

The Holidays—a Reality Check and a Plan by Leane Ketcherside

At the end of October, all of your Christmas gifts are bought, wrapped, stashed and aid for. Your Thanksgiving feast is mostly ready and in the freezer so all you have to do is thaw and brown it all in the oven an hour before dinner is served. Most of your Christmas dinner is also frozen and ready to go, and you even have 6 dozen varieties of cookies baked, homemade fudge packed in tins tied with silver bows for your Letter Carrier, Hair stylist, Veterinarian and ten others who may unexpectedly drop in. Now all you have to do is look gorgeous and bask in the warm glow of your friends and loving family as you sit by a roaring fire, admire the stunningly decorated tree, sipping hot apple cider and singing traditional holiday songs.

Then you wake up!

Now, before those (very) few of you who really are this organized send me nasty e mails, let me say that I admire you, but the majority of us live in a much different world. This article is for the rest of us—the tired, over-worked, under-paid people who truly want to love the holidays, but begin to quake with anxiety sometime in mid-September when the Christmas trees go up in the malls. **SEPTEMBER!**

I admit it—I have a real problem with the commercialization of the holidays—I think it bites. The TV ads, cleverly (and effectively!) targeted at children (and adults) begin their relentless barrage of brainwashing jingles, and convince us that we'll be somehow “less” than others if we don't get & give...everything! At a very young age, our kids are taught to equate money with love. For years, I've said that you know it's Christmas when you see Santa sledding downhill on his Norelco® razor. How absurdly *sad* is this!

That said, let's get to the nitty-gritty and figure out how to put sanity and love back into the holidays.

- **Our need to give.** First and foremost, we *want* to give, and we *need* to give. Therefore, when someone you normally exchange gifts with asks you what you want for Christmas, it isn't helpful to say “Nothing”, even if you mean it. When my brother was alive, I always asked for Tea Towels and dish cloths. I *wanted* them, but absolutely hated spending money on them. They fit his budget, satisfied his *need* to give, and he knew I truly appreciated his gifts and I *used* them every day. I miss my brother, and I miss getting Tea Towels and dish cloths from him, I really do.
- **Our friends.** The years we're flush, we agree to give each other a small, thoughtful gift. Usually, though, we're all strapped for cash and need to focus on the kids and grandkids. We know we love each other—we don't need gifts to prove that. What we normally do is plan a Saturday or two to get together and do whatever sounds good. My best friend Valerie & I have a ritual or two that we've developed over the years, and we usually end up laughing so hard we come dreadfully close to peeing in our pants! About every-other year, the two of us drag her son with us all over St. Louis in search of THE PERFECT Pinecones. (We have no shame, and have been chased off a certain Restaurant property more than once, but they have the BEST Pinecones. We've become brazen and learned how to hold a flashlight in our teeth and snatch the Pinecones from the lower branches, bag them in the dark and peel out of the parking lot in less than fifteen minutes with our stash. Her son turns 16 next year, so we'll finally have a “wheel man”!) Then we head to several parks (where more than once a police officer has sat in his car, scratching his head, wondering if we're actually breaking an obscure law.) She & I climb the trees and pick the cones, then throw them to the ground for her son to chase down and put in the bag. (It's when I get stuck up in a tree that the unstoppable laughter starts, and there are

no toilets in trees, which only makes us laugh harder...It's usually right about then that the bewildered cop drives over and asks if we need help, sending us into hysterics and making us wish we'd stopped at the local pharmacy for a bag of Depends®!) Then we take the treasured Pinecones back to her house, dip them in melted Soywax™ with Essential oils and make basketfuls of beautiful, aromatic fire starters, which last us about 2 years, including those we give as gifts to others. On the non-Pinecone years, we get together and have a Spa Day with several other friends. We do Facial steams with Hydrosols, Clay cleansing masks followed by moisturizing Clay/Agave masks, pedicures, manicures, back rubs and whatever else we think of. We give each other the gift of time and laughter, and these days stay with us forever.

