

The Gift of Time at Christmastime

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I'm not really sure when I started dreading Christmastime. From childhood to early adulthood I loved Christmas - the presents, decorations, special foods, the story of Jesus' birth, Christmas carols - I remember looking forward to Christmas with great joy and expectation. But something changed so that by the time Owen and I were a family of four living in rural Webster, Christmastime loomed ahead of me not as wonderful holiday but as an event that threatened to toss me over the edge.

Maybe my change of heart came with full on adulthood and marriage when I became the person in charge of making Christmas happy for everyone else. Maybe I started dreading the season because I associated it with a relative who would visit at Christmastime and bring with him criticism, arguments and bad cheer. Maybe it was because gift giving felt meaningless, especially since we sent presents all across the country to family members who didn't even seem to like us. Maybe the culmination of many long Minnesota winters was weighing me down. Whatever the case, instead of being a season bringing happiness and joy, Christmas started to represent the beginning of a very long, depressing holiday and winter.

It's no surprise that by the time Christmas rolled around about eleven years ago I saw little point in getting presents. Owen and the kids would ask me what I wanted for Christmas. "I don't want things," I would say. "What I want is to get stuff done!" I wanted help to get even just one thing checked off of the never ending to-do list of Christmas. Or someone to help me paint the stark white walls of our new-to-us house so it would feel more like a home. "I want someone to take time to help me," I told Owen in despair. But how do you wrap up that kind of gift under a tree?

Come Christmas morning, even though I could barely muster up joyful thoughts about Jesus' birth or even Jolly Old St. Nick, I'd done all the necessary things to make Christmas happen for my family. I'd decorated, wrapped presents, baked, hosted guests. Christmas music was playing on the stereo and the kids were excited as we started passing out our presents. Owen handed me a carefully wrapped box. "This one is for you," he said. I did my best to smile as I started to unwrap the package. Inside, I found an envelope on top of tissue paper. "Do I open the card now?" I asked. "If you want," Owen replied. I decided to wait on opening the envelope and pulled the tissue away and found, strangely, one of our household clocks. "It's our clock?" I asked, puzzled. "Open the card," was Owen's reply. The kids leaned in close as I opened the

envelope. Inside I found a card that I could tell Owen had made on our computer with a Christmas tree and "Merry Christmas" on the front. Inside it I found a poem written by Owen in which he wrote that he was giving a gift of time - a whole day of his time to paint our bedroom, to warm it up from the stark white walls and help make our house feel more like a home.

I started to cry, but instead of the tears of sadness that had been a part of my days, these were tears of happiness as I realized the fullness of the gift Owen had given me. "Thank you," I wiped away my tears as Owen and the kids hugged me and I felt some of the heaviness I'd been feeling about Christmas lift from my heart and soul. By some miracle, Owen knew exactly what I needed for Christmas that year - the gift of his time.

Come January when the decorations had been put away, we went out and bought paint in a color of green I had picked out months before. Then Owen took a day off of work, arranged for my parents to watch Rose and Ryan, and the two of us set to work painting our bedroom. Weeks later I realized the color we'd painted our walls was the spruce-green of Christmas trees - a color that reminded me of Christmas and the freshness of Spring.

It was likely a combination of things but, given how much I hated Christmastime and how hard it was for me to get through the season, I'm thinking Divine intervention was at work that year. Owen's gift of time changed the way my family looks at gift giving. I feel less stressed about finding perfect gifts now and more joy in listening to Christmas music and spending time with family. Where we used to ship gifts across the country now we've taken to donating funds in honor of family members through Bethel's Alternative Giving Fair instead. We still buy gifts for our close family but we also make a point of giving gifts that involve time - like taking my brothers out to lunch at our favorite restaurant.

The gift of time is something we can all give. Maybe it's setting aside an hour or two one evening to play a board game with family or taking a friend out for coffee. We can help someone do errands, watch a young couple's children so they can go out on a date or shovel a neighbor's driveway. Though it's great to give the gift of time, it's also something we can give ourselves. Instead of letting Christmas rush on by us, we can take a few moments to sit next to a Christmas tree and enjoy the beauty of the lights twinkling in a darkened room. We can set aside time to listen to Christmas music or to attend Advent services. And we can remember that the gift of time isn't just for Christmastime. The gift of Christmas Time can be given and received all year long.