

Gifts
By
Daniel E. White December 22, 2025

At a New Year's Eve party some years ago, I was chatting with some folks about the job of being a Head of School. I mentioned that a part of the job I found I liked was talking with donors about potential gifts to the school. "There's the challenge of meeting a donor's needs and desires with the needs of the school," I said. "When this matchmaking works, everybody benefits."

One fellow seemed surprised. "Don't you find that a bit awkward, asking for money?" I was about to answer when a second fellow jumped in. "You know, none of us hesitates to ask a friend to help us do this or that. When that friend agrees, she's giving us a gift, the gift of her time. When he asks for money, Dan is talking about giving something that is replaceable, money. What the friend is giving you—time—is irreplaceable."

Reading a recent *Christian Science Monitor* article, "All You Knead is Kindness," in the November 10, 2025 issue by Troy Aidan Sambajon, I recalled that conversation. Sambajon wrote about taking a walk to clear his head when he saw a Chinese woman standing alone at a crosswalk, seemingly unsure about where to go. He approached her and offered to help.

Neither spoke the other's language. But the woman had an ad for Trader Joe's at which she pointed. Sambajon tried to point her in the right direction and soon realized how futile that was. He knew he had to walk with her there, not a long distance but not where he had intended to go.

The woman walked the aisles selecting items here and there, loading up with several loaves of bread. At the checkout stand, the woman pressed a loaf into Sambajon's hands. He tried to turn down the offer, but she insisted that he take it. She then began to take photos with her smart phone, the last one being a selfie of the two of them and the gifted loaf.

Before picking up her bags, she opened her arms and hugged him. Then she walked away.

Sambajon wrote, "All I had to remember her by was that loaf of bread—a small gift that felt like something much bigger."

There were three obvious gifts in that story: a loaf of bread, unrestrained kindness, and time. Was there not also a fourth gift, to Sambajon, of that sense of "something much bigger?"

O'Henry's short story, "The Gift of the Magi," is often read or told around the holidays. The story is uncomplicated. There is a young married couple, deeply in love with each other but struggling to make ends meet. (Perhaps you, like us, have been that couple.) Christmas is approaching. Each wants to give the other a gift that will embody the love they have for each other.

The woman's prize possession is, in fact, her luxurious and long brown hair. His is a treasured gold pocket watch, a family heirloom. She knows that he would welcome a fob chain and decides to buy him one made of platinum. To get the money to buy the chain, she goes to a wigmaker and sells a substantial portion of her beautiful hair for \$20.

At home, she is excited to give her gift to him. He accepts it lovingly and, in return, gives her the ornamental combs for her hair she has admired. Then he explains that, in order to get the money for the combs, he has sold his watch.

There are three obvious gifts in this story, too; the fob chain, the combs, and the love that led each to give up something they valued to the benefit of the one they loved. Is there a fourth gift here, too?

The giving of material gifts has been part of celebrations across many cultures and faith traditions around the world for generations. There are many real-life benefits gained in giving and receiving gifts, beginning with how critical to the well-being of economies around the world the surges in sales associated with holiday seasons are.

Sometimes a gift fills a recipient's real need, providing, perhaps, something that the recipient cannot afford to buy for himself. The fun some lucky adults derive from watching the unrestrained joy in a child as she unwraps a coveted toy or book should not be discounted as frivolous; modern life, for many, can be spare in moments of unrestrained joy.

We grow up. We change from those who experience the joy of unwrapping to being those who enable such moments for others, and we find joy in that new role, too. We come to know that sense of "something much bigger" than a loaf of bread, a platinum watch fob chain or a set of ornamental combs.

I believe that there are many people who understand the idea of "something much bigger" in their lives because they are generous of spirit. What a gift it would be, to the world and to themselves, if even more people found that sense this holiday season!

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