

To Buy or Not To Buy?

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Unitarian Universalist Meeting House
December 4, 2011

I want to start with what will be a very challenging question for some of you: how are you coming with your Christmas gift list? Some of you will sit back and say, very well thank you. But for others of you, the question will invoke something near to panic and you will have to stifle the urge to run screaming from the church.

I'm in the latter category; I don't have a list yet and if I hew true to form won't start thinking about making one for another week. I am a Christmas procrastinator. I need to get that confession off my chest before I plunge into the subject of holiday shopping.

One of the focuses of the Occupy movement a couple of weeks ago was Black Friday, the start of the holiday shopping season. Many in and out of the movement were urging us all to boycott Black Friday. I didn't join in the call for the boycott, and actually went to the Cape Cod Mall on Black Friday, but it was to see a movie with Jacqueline's family, so that doesn't count as shopping. As we shouldered our way through the throngs of shoppers, I was glad I wasn't trying to get presents. On-line retail was made for people like me.

But the call to boycott raises some wonderful questions about what it is that we do in buying and what it is that we do in giving presents at this time of year, and that is what I want to unpack this morning.

The first thing to observe is that buying and giving are two different things. A call to boycott retail buying might come from an economic and political analysis that corporations are too powerful and why give them any of our money; that would be most of the folks in Occupy. It also can proceed from a more spiritual stance that says consumer capitalism makes the market the source of too much of our value and we must reassert more spiritual values at this time of year, values of compassion and cooperation and generosity. So the call not to buy might be based on Christian principles or a general ethos of compassion.

The call not to give, not to exchange gifts at all is on a different level; typically it happens in a family; someone says, hey, let's have a pact: nobody buys anything serious. Such a pact tries to stop the escalation which occurs naturally over the years: if aunt Sarah bought you a \$35 necktie last year, you need to spend at least that much on a scarf for her this year.

But the problem with a gift cease-fire pact is basically a practical one: people are notorious for welching out of it. If you go on in perfectly good faith and don't buy for the people in the pact, there is always the chance that on Christmas morning someone else in the pact

will have gotten something for you, and she will offer some lame excuse like, “Oh I was just in Macy’s and saw this and thought of you and couldn’t resist.” This causes you great shame, and knowing this you are inclined to buy presents preemptively just in case someone breaks the pact.

But if the pact works, it means that no presents are given or received. And that, I think makes us spiritually poorer as I hope to show later on. So I will end up in a few minutes saying that it’s OK to boycott buying presents, but I don’t recommend a boycott of giving them.

How did we get into this present madness? Christmas grew out of the Roman pagan holiday Saturnalia, and that holiday involved exchange of small presents, but the tradition of Christmas giving really starts with the story of the Magi. The Magi were wealthy men, either astronomers or kings, who came from afar, as the story in Matthew says, to bring gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Why these three? The writer of Matthew might have been inspired by a passage in Isaiah 60 describing the New Jerusalem. The first line of this passage will be familiar to us from the Messiah, “Arise, shine for your light is come.” But a few lines later, it is prophesied that the New Jerusalem will be visited by camels which “shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.” (Isaiah 60:6) So at least gold and frankincense were already associated with praising God.

But what about myrrh? Myrrh was used in embalming, and it is striking that these wise men should bring to an infant child a gift associated with death. I suspect Matthew added myrrh to his account as a means of reminding his readers that the infant being praised that holy night would end up on the cross.

So the founding story of Christmas gives a basis for the giving of gifts. Yet from all we can tell of the history of Christmas, the giving of gifts was not a big part of it until the Nineteenth Century.

About twenty years ago, a scholar named Stephen Nissenbaum put out a book called *The Battle for Christmas* which has become the definitive history of how our modern Christmas celebrations came about. I have told the story before; Christmas celebrations up to the early Nineteenth Century were riotous affairs, with the lower classes filling the streets with great drunkenness and debauchery. In the 1820s, a group of conservative upper-class New Yorkers called the Knickerbockers determined to put an end to this and basically reinvented Christmas as a domestic, child-centered holiday which revolved around the largely concocted figure of Santa Claus and the giving of gifts. Washington Irving was in this group, as was Clement Clark Moore, author of “A Visit from St. Nicholas.”