- **Give with love, or don't give at all!** It isn't the gift that matters; it's the thoughtfulness and love attached to it that mean the world. A thoughtless gift hurts! Here's a perfect example: My friend, Ann, owns a fitness facility. She teaches umpteen Aerobics classes, countless Spinning® and weight classes every day of the week—you could bounce a quarter off her back! For the past 8 years, she's worn a size two. Last Christmas she received a blouse from her sister-in-law; it was an XXL! The fact that the tag (marked down to \$2) was left on didn't help, and the entire incident made her cry. It wasn't the gift—it was the utter lack of thought and love that hurt.
- **Know the person to whom you give:** I understand that it isn't always possible to be on intimate terms with everyone, especially the kids of family members who live out of town. We'll cover that later in this article. This is about the people in your life who are close to you. Rushing around the mall just to find something, anything, to give isn't love—it's duty. Love is knowing that my mother-in-law loves birds, (homemade bird cookies and a birdhouse), has painful knees (microwavable moist heating pads) and doesn't want anything she can't use up (soap, candles, crèmes & lotions). It's knowing that my Grandmother, who is in a nursing home, has very little room and so many clothes that there are 4 boxes of them in storage. All she wants is *to see me*. I'll bake lasagna, stop and get her a Latte on the way, and we'll eat dinner together. She doesn't *want* another robe she *needs me*.
- **Give the gift of not giving:** There are so many people who live in my heart, but whom I rarely see. They're the people we've collected through the years who, although they aren't in our daily lives, we know the world is somehow right because they're in it. Heart-adopted mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers—people we just love. Some have extra money and some have very little. It's these people to whom I give the gift of not giving. I tell them I love them. I tell them there's just nothing I *need* or *want* other than for both of us to have peace of mind for the holidays, and ask if we could just concentrate on the kids and grandkids instead of spending money on things none of us *need*. I always get a huge sigh of relief. It's to these heart-people I send cards, and/or call on the holidays to say I love you. It's always just what we need. It is so important to stick to this agreement once you make it; In spite of good intentions, making this agreement with someone because you know they can't afford a gift, and then *breaking* it by giving them "*a little something*" will embarrass them and cause them to feel horrible. *Keeping your word is love.*

Wake-up Calls:

- Learning to recognize the signs that things are out-of-control require us to pay attention to statements, expectations and past habits of which we may not even be aware. The most important place to begin is to **examine our own thought patterns**—thoughts such as “Aunt Gretchen spent \$50 last year, so I need to spend at least that on her this year”, or “I’m afraid I’ll look cheap if I don’t spend at least (\$?) on my boss, co-workers, etc.”, indicate that you may be lost in the maze of commercial hype. Watch out for statements (usually from the kids) such as “It’s *only* \$50!” or “Everyone is getting/already has this thing I can’t live without! I’ll look stupid if I don’t get it, too!
- Ask yourself some questions before you whip out the credit cards: **“How many hours do I have to work for that \$50?”** “Do I want to send the message to my kids that money is easy to come by, or that *fitting in* requires *things*?” Also, ask yourself if you truly know the difference between wants and needs. If you don’t, chances are that your kids don’t either. For example, I *need* a new roof; I *need* to pay my Property taxes and I *need* to stop drinking so much coffee for my health. I *want* (almost) every Essential Oil on the planet, a Cobblestone patio the entire width of my house, a cabin in the woods, every indoor and outdoor fountain I see, and a One Carat diamond solitaire for each ear. Our *wants* can take us over and cause our *needs* to go unmet. Worse than that, we can easily convince ourselves that our *wants* are actually *needs*.
- **The Most Important Question of all:** “*Will this thing enhance my life and/or the lives of those to whom I’m giving it?*” If the answer is yes, “*How will it do so?*” Since advertising is designed to convince us that our lives WILL be enhanced by any and every product on the market, we must truly examine this question on an individual and very personal basis. Some of my personal examples of this are; **Books**—I *need* to expand my mind to be happy. I’m one of those people who want to learn almost everything there is to learn and can, and often do, read three or four books at a time. Therefore, **books and gift certificates to bookstores** enhance my life by helping me fulfill my *need* to learn and grow. **Beautiful Journals, pretty writing pens and lovely stationery** are also small enhancements to my life, since they help satisfy my *need* to express myself by writing. **Bookmarks, Sealing wax and bookplates** also meet my criteria as life-enhancements because they represent and assist with two of my greatest loves. I collect these things, as well as **frogs, dragonflies, ladybugs (not live ones, of course!) and teapots**. Each of these represents something very personal and emotionally important to me, and aren’t items that I would buy for myself (except for bookmarks, which I can rarely pass up). It’s always the people I love and who love me who give me these thoughtful gifts, which is truly the reason they enhance my life. Each time I look at a frog, teapot, dragonfly or ladybug, I remember the love behind it and the person who gave it to me. My mother-in-law scours yard sales to find me teapots, and the time and effort and love she puts into this genuinely warms my heart. I could go on for pages, but I know you get my meaning. It is the love (*a need*) behind the gifts (*wants*) that enhances our lives, never the money.
- **The Kids.** There were two incidents that rocked me to the core and made me realize that we had gotten so very off-track with our kids. Unfortunately, they were older so it was much harder to change their ideas and expectations regarding holiday gift-giving, and I suspect that they felt as if they were being cheated, or somehow punished, even though I explained why I no longer felt the need to stack gifts to the rafters and take out a second mortgage to pay for it all. If you have the chance to begin with little ones, your task will be much easier.

