

Christian Perspectives: Finding the right balance in Christmas giving

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The month leading up to Christmas can be a very stressful time for me.

Perhaps it is for you, too, but maybe for a different reason.

There is no official title for it, but I am the total opposite of a 'shopaholic'.

I am not sure if I became this way because of Christmases past or not. I'm very uncomfortable stomping through a heated mall in boots high enough to counter the snow outside and a coat designed for subzero temperatures on my back.

Most likely my aversion to shopping stems from raising two teenage girls who pleaded with me to sacrifice full Saturdays to following them from store to store while they chose the perfect sweater. That sweater, it turned out, was found in the very first store we had visited. Both my daughters still enjoy shopping as adults, but I bear the scars of those early expeditions to the malls.

Perhaps I harbour memories of Christmases when the budget was stretched even for the basics of life. Many of us have had or are having a Christmas like that this year. Shopping becomes a discipline of higher economics to get the best deal for the least amount of scarce cash or pay the high penalty of overusing the credit card.

No fun in that either.

One Christmas, when some of the children were in college and the senior adults had retired, we decided to try an alternative plan. Every gift had to have been previously owned. This meant you could give someone something of yours that they had admired, or shop in second hand stores. Such shops are rarely busy at Christmas so you can browse at your leisure and leave with the satisfaction that you have found a bargain and kept at least some material goods out of landfill sites.

In another experiment to find the perfect gift giving strategy, we opted to draw names. Young children excepted, this was for everyone not just the distant cousins. It took time to get used to this as years passed, when I did not have the opportunity to choose a gift for some or all of my own children.

I rationalized, 'They all have birthdays.'

Over time we have also introduced giving small personal gifts combined with charity gifts like buying chickens for a farmer in Africa, a sleeping mat and net for a child half way around the world or a sleeping bag for a homeless person in Canada.

Members of my extended family like many other families often find their ability to give gifts constrained by the economic realities of unemployment, first time home purchases and family units altered by death or marriage breakdown. More often now we buy for people outside of our families in the form of donations of food, warm clothing, toys and toiletries for those less well off, collected through our church.

All this has begun to make more sense to me as I have looked at the first Christmas story again.

Most of us have heard that gift giving originated with the Magi, the kings who followed the star that led them to the Christ child. These men were very rich. They could afford to leave home and mount a costly expedition to go chasing after a star.

They brought very expensive gifts; gold, frankincense and myrrh. Such rich and privileged people were rare in the time of Jesus.

They are still rare today. For centuries we have been basing our model of gift giving on people who are really not like most of us at all.

Had we lived in that time and place, most of us at best would have been just getting by, some would have been very poor, widows and orphans would have been abandoned.

Our pattern for giving should not be based on the kings at all. It ought to look more like the gift of the shepherds. They were the regular people of modest means. The angel herald invited them to go to the manger. They merely brought themselves. They came to share in the joy of new life - a baby that held much promise for the world. Perhaps there is much blessing in just bringing ourselves; bringing ourselves in love, understanding and patience to our families and among our friends not only at Christmas but all year round.

Perhaps we could just try to bring our best selves to everything that we do in our work and play. Perhaps we too should listen to the invitation of the angels and bring ourselves to the child in the manger.