

## The Gift that Matters

by Rachel Macy Stafford

□ From a very young age, my oldest daughter has been a gift giver. Like most children, her offerings consisted of items that adults wouldn't ordinarily classify as gifts. Broken seashells, traumatized frogs, dying weeds, and misshapen rocks were often presented in small, dirt-laden hands beneath a wide smile. In the past two years my child's gift giving practices have moved up a notch. Gifts are no longer found in nature; they are found in our home. Yes, it's re-gifting at its best—wrapping barely-used items and presenting them with great love.

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□ I must be honest; I used to cringe at the sight of my child tearing through our (multiple) junk drawers looking for the perfect gift. When she found it, she would beam at the "treasure" as if she just knew the recipient was going to love it. Then without delay, she'd get straight to wrapping.

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□ Although highly practical and earth-friendly, this gift-giving practice brought to mind words like "tacky" and "cheap." But for some reason, the control freak in me kept her mouth shut. Miraculously I had enough sense to stand aside and let my child give as her heart felt lead.

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□ Last Christmas, my daughter spent hours wrapping barely-used bottles of lotion, tiny hotel shampoos, and gently-used books. She then declared she wanted to distribute the colorful packages to homeless people in the downtown area on Christmas Eve. Her very first recipient was a frail, elderly woman with sad eyes who clutched her life possessions in a ripped trash bag. It wasn't until I watched this woman's face completely transform by the mere sight my pint-sized-gift-bearer that I got over myself.

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□ Shortly thereafter, my child thought it would be nice to create a care package for a family in India with whom we had connected through Samaritan's Purse. On top of the new pajamas, packaged toothbrushes, and pristine white socks, she placed two hairbrushes that she and her sister had used for almost a month. She was adamant that the brushes must be included. It wasn't until we received a thank you note with this picture that I vowed I would never cringe at her gift-giving practices again.

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□ And last Valentine's Day when we learned that one of my mother's friends had lost her husband of 47 years, I suggested that we send flowers. My daughter assured me a handmade Valentine, created by her, would be the perfect gift. In response to my daughter's card, the 80-year-old widow wrote:

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□ "Thank you for the Valentine. I thought I was not going to get one this year for the first time in many, many years. It made me sad, but now I feel better because I no longer have to worry about being forgotten. Always remember that some people have the ability to smile on the outside when they are hurting on the inside. These are the people who may need your gift of kindness the most. I know this for a fact because I am one of them."

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□ □ As I read the dear woman's note, my idea of a "proper gift" flew right out the window. And I began looking at my daughter's gift giving practice with awe rather than embarrassment.

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□ □ In fact, when the mood strikes and a present is needed, I actually look forward to the moment my daughter reveals the ideal gift she found at the bottom of her messy closet. Because I am now quite certain there is something magical in the way my daughter gives—in the way all children give. Perhaps you've noticed, too.

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□ □ And if I had to give a name to such heartfelt gift giving, I would call it "Hands Free" gift giving:

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□ □ Letting go of societal standards ...

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□ □ Letting go of monetary expectations ...

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□ □ Letting go of consumer pressure ...

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□ □ Letting go of the need to out-do ... to impress ... to check off the list ...

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□□ Letting go in order to give the gift that matters.

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□□ Through my observations as a parent and as an educator, I've summarized what makes the way children give so meaningful. I plan to refer to this list throughout the holiday season and hopefully for the rest of my life. My hope is that you will, too.

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□□ A "Hands Free" Guide to Gift Giving

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□□ 1. Give with open eyes and a willing heart.

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□□ Not only do children see opportunities to give, but they seize opportunities to give. I'll never forget that day in Pike Place Market when my daughter walked by the disabled homeless man in a dingy pink cast. She stopped in her tracks and said, "I feel like I need to give that man some money." So she did. She didn't concern herself with the fact he was missing a leg, that there was no money cup next to his wheelchair, or that it was her last \$5 bill ... she just walked straight up, looked him in the eye, and offered her blessings.

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□□ This season, don't walk by despair; if your heart tells you to stop, then do it. Look for the overlooked, the underappreciated, and the easily forgotten and then show them you see them—show them they matter.