1. **Our Daughter.** My first eye-opener came when our daughter, who was 16 at the time, demanded a 32" Sony color television set, with remote, timer and "picture in picture" for her bedroom. This, and *only* this, would be acceptable. (At the time, this particular TV cost around \$800.) I shamefully admit that I didn't handle this at all well. I got mad. My head filled with thoughts of what a selfish, ungrateful brat she was, and how *dare* she try to hold me hostage, and *demand*—no—*dictate* to me what was and was not an acceptable gift! Thank goodness I didn't speak these thoughts out loud. As I angrily paced the floor, I realized that I had a rather large slice of the responsibility pie in this situation, since I was the one who had always gone overboard on the gift-giving. We did get her a color TV that year—a nice 13" Samsung, with a remote, of course. There was disappointment on her face when she opened it, and I admit that it stung, but she got over it and so did I. The upside to this story is that she's now a mother herself—and I thoroughly enjoy the belly laughs I have when she tells her woeful stories about my granddaughter's demands.

 2. **Our Son.** This one really shocked me because our son is usually cost-conscious and rarely anything but appreciative. It was his birthday, which usually reaps him a decent amount of cash from us, both sets of grandparents and the rest of the family. Money was tight for everyone so he ended up with about half the amount he was used to getting, but still, by my standards, it was a tidy sum. My boy actually said, *out loud and to me*, that he "got screwed this year"! I think I still have the scar on my tongue from biting it.
- **Getting Yourself & Your (Young) Kids off the Insanity Train.** Oh, how I do miss the "Lego® Years!" When kids are little things are so much easier. Dolls, trains, little girl make-up, it's all magic! The only rule is self-discipline—on your part—not to go overboard; it's that simple. Give one gift at a time, and help them appreciate it by taking the time to really look at it and see what it is. Take turns opening gifts, one person at a time, and allow time to appreciate each gift. It sounds so simple, but it really works. So often we end up with a free-for-all on Christmas morning, with everyone opening gifts at once, tossing one aside in anticipation of what's next. It's over in less time than it took to wrap it all. When there are too many things for a child to open, it not only sets the foundation for future expectations, it also teaches them a lack of appreciation and robs them of a memorable family experience.

