

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

What Makes a Gift Great?

I know there are those of you out there who are awesome at gift giving. You always know just the right thing to get. You're generous, maybe even spontaneous, giving gifts even at non-holiday times. Boy, do I have deep respect for you people...and this newsletter is not for you. It's for two other types of people among us:

- 1) Those who are *not* natural at the gift giving process. We forget until the last minute or give the minimum because we are trying to be too frugal or efficient. If we're generous, we waste our money buying exactly the *wrong* thing that will inevitably end up in a White Elephant gift exchange or hidden in a closet, displayed only when we come for a visit. We need some help to more effectively show those in our lives that we care for them in this way. And...
- 2) Those of us who have received gifts from others that seemed really generous or thoughtful. We feel like we should be really grateful for the gift, but there's just something about it that seems off somehow and we just can't figure out what that is.

For both these groups, digging deeper into exactly what makes a good gift and what doesn't is key. Thinking about this recently, I've wondered if the best gifts are those that get high marks in these three areas:

1) Personal Cost to the Giver

On the surface, this one probably feels like a no-brainer. There's a cultural assumption that it's the financial value of the gift that communicates what the person is worth to the giver. So if we want the other person to feel like they matter, we better empty our wallets, right? But that's not always true though, is it?

Certainly, if we're like Ebenezer Scrooge, saving every penny because we value money more than almost anything, *and* we spend a lot on a person, in that case, we're saying to them, "Because money is really dear to me since it makes me feel secure and important, the fact that I spent it on you says that I value you even more than that." For the Scrooges out there, spending money is a *personal* sacrifice and so the amount spent really does communicate the amount a person matters.

But what if we happen to be wealthy enough that an expensive gift is a drop in the bucket for us? Or what if we're rotten at budgeting and just spend every dollar that comes our way? Then, if we spend a boatload on someone, it is not necessarily costing us anything that we really value. It's just how we roll.

Nope, the personal cost to the giver element of gift giving is really about communicating to the other person that we value them by sacrificing something precious *to us* to increase their joy in some way. If we are short on time and we throw them a party that requires a lot of planning and coordination or we make a gift that took all our spare minutes to complete, we're saying, "I value you more than my time, which is super precious to me." If we give something that meant something to us for personal reasons, we're saying, "I value you more than this object that was

precious to me.” This aspect of good gift giving is doing whatever says to the other person, “You are more important to me than other things in my life that I value highly.”

Now, the problem with relying solely on this measure of gift giving is that sometimes what is dear to us does not matter that much to the other person. We might spend precious hours making them a one of a kind art object, but our friend is a minimalist who hates having anything around that’s not “useful.” We Scrooges might spend a ton of money buying our favorite someone a beach vacation only to find out they have a water phobia. So the second key aspect of gift giving is:

2) Prioritizing the Needs and Wants of the Receiver

This one is tricky for several reasons. It’s where a lot of gift givers miss the boat. Ideally, this would involve 1) figuring out what people need and want by 2) being in close enough contact with them over time to 3) be around when they say they want or need something and then 4) remember what they said when it’s gift giving time. By doing this over and over—again, in the ideal world, here—we’d 5) develop an innate sense of what they want so we can *almost* read their minds and every time get them exactly what they wanted or didn’t even know they wanted, though they really did!

While we might aim for the ideal, it’s no surprise that we miss the mark considering all five things that are involved here. In the real world, lots of us give gifts on birthdays and holidays to people we’re not in close contact with. When those we’re close to mention what they want along the way, we often forget what they said. Some people never seem to mention wanting or needing anything, even when we’re paying close attention. And to top it off, people can say they want something and then change their minds later. The all-things-penguin collector suddenly decides to collect all-things-cow instead, right after we found that adorable barfing penguin milk pourer. The nerve!