Since Nissenbaum’s book, several scholars have followed up to point out that our modern Christmas may have been invented by the Knickerbockers, but much has changed in American

society since those days.¹ The average American in the 1820's owned little but the shirt on his or her back. It was only after the Civil War that the Industrial revolution began generating a surplus allowing average people to buy goods above and beyond the bare necessities of life. True consumer capitalism did not arise until the twentieth century, when advertising figured out how to use sex and shame to sell people products they didn't know they needed, like deodorants and teeth whiteners.

Back in the first Gilded Age, the social critic Thorsten Veblen coined the term "conspicuous consumption" to describe the behavior of the rich with their private railroad cars, huge estates and lavish parties. While this consumption did create populist political movements against the upper class, it also created a lot of envy and a desire among the less wealthy to get a piece of the pie for themselves. From that day to this, we have evolved a consumer culture which declares that "he who dies with the most toys wins."

And the holiday season is the peak of this conspicuous consumption. Interestingly, the biggest Christmas spike in retail occurs not in toys or clothing, but in jewelry: December sales of jewelry account for 25% of the year's total, a much greater spike than for any other category of retail.

For many of Jesus' fans and followers, the consumer culture of Christmas, Jesus' birth, is directly counter to the teachings of Jesus, who said such things as "Blessed are the poor," "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

But Jesus also said

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

"The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 46 on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it."

(Matthew 13:43-6)

Treasure buried in a field, a pearl of great price: Jesus is here talking about salvation, the supreme spiritual value, but he uses the analogy of market value to get his point across.

And in another passage in Matthew, a woman was anointing Jesus's head with very expensive oil, and she was rebuked by the disciples, who said the oil should be sold so they could give the money to the poor. Jesus replied "the poor you have always with you." (Matthew 26:6-11) Jesus is not a complete poster boy for frugality. He is depicted as having the

¹See essays collected in Horsley and Tracy, eds, *Christmas Unwrapped: Consumerism, Christ and Culture*, 2001 Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International.

capacity to enjoy the goods of this world.

Yet we tend to seize on the frugal side of Jesus because it calls to the frugal side of ourselves. We will sing earnestly in a few minutes the great shaker hymn, "Tis the Gift To Be Simple." We will read with approval books like *Walden* and *the Outermost House*, where people go out from civilization determined to live simply in communion with nature. We can't imagine Henry David Thoreau or Henry Beston at a shopping mall checking off their Christmas lists.

But however strong we may think our resolution not to participate in the retail madness of the holiday, it will be put to the test if we have small children to buy for, and if those small children are our own grandchildren, you might as well not make the resolution at all. After all, your children and grandchildren carry your own genes; even if there are adoptions in there somewhere, your evolutionary instincts are programmed to protect them and see that they thrive. Each of us remembers the thrill of getting gifts at holiday time. I can remember acutely the anticipation as Christmas day dawned, and having to keep myself in bed until the appointed hour, and then seeing all those presents. All the wishes, all the excitement. Fully half of all the still and moving pictures taken in my childhood were of Christmas morning.

We are genetically hardwired to want to see the same excitement in our children and grandchildren. We can exercise frugality with our own generation, but there is little use on trying to exercise it with our descendants.

And if you want to buy but happen not to have any children to buy for, your church is ready to help. All these tags on this tree represent a real person, most of them children, that you can take and go out shopping for.

Where are we with our boycott of retail? I think we are at a conflict of oughts. One voice says you ought not be wasteful, you ought not participate in the market-based value system, you ought to be frugal with what you have. The other voice says you ought to be generous and approach the holidays with an open heart and an open hand.

Our sister congregation in Falmouth has a creative approach to this tension; they organize an alternative Christmas fair in November, and they have gotten several other local congregations to join them. You can go to the fair and visit booths for worthy charitable and social justice projects. You can choose to give so much to the Heifer project or so much to Habitat for Humanity, so much to build a school in Haiti. When you come to check out, you write one check for the whole bundle, and you get cards that you can send to your family and friends, explaining what you've done with your money instead of buying a present for them they don't need. If any of you has any interest in starting something like that here next year, let me know.

