



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“The Gift of Nothing”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

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Centering Thoughts

If instead of a gem, or even a flower, we should cast the gift of a loving thought into the heart of a friend, that would be giving as the angels give. George MacDonald

You give but little when you give of your possessions. It is when you give of yourself that you truly give. Kahlil Gibran, THE PROPHET

Each day comes bearing its own gifts. Untie the ribbons. Ruth Ann Schabacker

Sermon

Christmas lies behind us and New Year’s still lies ahead, but are any of you, like me, suffering from the gift of too many holiday sweets or high fat foods? If only we had thought about gifting our stomachs nothing, rather than too much of something, we might feel better today. Maybe next year...

Today’s story reminds me of one particular Christmas Laura Ingalls Wilder tells about in her book *Little House on the Prairie*, a fictionalized biography of her childhood pioneer days in the west during the late 1800s. She recalls learning from her neighbor Mr. Edwards that Santa Clause was unable to deliver presents to their home on Christmas Eve because his pack mule couldn’t cross a flooding creek. In those days Santa was known to use mules when there wasn’t any snow for his sleigh to run on. And that meant the reindeer which could have flown over the creek were back at the North Pole with his sleigh.

Fortunately, Mr. Edwards encountered Santa in town and he agreed to carry on his own horse Santa’s presents for Laura and her sister. Unlike the mule, Mr. Edwards’ horse could swim across the rising creek with him riding on the horse’s back, though it was dangerous.

Edwards managed to cross and he arrived at the Ingalls home soaking wet and cold, but the presents were safe and dry. Eagerly, Laura and her sister opened Santa’s gifts to find a shiny tin cup, heart-shaped cakes, peppermint sticks, and a shiny penny for each girl. Receiving the cup meant the girls didn’t need to share one any longer.

These gifts may not sound like much to us today, but to the girls they were equal to any Magi’s gift. Wilder’s story affirms that the simplest things, even next to nothing, can give much joy. More importantly, it was the neighbor’s friendship that made receiving the presents possible and the girls were grateful for their simple, welcome gifts.

In McDonnell's little story, Mooch wants to give Earl the perfect holiday gift. But unlike the frontier girls who had next to nothing, Mooch wondered what to give a dog that has everything. Earl already had a bowl, a bed, and a chewy toy. A dog's life is simple, what more could he need? When Millie returned from her shopping claiming the stores had nothing to buy, Mooch misunderstands. He decides to buy the 'nothing' stores were selling. But he finds only meaningless somethings for sale.

Later at home, in a Zen-like moment of stillness, Mooch found nothing. Or, more accurately, he found 'no thing.' Mooch realized the one precious gift Earl couldn't possibly have enough of was friendship, or in Mooch's words, "me and you". His gift was a gift of himself, a promise to spend time with his buddy doing "nothing and everything", such as simply looking out a window together.

I once heard someone say a true friend is someone who will waste time with you and not notice the time passing. Wasting time implies not doing anything constructive, therefore doing nothing. But doing nothing with a friend can be enormously satisfying. Who else but a friend would be willing to do nothing with you?

My family didn't do much of anything during Christmas. We ate, talked, played cards, completed two jigsaw puzzles, watched some TV sports, and simply spent time together. It was wonderful. Like Mooch's nothing, our nothing really was something.

There's an old Smothers Brothers comedy riff where Tommy complains that he always got the short stick in life from his parents. "Mom always liked you best," Tommy would say to his brother Dick. To prove his point, Tommy would add, "You'd get the present, I'd get the box."

But empty boxes make fascinating toys. I remember one year my parents bought a stuffed chair which was delivered to the house in a huge box shaped like the chair. My sister and I played for hours in that box. We would crawl inside and in our imaginations it became a house, a car, a store, and anything else we dreamed up. The empty box offered us the gift of creativity and time spent playing together. It was way better than any single-use item that can come in a box.

I wonder what your experience of holiday gift-giving was like this year. Do any of your friends and family seem to have everything, like Earl? Does it seem meaningless to give them something? I feel that way. I've stopped giving *things* to people who need nothing. I much prefer to spend time with family and friends, as I did this year, rather than give them more stuff. I'd rather give my money to people or charities that do need whatever I can share. In your support of our share-the-plate initiatives, it's clear you agree.

Though some of us need more than others to meet life's basic need of food, clothing, shelter, and purpose, our economic means are irrelevant when it comes to needing friends. We all need mutually rewarding relationships. We all need friends like Mooch and Earl. We need meaningful relationships, intimate or not. And it's affordable for everyone because friendship costs nothing but time. And since time seems to be the most precious thing any of us has these days, it truly is a valuable gift.

Imagine how much happier we'd all be if we gave each other friendship as our gift? We wouldn't stress over the cost of things. We wouldn't stress over whether it's the right gift or not. We wouldn't stress over whether the person already has it or not. And we wouldn't stress over spending money we might not have. Instead, we could be happy that we're not adding to the stuff people already have too much of. We could be happy over our planet's sigh of relief that it won't need to accept more stuff in landfills. We could be happy that we're helping to bring our economy's needs and our environment's needs into better alignment.

But that happiness requires us to ignore the signals of American culture. It's unfortunate that our culture doesn't encourage us to delay instant gratification. Advertisers and merchants want us to buy, even if we don't have the money. Credit cards make it possible for us to do just that. In person and online stores are open around the clock just so that we can get what we want whenever we want it. 'Good things *don't* come to those who wait' is the new saying.

What if you can't afford instant gratification and your credit cards are maxed out? America's consumer culture and economy makes us feel bad, not just poor. Parents feel bad because they can't get their kids everything they want. Kids feel bad because they see others getting things they can't have. Wanting or needing things we can't afford makes people feel humiliated rather than humble. Instead, we need to turn this around. We need rewards for people who don't satisfy their every want.

Mooch's gift of friendship to Earl was the perfect gift for the dog who had everything. All those somethings Mooch saw in the stores wouldn't have satisfied Earl, or us, because we also long for meaningful relationships more than stuff. The Beatles knew this when they sang, "Money can't buy me love". Nothing we can buy will ever satisfy us as much as the gift of ourselves.

Another oft-heard saying at this time of year: "It's the thought that counts," in response to a gift you wished you hadn't been given. So why not give the thought without the thing? Tell someone you're thinking of them by spending time with them. Phone them if you can't be together. Write a letter, even.

It is the thought that counts. Time spent with another person or creature counts. Give of yourself and be truly satisfied by giving no thing. And enjoy the friendship you receive in return.

May this community continue to enjoy the blessing of friendship and time that you share throughout the year. May it always be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. How does holiday gift giving and receiving make you feel? How might past experiences contribute to your feelings today?
2. What were the most meaningful gifts you have received? What made them special?
3. Have you ever wanted something, but when you received it you felt disappointed? Share.
4. What gifts are easy for you to give and why? What makes a gift hard for you to give?