

Received Gifts

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Advertisements for Christmas shopping begin before Halloween trick-or-treaters have time to get out of their costumes and throw them unceremoniously on the floor next to their bags of candy. The barrage of commercials begins slowly, providing reminders that the gift buying and giving season is on its way. The tenor of these commercials intensifies as the days of November pass towards the first day of the ritualized Shopping Season, Thanksgiving.

As though a series of religious holy days, our Shopping Season has named days beginning with Thanksgiving also known as Gray Thursday, with the color gray hopefully not used with reference to the color of the turkey meat eaten earlier in the day. Gray Thursday is a controversial day, given that some retail workers are forced to be at their sacred job posts instead of with their families. This is followed by the most important of the shopping days, Black Friday, the day when the frenzy of purchasing begins in earnest. We are all familiar with the scenes of serious shoppers waiting in determined anticipation to be the first into stores all around the country. Some camp out for days in front of the malls and stores. When Black Friday officially begins at midnight, a rush and crush of bodies weighs into stores without care for others with similar intent. This year the three-day Black Friday weekend accounted for over fifty billion dollars in retail sales in the United States. On the heels of Black Friday comes Cyber Monday, the online shopping counterpart to Black Friday. The season also has Buy Nothing Day and Giving Tuesday, the former designed to quell blind consumerism and the latter a branded day attempting to make charitable donations a gift-buying alternative.

Our holiday Shopping Season is similar to deer season in Western Pennsylvania when schools close and workers take vacation days to go after waiting prey. After all, do we not refer to shoppers as bargain *hunters*?

Regardless of the intensity or insanity of this hunting or shopping, the point of it all is to purchase some thing intended to be given as a gift to someone else. The act of giving is the transference of ownership of some thing to another without monetary consideration. That is what all of us children would think of as a gift whether birthday, Christmas, Hanukkah, or otherwise, something we get gratis from someone else.

In anticipation of writing this paper, I began to think about the gifts I received during the Christmases of my youth. I clearly remember getting my hands on the massive Sears catalog, with a seemingly endless toy section full of color photographs of the latest and greatest offerings from toy manufacturers around the world. I remember taking the choosing of what I wanted very seriously, for if I chose something too expensive, I knew I risked not getting it. When I believed in Santa Claus, I recognized that even in my best years my behavior would not warrant the expectation of everything from the catalog. Although I can remember the process of selecting my wish list, I can recollect

vanishingly few gifts that I actually received. I do recall however one Christmas in particular and two gifts I received that year that could not be found in the Sears catalog.

In the summer of 1968, my mother, father and I moved into a new house, at least new to us. We unpacked into a spacious brick home on the Main Line of Philadelphia, an area named after the railroad line that bounded the far end of our back yard. Our house, like most houses of the area, was part of the suburbanization of northwest Philadelphia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Shortly after moving into our new home, we met our next-door neighbor, Dr. Paul Gyorgy, an elderly Hungarian and his wife. The Gyorgys lived in a six-bedroom, turn of the century, stone colonial house, set on an acre of secluded woods canopied by 80 foot tall red oaks, a fairly common sort of home on the mainline. Dr. Gyorgy was born in 1893 in the Transylvania region of Hungary and immigrated to the United States in 1935 to evade the growing ominous pall kindled by Hitler's rise to power. Dr. Gyorgy was the discoverer of riboflavin, vitamin B6 and biotin, accomplishments that earned him the National Medal of Science in Biology. When I knew him, he was a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. He spoke with a thick accent tempered by a calm and reassuring intonation.

In the first week of December of that year, an ice storm deposited a thick sheet of ice early enough in the day to allow cancellation of school. I was looking out the window towards the Gyorgy's house and saw Dr. Gyorgy very cautiously shuffle across the twenty or so feet between his back door and his garage. He started his car and backed onto the driveway where the car ceased movement. The good doctor spun his wheels fruitlessly. The car remained in place. He continued to spin the wheels periodically revving the engine through a musical scale of rpms. I suppose he was attempting to melt the ice beneath his tires, which if it had been successful, would have gained enough purchase for the tires to move him a few inches onto another icy impasse. While this might allow him passage from his driveway, it would have been glacial in pace. Before he could melt enough ice to gain a few inches, the engine caught fire. Smoke billowed from beneath the hood. Realizing that further prosecution of his war on ice was futile and that a new challenge presented itself, he got out of his car and slowly shuffled back towards his house. I guessed he was going to call the fire department. In less than a minute after he entered the house, he reemerged with a clear glass pitcher full of water. He shuffled back to his car and opened the hood to ever darkening smoke. He dumped the water onto the fire. The flames, meaninglessly deterred, rose again with a puff of gray and black smoke. He then turned and began to shuffle for a refill. My mother called the fire department who soon arrived and doused the flames. In addition to causing damage to his car and wallet, this incident also engendered neighborly concern over his age.