 - **Getting Yourself and your (Older) Kids off the Insanity Train.** This takes courage, but you can do it. There is a Public Service commercial on TV right now that shows a man and a woman taking turns slamming doors, screaming "I hate you!" and exclaiming "It's just a little Pot!" over and over again, until the man asks "Are you ready?" and the woman says "Yes." The commercial then points out that, if you're going to help your child with his or her problem, you first have to deal with yours. This holds true for many things, including switching reindeer in the middle of the ride. As parents, we have to get past our fears: of disappointing our kids, of feeling cheap, keeping up with the Joneses, being compared to other family member's gift-giving habits—you name it. Another huge hurdle is what I call "**Working mother's guilt**". I don't care what anyone says, I *know*—mothers

who work outside the home **agonize** over feelings of guilt and inadequacy because we feel we're cheating our kids. We don't get to spend the time with them we wish we could, and we try to compensate, usually by buying them whatever they want. The problems with this are that the guilt and feelings of inadequacy don't go away, regardless of how much money we throw at it, and it sends the absolute worst message to our kids; that love equals money. This is such a destructive way of thinking and behaving that all of us—every mother in the world—should take the sage advice of the *Eagles* and “Get over it!”

1. **Set Monetary Limits:** The most joy-robbing aspect of the holiday season is stress over money. Many of us haven't even paid off the costs of last year's holidays! It is impossible to relax and enjoy time spent with family and friends when we're terrified of the debt that just keeps piling up. Each of us has a different financial situation, and only you know what you can reasonably spend. Set a limit for each child, and stick to it. As kids get older, the stuff they want gets more expensive. A stereo costs a lot more than Legos®, obviously. The only time I advocate spending equal amounts on anyone is for the kids. If you have a 5 year old and a 15 year old, and the older child wants a stereo, then he/she will have fewer gifts under the tree than the 5 year old, but the amount of money spent stays equal.

 2. **Get them Involved!** Make memories and create your own family traditions. Even sullen teenagers can help decorate the tree, string popcorn to feed the birds, rubber stamp, paint or even splatter color on rolls of Kraft paper for hand-made gift wrap. Use their talents and turn them loose to create something *their way*. Make clay, paper or wire ornaments, turn them loose with photographs, a camera, leaves—whatever—and glue sticks to make a collage. Make slice & bake cookies together (No, you are NOT a horrible mother if you don't bake from scratch!) Let them do some things their way, disregard the rolled eyes, exasperated sighs and irritated groans. If you don't place your expectations on them, you won't be disappointed! Good memories don't happen all at once, but they will happen. Those perfect, Dickensian Christmases are *fiction!* Break the unrealistic molds and make new ones.
- **Spouses—The Clueless Husband:** Sometimes we can't even enjoy the gifts we get from our spouses because we worry about how we're going to pay for them. (If I took a poll, I wonder how many of you would admit to returning gifts from your spouse because of the money.) I admit that in the past, I have done this. It made my husband feel bad because I robbed him of the joy of giving. I will never do this again, but then, neither will I ever again allow him to set foot in a jewelry store! Instead, I ask for simple things that I really treasure. Sending him to Borders or Barnes and Noble always fits the bill. He knows what I love. A gift certificate, a Flavia wall calendar and some of my favorite teas satisfy my *wants* and his *need* to give. He'll also usually pick out a pair of house slippers or a special tea cup as well, which I always appreciate. The most important things are that the money he spends is reasonable and that he *knows* me, and he understands what's important to me. No amount of money in the world could ever mean more than this.

