

2007 Gift Guide

Thinking Outside the Package

The surreptitious joys of nonmaterial giving for the anti-consumer

If you celebrated Black Friday by staying away from the stores in observation of Buy Nothing Day, you probably already have a few ideas about how to alter the consumer-frenzied focus of the holiday season. Buy Nothing Day (BND) is a grassroots movement that encourages people to consider what they consume. One of the proponents of BND is Reverend Billy, who features a Shopocalyptic video from Buy Nothing Day in NYC on his “Church of Stop Shopping” Web site. While the Reverend preaches against a consumer lifestyle, I’m sure he’s happy to have people buy his recently published *What Would Jesus Buy?*, a compendium of sermons, lyrics and, apparently, holy jokes.

But what if Buy Nothing Day is all news to you? What if your godmother announced she does not want to receive any consumer goods, period, but you feel obliged by a deep, unwritten, yet spiritually explicit contract to give her something for all she has given you? Hang onto your credit cards, because yes, Virginia, there is a Christmas without packages.

There are all kinds of ways to handle this situation. Come January, some people are going to try to impress you with how little they spent—in time, money or energy—on the holidays. They will brag that they’ve got nothing to recover from while you are trying to reassemble your nerves and your finances. Others may feel good about giving only cookies or hugs. No matter where you fall on the spectrum, here are some hints on how to “shop” for the person with an anti-materialistic gift list.

One friend’s family bought gifts for a family in need instead of exchanging presents. Why, they reasoned, should they shop for each other when they could afford most anything they wanted? They found a family to sponsor through a local charity, and bought everything on the family’s list.

Another great example came straight from the deep dark heart of retail. My sister runs a jewelry store, and one year, when I asked her what she wanted, she said she wanted us to spend time together. So, my husband traced his hand six times and had our son decorate the fingers: coupons for dinner and massage. The evenings we spent together—chowing on homemade food, lazing on the sofa and massaging her shoulders and feet—were great. If MasterCard added up the cost, they’d call it priceless.

Coupons are a good cover-your-bases gift for bad shoppers, no matter what time of year. Birthdays often take me by surprise, even though I theoretically know when they are going to happen. But I always have envelopes, paper, and my imagination on hand to whip-up a coupon for a shared outing. A trip to an art museum, and a meal or drink afterwards. An evening at the movies.

Pick your brain and see what other hidden talents and tricks you can transform into gifts. Do you know how to make caramel sauce that your best friend loves? Give her a coupon for a lesson. If not caramel, then how about crepe making, or knitting, or raking leaves? Who would not *love* having a friend share the chores that come with running a home? In case anyone in my family, immediate or extended, reads this, I would love coupons for laundry help. I can wash the stuff, but I’m crippled at putting it away. Once a month would be often enough, and a half-year of laundry filing services would be plenty, thanks. Maybe the memories of doing it together would inspire me to do it gladly on my own.

Give coupons to your mate for handholding, walk-taking, or just plain kisses. Give coupons to your kids for book-readings in the afternoon (in addition to bedtime). Invent a family currency for sharing the necessary evils of domesticity (did cavepeople fight over sweeping the cave floor?), and also, a money, of sorts, for the domestic



blessings: the shoulder rubs, the sandwich hugs, the board games on the floor.

Write coupons for room painting or a morning of elbow-deep spring-cleaning. Make a promissory note for closet cleaning or car vacuuming. Say you'll take the time to climb a mountain or have a cup of tea or a pint of beer with your lover, your mother, your friend. Has your brother-in-law always admired your woodworking skills? Share them.

But how do you resist materialism with friends and family who live far away, or are stationed remotely? Don't you want to give them something you've held so that they can hold it and think of you while they play cards or wear a shirt you've chosen? Probably—even if they are toeing an anti-consumption line. Still, there are alternatives, such as giving money to charities. For about \$25 to \$50, you can buy a lot for someone who is not so fortunate: Give money to food banks, homeless shelters, animal shelters (and give the money in June, when donors have forgotten that people are hungry year round). If the charity doesn't have a formal program, write a card yourself, and include information on the charity.

My favorite buy-for-someone-else charity is Heifer International. You can buy a flock of ducks for a third-world community, in honor of Aunt Lucy. Or, if you've really got the cash, a Noah's Ark to help a whole village.

If you follow this philosophy for even one person on your list, whatever you give—coupons, chickens or caramel lessons—get ready to receive the gift of shared time, a precious commodity. And don't feel embarrassed by saving a little dough in the process.

—Amy Halloran