When any of these contingencies happen, they force us to make a difficult choice. We can choose Option A and hazard a guess at what the person wants or get them something that we deem universally desirable (scented bathroom products, candles, engraved flasks, gourmet foods, etc.). This has a big payoff if we guess correctly (“Oh my gosh! How did you know I wanted this? This is the best! You are the best!), but if we guess wrong, or the person doesn’t like “universally desirable” objects, it’s like saying to them, “Clearly, I really don’t know you very well or I didn’t put in the effort to find out what you want or need, but at least I should get credit for giving you something, right?” Lots of people chose this option, which is how I ended up receiving a *wedding gift* of a plastic hamburger meant to hold relish accompanied by two plastic cheese spreaders shaped like fries and a milkshake. No, I am not joking. And no, it was not on my registry, unless I accidentally registered at Burger King.

Other people choose Option B: admitting that they aren’t good at mind reading and just asking people what they need or want. This option has the down side of taking away the element of surprise and announcing to all present that the giver can’t read minds. So people who prioritize their own need to seem like a mind reader, be good at surprises, or pretend they are closer to the receiver than they actually are tend to avoid this option. It’s not as nice to the giver’s ego as guessing is. And, of course, it doesn’t work if receivers can’t think of anything they want or refuse to tell us because they have a fantasy that we should be able to read their minds. In that case, we can hope what they *really* want, deep down, is a bathroom full of smelly lotions and a whole cabinet full of flasks.

In sum, prioritizing the needs and wants of the receiver involves—to the best of our ability within the constraints of time, geography, and closeness of the relationship—paying as close attention as we can to what our loved ones say they want OR sacrificing our own need to be surprising or a mind reader to simply ask people what they want. That's followed by giving people what they actually want, rather than something that we value that doesn't mean much to them.

Unfortunately, even those who excel at the first two aspects of great gift giving can miss:

3) Minimizing the Payoff to the Giver

This is the one that most often gives us a mixed feeling about a gift we've received. Gifts that fail in this measure might be very costly in terms of time or money and they might be very much what the person wanted, but they come with the expectation that we're going to get something in return that goes beyond a genuine "thank you" and the internal joy we get from loving on someone.

Here are some examples: A guy gives his estranged girlfriend the birthday gift of a trip to Italy four months later, subtly obligating her to stay with him at least until then. A parent pays for grad school and then brings it up whenever the son suggests spending part of his vacations anywhere other than home. A woman refinishes her friend's office and then mentions it every time they get together for years, expecting repeated, enthusiastic thanks from her friend and praise from everyone else in earshot of the conversation.

To avoid this gift ruiner, we need to ask ourselves *before* we purchase the gift, "If I get no more than a 'thank you' and a hug for this, will I feel disappointed or taken advantage of?" If we can't answer "yes," it may be better for the relationship in the long term for us to get something else for the person that we can give without strings attached. Otherwise, the person may sense our efforts to control their behavior with our "generosity" and may begin to distance themselves from us either obviously (spending less time with us, taking longer to return communication, etc.) or subtly (smiling on the surface, but resenting us underneath and dreading the time spent together).

Taking the Next Step in Giving and Receiving

Okay. So I get that even though I'm talking about gifts, we are touching on some pretty deep emotional and psychological issues here: our ability to do intimacy in our relationships, our ability to juggle our needs and constraints with those of others, our insecurities and needs to have our egos stroked, our fear of being not worthwhile unless we obligate others to be with us through our "generosity," etc. So let's be kinda gentle on ourselves with the take aways here, going one step at a time. I'll just issue two challenges, one to givers and one to receivers:

Giving Challenge: Choose one of the three areas above and for the next 5 gifts that you give, see if you can do a little better at either sacrificing to show you value others, or prioritizing their wants, or giving such that you're not expecting a personal payoff.

Receiving Challenge: If someone is giving you gifts that make you feel unknown or uncomfortable, see if you can identify which of the three gift giving skills is missing. Then ask yourself whether you 1) mention the kinds of things you like or want in a way that is clear, 2) tell others whether you prefer to be surprised with something that's not quite right or to know what the gift is but receive exactly what you want, or 3) let others know whether super generous gifts

make you uncomfortable. If you suspect that you haven't been clear in these areas, see if you can work on being gradually (and kindly) more clear in just one of these areas with the person who keeps missing the mark.

If you or someone you know would like help with some of the things that get in the way of intimacy and gift giving, feel free to call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email info@jenniferdiebel.com.

Thanks for reading!

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