. By the time the wallet has just begun to recover from one spend-up, another excuse arrives; and to make sure the wait isn't too long, some bright spark came up with Mother's Day and Father's Day. Added to these are birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, christenings, weddings and any other occasion that seems to require the giving of a present. For most families, I doubt a month goes by without at least one celebration or another to hit the pocket.

Most of us find it necessary to include these in the normal household budget. Like every other expense, inflation adds to the cost. Even if the same type of present is bought, for example a pair of socks and a handkerchief for Dad on Father's Day, guaranteed the price will be up on last year. That's to be expected of course, and the solution is simple – spend more, hunt around the bargain stores to pick up the same items cheaper, or leave out the handkerchief and just give him the socks. The first is undoubtedly the easiest because, in this case, the present is merely a low-cost token and any increase in price is unlikely to hammer the budget; but the equation changes when the monetary value of previous gifts was relatively high. Then, despite putting a strain on the coffers, to spend less than before might be construed as penny-pinching. Add to this the fact that we prefer to give something different each time, quite often the dollar value becomes the benchmark, even before we've decided what to buy. Obviously, by allowing more to spend, the choices are also increased; but although some thought must still go into the selection of a suitable present, the financial parameters tend to be the main consideration.

Over time, the cost-factor graduates from an inconvenience to a definite burden which can cause quite a few headaches not only to balance the books, but also when caution leaves one feeling a regular Scrooge. What was once a pleasure suddenly becomes a major issue of conscience versus practicality. Individuals who can't really afford the expense can feel guilty for even thinking about it. They may regret being forced to spend so much and even start weighing up the price against the importance to them of the one they are buying for. It's the same as sitting them on one side of the scales and piling cash onto the other – are they really worth *that* much? Whatever the decision, once made, the same ruling is likely to be applied to all future gift purchases for whomsoever. Only those with money to burn are immune; the rest of us are up for serious soul-searching when another birthday comes around, then another. There are plenty of those, an entire year of them, all serving to keep the bank account hovering close to overdraft. Still, there's always the credit card.

Just as well we have one or two of them because there never seem to be too many shopping days to Christmas. By this time the cards are almost maxed out. But, we tell ourselves, it is Christmas after all. The kids always have presents, lots of them. They'll be disappointed if they get less than last year. It's beside the point we had more spare cash then. Well, we didn't, but the credit cards weren't as bad as now. Another problem is their ages. Growing up as they are, they've surpassed being happy with a few brightly-coloured toys. They are into video games, iPads, designer clothes, in fact all those things that cost big bucks. It is almost impossible to give them what we know they wish for and not end up in the poor house. We may start out trying to be frugal, setting a limit on spending; then, half-way through the shopping we compare what's in our trolley to the overloaded ones around and gloom sets in. What kind of a Christmas is it going to be if this is all they get? So we'll take the next ten years to pay it off, so what? Unable to help ourselves, we go on a binge that far exceeds the original plan. The check-out total is a killer, but we manage to ignore it. By the time the truth eventually hits home, Christmas has come and gone and we are wondering how we can possibly survive next month, never mind a whole year.

Needless to say, we will have to, and one way to avoid financial ruin would be to cut back on future spending, especially with regard to the buying of presents. Of course, it would be better if everyone involved came to the party. If friends and family members who give and receive presents would agree to either set a limit for each individual; maybe even just buy for the children who are 14 and under. Surely the other kids will understand, after the initial shock, anyway? It might even teach them about values. As for what to buy, an awful lot more thought would have to go into it when the sky is no longer the limit. The selection of a gift would need to be more about suitability than money: maybe something unusual, quirky, unique, old even. When the person we are buying for already has everything, shopping at one of the big superstores isn't the smart option because everyone has seen what's on offer in the junk mail, including prices. There are, however, plenty of second-hand shops, craft fairs and weekend markets. Antique dealers quite often have a jumble section of bric-a-brac and collectables where interesting pieces can be picked up quite cheaply. Then there's eBay and the like.

By making suggestions such as these, it could seem that I've gone over the top; but when you think about it, not only is it financial commonsense, it can also be a lot of fun for all concerned. Considering how competitive big spending has become, everyone trying to go one better, that tradition could still be upheld, but in reverse, maybe to the extreme. Who can buy the cheapest present in town? What about the least suitable, something absolutely useless to the person receiving it? For the past few years, an old school friend and I have been trying to send each other the worst, cheapest, the most pathetic Christmas card we can find. So far, he's winning, having sent me back the one I sent him last year. I don't know how I'm going to top that, but I'll give it a good try.

Most of us have a talent or two – art, woodwork, model-making, leather-craft, sewing, knitting. Making a special present for someone is far more personal and meaningful than simply buying one. Sure it takes time and effort, not to mention the thought that goes into it. Don't fancy that? Perhaps you could come up with something else, if you were prepared to give it some thought. That's what this is all about – *thought* - knowing a person, or getting to know them and their little idiosyncrasies, finding out what might please or delight them without having to spend a fortune. If two people opted to give each other simple, inexpensive gifts, over the years they may end up with a collection of what others might regard as junk, but they will almost certainly remember every item as important, both to them and the one who gave it. How often have you looked at a present you received years ago and couldn't remember who you got it from? But the jumper that your Gran knitted from recycled wool, you remember that; and even though the elbows have worn through, there's no way you'd throw it out. That thought did count; and it still does.

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