A couple of weeks later we attended the Gyorgy's annual Christmas cocktail party. We entered the Gyorgy's expansive living room, decorated with antiques of the Gyorgy's Hungarian youth. In the far corner stood a massive Christmas tree, the top of which brushed against the ten-foot ceiling. I immediately noticed that there were no lights twinkling on the tree, but rather in their stead, small, unlit candles were fastened to the branches by thin steel wires. After all of the guests had arrived and been given refreshments, Dr. Gyorgy emerged from an anterior hallway with a long brass candle

lighter. He lit the lighter in the fireplace across the room from the tree. As he slowly crossed the living room, the episode of the burning car entered the minds of the guests whose nervous and anxious stares confirmed the collectively held concern. The doctor stretched his arm tremulously into the air placing the flame of the lighter into the topmost branches. Stifled murmurs emanated from the far side of the room. Semi-filled glasses were held at the ready in case of ignition. Some of the guests refilled their drinks to maximize dousing capabilities and anxiety reduction. With experienced focus, the doctor completed the lighting of the tree without mishap. It was beautiful and wondrous, something so foreign to me that I supposed that the Old Country had a few advantages over America and that I had just been let in on this secret. Little did I then know that that tree would be my first and last of the candle lit variety.

In retrospect, I consider this a gift in spite of the fact that no thing was transferred to me. I have come to understand that what I received was the sharing of the fruits of the Gyorgy's efforts and their passion for their traditions. It is a memory that I fondly cherish.

During that same Christmas my father's mother, sister, her husband and their two children traveled from Ohio to spend the Holiday with us. As often happens within congregated families, disagreements occur. The primary disagreement of this reunion was between my father and his mother and sister. They were stalwart Catholics and insisted that my father and I join them at Christmas Eve Mass. My father resolutely refused. My grandmother became as angry as I had ever witnessed. She darkly and forcefully asked what could possibly be the reason that compelled my father to risk his eternal soul by skipping mass. He replied that he wanted to watch television with me. No longer burdened with the insinuations of our relatives, my father and I sat in a dimly lit den and watched the crew of Apollo 8 broadcast live from lunar orbit on Christmas Eve.

The Apollo 8 mission marked the first time humans had left the earth's orbit, traveled to the moon and established an orbit there. My father had great admiration for astronauts, as he had been a jet fighter pilot for the U.S. Air Force flying F-80 Shooting Stars in Turkey. Consequently, he wanted to see what these pilots viewed so far away that evening.

Covered by a knit blanket, my father and I sat close together on a couch, our eyes fixated on the black and white television screen. The wavering images mesmerized and captivated. In due course, the three members of the Apollo 8 flight crew, Bill Anders, Jim Lovell, and Frank Borman read the first ten verses from the Book of Genesis as the Earth rose over the lunar horizon. It was moving, exciting, and encouraging. After the completion of the mission, while Borman was touring the world, he met with Pope Paul VI who told him "I have spent my entire life trying to say to the world what you did on Christmas Eve." It struck me even then that what we were watching held more spiritual meaning than the formalized, compulsory ritual to which my father's family felt drawn.

My father's eyes welled with tears. Upon my asking if he was alright, he said he was thinking of the poem High Flight, a poem well known to Air Force pilots. The final stanza of that poem is:

"Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace.
Where never lark, or even eagle flew —
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
- Put out my hand, and touched the face of God."

My father and I shared the experience of witnessing Human History. Moreover, we, as well as an estimated one billion other humans worldwide, shared the gift provided by the efforts and passions of those men carving their way through the void.

I imagine that my mass attending family members experienced a less inspiring evening.

Surprisingly, I have no recollection of any material gift that year. All or perhaps none of my choices from the magnificent Sears catalog may have been granted. I cannot remember. However, I do remember Dr. Gyorgy's candle-lit Christmas tree and watching with my father as Apollo 8 circled the moon. That was a great Christmas.

While thinking about that Christmas of forty-six years ago, I realized that the best gift one receives, and perhaps gives, is the appreciation of the efforts, freely shared, of others. It also occurred to me that that is what we do here. We receive the gifts of shared experience from the efforts, freely shared, of others. Further to our benefit, we receive these gifts for the majority of each year. We are lucky indeed.

Thank you for all of your gifts.