

Peace & Justice Blog November 2022

“Simple Gifts” by Tom Wagner

As we approach winter solstice, night dominates our days. The kindly glow of candlelight holds back the frigid shadows as many of our faith communities recall fulfilled promises in preparation for hope yet to come. However, we easily can lose sight of these gentle flames and even the occupant of a certain manger in the high voltage glare of commercialism. If we keep our focus, gifts can teach us something of love. Too often, the season degenerates into an accelerated course in consumerism.

The following list of gift suggestions is neither original nor exhaustive. These are merely thoughts I have gleaned over the years from sermons, articles, conversations and personal experiences.

Consider conscientious retail choices. I try to avoid clothing, toys, etc. featuring media characters, corporate logos or designer labels. Paying wealthy corporations for the privilege of advertising their wares is at least annoying. Part of my concern is to discourage conspicuous consumption. I am also aware that some of the manufacturers of popular brands have some rather dubious labor practices.

I avoid fashion dolls and action figures. Most of these characters represent values unbecoming of the season: materialism and violence. The unnatural body images presented by these dolls--regardless of gender—can create unrealistic self-expectations.

I prefer simple, sturdy toys, which invite children to use their imaginations. My daughter, as a child played a lot with a set of building blocks. Her sons now play with those same blocks during their visits. I have bought quality hardwood blocks, but I have also made a few on my own. Third World shops and craft fairs are good sources for wooden toys. We bought the boys a wagon a few years ago. The price was a bit more than I had planned, but it may survive their children. Such toys are worth the long service they provide and the natural resources they save in the end. Crayons, paints and other art supplies are also a good idea.

I shy away from electronics, which maybe a function of my age. I prefer to give books, board games and puzzles.

Consider recycling gifts. Years ago, my mother gave my eldest niece a doll cradle she had played with as a child in the 1930s and 1940s. I have begun to give family heirlooms to my daughter and her sons. I had inherited a baby spoon from my namesake—a 1st cousin to my maternal grandfather who had died young. I gave it to my eldest grandson whose middle name is Thomas. I have given my daughter a butcher knife that had belonged to one of my great-great-grandmothers and a rolling pin that belonged to a great-grandmother. In each case, I wrote a short note about each ancestor.

Consider making gifts. I have friends who often give baked goods and homemade preserves to neighbors and loved ones. As I recall, college students are usually quite grateful for care packages of homemade goodies. Others put their sewing or woodworking skills to work. Over a period of six years, I typed, printed and bound a series of booklets on family history as gifts for my aunts, uncles, siblings, cousins, daughter, nieces and nephews.

Consider giving yourself. Offer to babysit for a couple with young children. Invite folks into your home for a meal. Promise to help with canning next summer. As a kid I had a great-uncle who took me ice fishing occasionally. A great-great uncle and I built a crystal-set radio together about a year before his death. I am fortunate that two of my great-great grandfathers and my maternal grandmother were talked into writing down memories from their early lives. Those stories became the inspiration for my family history series.

Finally, remember that God shared with us the best gift of all: Emmanuel, “God with us”.

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