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□□ 2. Give with no reservations and no hesitation

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□□ Have you ever noticed children cannot wait to give their gift? It never fails. Each year, my daughters go to their school holiday shop armed with a few dollars to pick out family gifts. But alas, they never can wait until December 25th. I must open the gift now. And because the best part of the gift is the expression on her face as I rave about what she chose for me, I oblige.

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□□ This season, who says you have to wait until the proper day, a grand occasion, or the perfect moment to express how you feel about someone? If you wish to bestow a gift of love on another person perhaps there is no better time than the present.

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□□3. Give with no hidden agenda and no expectations

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□□Children give because they want to express their love and appreciation – not because they feel like they have to or expect something in return. I'll never forget when my daughters set Easter baskets out for the trash collector and mail carrier.

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□□As soon as they got home from school they scoured the area like professional detectives. When they squealed with delight, I thought perhaps something had been left for them. But I was wrong. When my oldest child called out, "Yep! They got 'em!" I realized they were expressing happiness solely because their gift had been received.

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□□Truth be told, that is the day I stopped looking for my thank you note or reciprocated favor when I helped someone or gave a gift. My children showed me that one of the greatest joys in life comes from giving with no strings attached.

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□□This season, focus on the true spirit of giving: bringing happiness to another human. Period. After all, exhibiting love and kindness toward someone else without expecting anything in return is a generous and content way to live.

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□□4. Give what you can

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□□Children give what they have – it may cost money or it may not. It may have lovely wrapping; it may not. Children don't get caught up in how a gift looks or its price or whether it is "good enough." I thought of this fact recently when I was at a rest stop that had a bathroom attendant. Although it was late and she'd probably been on her feet all day, she was making those sinks shine like diamonds and offered a warm smile to every weary traveler who entered.

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□□Before exiting my stall, I suddenly felt compelled to look inside my wallet. I found a crumbled \$10 bill and a few singles. Normally I would have thought that was not enough to make a difference and walked out. But when I thought of our children holding their precious hands open with whatever they have to give – be it a penny, a rock, or a paper heart – I was inspired to give what I had. After drying my hands, I held out the wad of bills and said, "I wish I had more." With eyes that glimmered with happy tears the woman whispered, "This is more than enough. More than enough."

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☐☐This season, remember that it is often the mere gesture, the thought, the effort – not the actual gift itself – that makes a profound impact on a person in need of a little kindness.

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☐☐I've often said that living "Hands Free" may require making choices that don't align with the values and standards of mainstream society. But eventually there is confirmation for these unconventional choices—confirmation that these choices are in deed bringing us closer to the meaningful life we are striving to live. Well, as I drafted this post, I received such confirmation to embrace this child-like, heartfelt way of giving.

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☐☐My daughter's best friend became suddenly ill with the flu. Within minutes of hearing the news, a card was made by my daughter and a bracelet from her drawer was lovingly wrapped. Briefly relapsing into my old ways, I felt slightly relieved that the price tag was still on the bracelet. But I was quickly reminded that the price tag meant nothing.

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☐☐The next day, the child's mother told me how much my daughter's gift meant to her daughter. And when the mother recounted what her child said, I could not hold back my tears.

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☐☐With sincerity her daughter said: "I bet a lot of people heard I was sick. And after they said, 'That's too bad,' they just went on with their life. But not Natalie. She stopped what she was doing to show me she cared about me. She is the best friend anyone could have."

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☐☐Which brings us to guideline #5, and possibly the most important one on the list.

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☐☐5. Give when the rest of the world keeps on going

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☐☐As my daughter's friend and all our children show us on a daily basis, our most precious gift is when we stop in the midst of our busy lives and give a piece of ourselves ... our attention, a listening ear, a lingering embrace, a word of encouragement, meaningful eye contact, snuggles in bed, one-on-one time, or a helping hand.

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☐☐In order to give our most precious commodity – the gift of ourselves – we must let go of all that distracts us from what truly matters.

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☐☐Perhaps the perfect gift is not in the getting, but rather in the letting go.

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☐☐This season, rather than spending hours at the mall shopping for the “perfect gift” realize what your loved ones most want this year is you—your attention and your love. Set aside the distractions of the modern age, let go of the need for the holiday décor to look perfect, forgo the barrage of social gatherings and instead simply be available – heart, mind, body, and soul.

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☐☐It’s what you call the gift that matters ... and you can’t put a price on that.

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☐☐Just ask a child.

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