- **Spouses—Wives going overboard:** Most wives know their husbands very well, which usually makes it easy to choose gifts for them. We run into trouble when we buy too much, try to top the year before, or attempt to illicit a demonstrable reaction from them. By nature, most men don't gush. The sooner we accept this, the better off and less disappointed we'll be by their reactions. One year (when I was MUCH younger), I spent \$900 at a photographers who specialized in Boudoir photos. They were classy, gorgeous photos (not trashy) and he made them into a calendar, along with a leather-bound album of several different shots. I was so *sure* I'd finally get a huge reaction from him that year. I didn't. Although he cherishes them and has the calendar on the wall to this day, he didn't gush. He worried about the money I spent (so did I), but he decided it was worth the cost. I don't regret doing it, not a bit, but I learned many things from the experience. These days he can never come up with anything he *wants*, so it's up to me to decide. I can tell you that I get him simpler things and I don't spend even $\frac{1}{4}$ of the money I did on the photos. He loves watches, pens, books and sweaters. I also get him some sort of a nice wooden box with the date inscribed on it every year to keep his "man stuff" in. It's become a tradition. There's always a tool he'd like to have but won't buy for himself, so there's usually one in his stocking. His *wants* and my *need* to give—satisfied with love and simplicity.

- **Uncooperative Family members:** Our (rather large) family has tried it all...agreeing not to give gifts to the adults this year (doesn't work—we all *need* to give something), setting a maximum dollar limit per person/family, (what usually happens is that some family members go along with it and some don't), drawing names (have never been able to get this to fly) and other tactics I can't remember. Here are some things I've found that work for me. It's rarely easy to introduce change, but change we must if we're ever going to put sanity into the holidays.
 1. **Listen *closely* for the beat of your own drummer, and then follow it!** Life isn't a popularity contest—if you try to make it one, you'll lose every time. Life is (or should be) about *love*. We are born to this Earth as loving beings—*it's natural and automatic to love!* Sadly, we often learn throughout life to replace love as our primary motivation with worries over money, fears of bruised Egos and comparisons to others, etc. This begins the insanity.

 2. **Don't be a "People Pleaser":** I confess—I used to be a doormat. I had no idea who I was or why I was here, other than to *try to please everyone, all the time*. I quit all that, listened *deeply* for *my own drummer*, and began to *follow*. At first, NOBODY liked the new me, and I mean NOBODY! I learned to say "NO" and meant it. I determined that I wanted to have a small, intimate gift-opening with immediate family, at home, on Christmas Eve, rather than get up at the crack of dawn on Christmas morning, race to someone's house and open gifts with our entire extended family. It was more stress than I wanted, and, since we have 2 kids and my sister-in-law has 3, and they also spend more on gifts that we do, it seemed somehow lop-sided to our kids. It wasn't ever that anyone did anything "wrong", I just wasn't comfortable with it. Everyone got used the scandalous changes I made, and we now get

together for Brunch on Christmas morning. Each of us pitches in with cooking, cleaning up, etc., and it all works out fine. Believe me, though, that first year I had to endure a lot of frowns, glares and indignant sniffs! I survived.

3. **When Somebody breaks the Rules:** It *never* fails! We'll all agree to a reasonable spending limit for the adults, and someone always goes overboard—*always!* In our family, it's continuously my sister-in-law, Pat. She invariably spends at least twice the agreed amount on her parents. It used to bother me, I admit—I felt trumped, cheap, embarrassed and as if I wasn't showing them enough how much I love them. Then I realized that, like me, *Pat was following her own drummer* and that her decisions on what she spent had nothing to do with me—it was none of my business—nor did it require me to change my habits. I also realized that, if I'm smart enough to understand that money in no way equals love, so were my in-laws and everyone else! I can tell you, there is tremendous freedom in acceptance—both of others, and of ourselves!

- **Gift-giving at work:** I think the most important thing to remember is that most of your co-workers are just as stymied, afraid and apprehensive as you are. This is a fairly easy one to tackle because there are so many choices.

- Draw names. This is an accepted practice almost everywhere.

Everyone donates a set dollar amount. Then each person sticks the name of his/her favorite charity in a hat. The charity drawn out gets the cash donation.

