

By Dr Tan Poh Kiang, Editorial Board Member



It's The Thought That Counts



Whenever Christmas comes around, there are two hassles that many of us face: the stress of getting enough gifts for everyone in time as well as the headache of storing the numerous gifts we receive. That is not even to mention the delicate business of not allowing the excessive presents to spoil our children, making them materialistic brats who take things for granted. Or the sinking feeling when Christmas is over that the entire purpose to celebrate the birth of Christ the Saviour has been inadvertently missed.

These days, I think about what kind of gifts makes me happy as a starting point of searching for the appropriate gifts for those whom I care about. Following the dictum “first do no harm”, I realise that when gifts are given out of obligation or without much thought, they achieve the opposite effect from what is intended. I have received expensive gifts that caused me dismay – a long-time friend had given the same branded jacket to our daughter two Christmases in a row. The manner of haphazard wrapping and the identical nature of the item caused me to think that they were extras she was trying to recycle. I am actually not against recycling multiple copies of the same stuff that we receive except that when it came from a close friend, I somehow felt our friendship was not cherished. The gift did not make me feel good. I would have thought better of this friend had she not given me anything.

On the other hand, even when it is not Christmas, receiving simple gifts that come from sincere individuals can be very heartwarming. Over the years, I have had all sorts of gifts that are passed to me by earnest patients who are

eager to express their gratitude. They range from fruits that come in the typical red plastic bag (often straight after their marketing); steamed buns (*pau*) and coffee from the neighbourhood coffeeshop; and pastries from the confectionery in the nearby block. More elaborate gifts include an old Teochew lady making the effort to go to an authentic Teochew confectionery at Chin Swee Road to buy me the traditional giant Teochew biscuits (I am not kidding – it is 12-inches in diameter); and the old Cantonese patient who found out that I enjoy pig trotters cooked in black vinegar and old ginger and specially cooked me enough to eat for a week! You can see that none of these gifts can be wrapped in sophisticated paper and ribbons but they bring more joy as each comes with the assurance that someone thinks the world of me.

The things I cherish from my own family include drawings from my daughter and words that are penned by my wife. If it is a purchased item, my loved ones know that when it is chosen with thoughtfulness, it will mean the most to me (even if it costs little and arrives long after the birthday).

So I am learning to be daring. I have to decide that I do not need to give to everyone I know (that will reduce the madness of marathon shopping and frantic wrapping of presents). And those whom I choose to give, I would like the gift to embody the thought that I think the world of them. And if I run out of time before this Christmas, I shall make a note to give them the next. In this way, they will come to discover that it is really the thought that counts. ■



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