For myself, I got a certain clarity on these issues from a trip I took this week to see an old

friend who is facing death. I have known Katharine since late in the last century through the religion and science group which used to meet on Star Island. She was one of my special buddies in that group; every year as summer rolled around, I looked forward to our long talks and playing music and singing at happy hour with her and others and dancing after chapel late at night. She is a community minister, a fabric artist, a creative spirit, wife, mother and daughter. This spring, her friends were shocked to learn that, though she has never been an alcoholic, she has a liver disease which will kill her very shortly unless she gets a transplant. She has had symptoms for twenty years but they were only diagnosed earlier this year when she almost died. Now she is waiting for an evaluation to determine her suitability for a transplant.

I had been trying for four months to arrange some time to drive to Katharine's home in rural upstate New York to visit, and finally made time this week. After a four hour-drive, I was in her living room drinking tea. It was good to see her though she looked wan.

Her condition has sapped a great deal of her energy, and she expressed a concern that she doesn't have the energy to go shopping. She said it might be the last Christmas she sees, but most of the presents she gives will have to be ones she makes herself.

And suddenly a door opened in my mind. I said, "Katharine, I have been mulling over this sermon, trying to figure out what it is about Christmas presents and you have just hit it. If it turns out that this is your last Christmas, how precious those gifts will be to everyone who gets one! They will be the work of your hands, and the craft and thought and love that you have for that family member will be in that gift. It will be a piece of yourself that you are giving to them, that they can hold on to no matter what happens to you."

What struck me was that this is what presents are at their best. They are a bit of ourselves that we give to others. They are an extension of our personalities.

When I shared this insight with Katharine, she told me that that was true in a very literal way. "I have four people who know me who are willing to give me part of their liver. And it blows me away."

I didn't know this, but it turns out that healthy livers regenerate like the limbs of starfish, and with today's technology, a living person can donate half of their own liver and regrow it back in a matter of weeks, and if the transplant takes, the recipient grows a new one as well.

Four people have volunteered to give part of their own bodies to give Katharine the gift of more life. What an amazing affirmation of the truth that life itself is the greatest gift of all. When we give of ourselves to others, we are giving back for the great gift that was given to us. It is the treasure in the field, the pearl of great price. This great gift comes with an expiration date, though for most of us that date is secret. The expiration date is part of the gift, just as myrrh was part of the gifts of the Magi. Katharine is an understanding colleague; as we closed our

conversation, she gave me permission to talk about this in this sermon. And as we parted, we held each other in a long hug, knowing that it might be the last time we see each other. She felt very frail and thin.

That was my gift to an old friend facing death: an eight-hour drive for a one-hour visit, and it was well worthwhile and I didn't buy it at the mall. While each of you is free to do what you will, I'm not boycotting retail stores this holiday season. But as I make my list and start tackling it, I am going to think about the time I have left on this earth. I am not facing any serious illness that I know of, but I have become acutely aware of the fragility, of the contingent nature of all our lives. As I choose gifts, I will try to make them be something of myself that I am giving away. I may buy them at the store because I'm not very good at making things with my hands, but I will try to put myself into them in some way.

Myrrh is one of the gifts of the Magi, it reminds us of death and it therefore calls us to give of ourselves. In the poem I read for our opening words, Sara Teasdale says, "Spend all you have for loveliness, to buy and never count the cost: for one stinging hour of peace count a year of strife well lost, and for a breath of ecstasy give all you have been, or could be." It is in the giving that we become who we are. Let us give generously. Amen.

Readings, December 4

Sara Teasdale, Hymn 329 *Singing the Living Tradition*

Life has loveliness to sell,
all beautiful and splendid things,
blue waves whitened on a cliff,
soaring fire that sways and sings,
and children's faces looking up,
holding wonder like a cup.

Life has loveliness to sell,
as music, like a curve of gold,
scent of pine trees in the rain,

eyes that love you, arms that hold,
and for your spirit's still delight,
holy thoughts that star the night.

Spend all you have for loveliness,
to buy and never count the cost:
for one stinging hour of peace
count a year of strife well lost,
and for a breath of ecstasy
give all you have been, or could be.

Sermon reading Matthew 2

9 and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.