- Have a carry-in lunch in lieu of giving gifts. Set the date; put someone in charge to get a list of who's bringing what, including paper plates, forks, napkins, etc. You can often get the Company to pitch in for the ham or whatever the main course is.
- If you're close to one or more of your co-workers and you decide you want to exchange gifts, by all means do! Just do it as friends, quietly and off of company property.
- **The "Office Party":** If there will be alcohol, Avoid, avoid, avoid! You'll either embarrass yourself (or agonize that you might have) or someone else will embarrass themselves and you'll have to witness it. The following workday will be nothing but gossip, gossip, gossip, and you really don't want any part of this! If you *absolutely must* go, go early and leave early.

Sane Gifts for Every One!

- **Great Gifts for Teens & Tweens:** These are gifts which are always appreciated, and I especially recommend if you aren't close enough to the recipient to know their likes and dislikes. **Movies** and **music** are universal, especially for kids. If they have a computer, so is **software**. The perfect answer to each of these is a **gift card**. Borders, Best Buy and Wal Mart each have great selections, and you can get movie gift cards on line! Don't forget homemade candles, incense and lip balm!
- **College kids:** This is so easy I hesitate to mention it: **MONEY!** They never have enough of it. If you're a person who doesn't like to give cash, here are some ideas that are always a hit with my college student: **Gift cards for gas, clothes, movies, music, software, restaurants & books**. If you have a Kohl's or an Old Navy close, they always have a great sale on **Hoodies**, and every body loves Hoodies!
- **Speaking of Hoodies:** Last year every male on my list got one, as did most of the women. Old Navy had them on sale for \$12.50 each. Not a single one has gathered dust in the closet!
- **Newlyweds:** Well, they need mostly everything, unless they're wealthy. Something my mother-in-law gave me one year is a treasured gift 20 years later. She wrote out her recipes for me on individual cards and tied them with ribbon. I don't even remember the other gifts we got. Although I *still* can't make her pie crust, the dog-eared, sauce-stained cards attest to the fact that they have been well-used and cherished.
- **New Parents:** A piece of cake—these couples need *time!* Time to sleep (offer to take the baby for a couple of hours), time together (gift cards to a restaurant and a movie, complete with an offer to keep the baby) and time with adults—remember to check in (by phone) often.
- **When you're Broke:** or even if you aren't, giving postcards redeemable for services throughout the year are wonderful offerings! Services such as cooking a meal, mowing the lawn, cleaning the house, raking leaves, painting a room—there's an endless list of loving ways to give, and not one will go unused or unappreciated.
- **Think Beyond the Ordinary:** Most of us know that the women on our list will love homemade soap, candles and toiletries, but have you ever given these to the men? I have and now I get phone calls when the stuff runs out! The funniest "man-soap" story happened when I gave my young brother-in-law, Christian, a few bars of CP soap one year. A few months later, I got an e mail from him that said, "**SOS! Send more soap!**" Now, Christian is a Big, Bad, Tough Marine Captain, so this just cracked me up. I sent him a few more bars, and told him that I had replaced the exfoliating oatmeal with ground rocks, so he wouldn't have to feel like such a sissie. A few months later I got another **SOS** e mail. That Christmas I gave him a 10# brick of soap, which he'll get every year from now on. Now, every man in my family asks for soap, shampoo bars and loofah-scrubbies for their feet. My brother-in-law is a Mail Carrier and his hands get horribly dry and cracked to the point that they bleed in the winter. He also gets a big jar of Ecztrema™ Butter, as do my Mail Carrier and UPS man. My son likes candles (which he

would never admit to, of course), my nephew loves homemade incense and my husband *asks* for facials! The point? Don't be afraid to introduce new things to people, and don't make assumptions that men won't like some of the same things that women like!

Gift-giving isn't really all that hard. Whether it's a stocking filled with favorite treats (and a new toothbrush, whether they like it or not) or a Cruise around the world, if there's love behind it, it's the perfect choice. Let go of your fears of not measuring up (to whom?) and learn to truly consider the person to whom you're giving. The holidays are a time for *gratitude*, *kindness* and, above all else, *love*. Once we truly find these in our hearts, we also find that every day is a holiday.

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