

The Best Gifts Are Simply Love And Understanding



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Only two days to Christmas, and you may still be wondering, “What do you give someone who has everything?” Landing one of the hotter items, like a Nintendo Wii video game system, requires battle-ready endurance, and finding an empty parking space may feel as though

you’ve witnessed a true miracle.

In spite of the hustle and bustle, Lee Ann Hanover loves the holidays. She and Karl, married nearly 20 years, live in a well-appointed five-bedroom colonial with their three teenagers and Siberian husky, Zeus. Everyone would say the Hanovers have a good life.

“It’s Friday morning, and Karl will soon be back from his business trip,” she thinks, as she puts the finishing touches on the tree. The beautifully wrapped presents (costing well above their agreed-upon budget) await their final placement.

Yes, it’s Christmas. But Karl isn’t feeling very celebratory. As he drives from the airport, he’s stressed to the hilt. It’s been an especially difficult six months. His weight and blood pressure are up, along with his anxiety. Unless he

takes a sleeping pill, he can’t rest or stop his mind from racing.

What Lee Ann doesn’t know, because Karl hasn’t told her, is that they’re in desperate financial straits. Karl’s marketing firm has had to downsize its work force by more than half, and he couldn’t even make payroll last month. To make matters worse, they’re just one missed mortgage payment from foreclosure and are leveraged to the hilt.

He is only home a few minutes when he calls my office, “Do you have an open hour?” he asks. Karl sounds uncharacteristically flustered.

When he walks into my office, I notice that his face is flushed, and there are perspiration stains under his arms.

“I’m afraid I’m losing my grip,” he begins. “I just came home from a grueling week expecting a little rest, and how do you think Lee Ann greets me?”

Karl looks at me shaking his head in disbelief.

“She tells me that she’s made dinner reservations for tonight! Doesn’t she get it?”

As he speaks, his voice gets louder and more rapid.

“I travel four days out of every week and live exclusively on restaurant food. I have to wine and dine all these pompous clients. Why would I want to go out for dinner? And she’s spent a fortune on

presents. They’re all lined up in the basement. We promised there would be a \$500 limit, and I know she’s gone way over. We’re going to be homeless, and she’s spending like there’s no tomorrow.”

I ask him to slow down and take a deep breath. After a pause, he continues more reasonably.

“I suppose it’s my fault because I’ve tried to protect her from how bad things really are,” he says as his eyes fill. “I didn’t want her to feel I’d failed the family. I’ll find a way out of this.

“Lee Ann doesn’t understand what I need is very simple. All I want for Christmas is some quiet time with my family — and a home-cooked meal.” Karl says this with the look of a little boy who found his stocking empty on Christmas morning.

“As I was flying home, I was thinking about some comfort food, like shepherd’s pie, spaghetti and meatballs or macaroni and cheese — anything not on a room service menu,” he says.

And then I ask, “Do you think that Lee Ann may also feel disappointed? She’s been home alone for the past week, cooking for the kids and doing all the holiday preparation. Don’t you think she was probably looking forward to an evening out alone, away from the kitchen and the kids?” I told him I

wouldn’t be surprised if she thought you were being insensitive, and that she probably didn’t understand his extreme reaction.

Karl smiled. It didn’t take him long to see things from another perspective. After a few moments, he said, “I think I know what to give Lee Ann for Christmas — dinner reservations.” I agreed that was a good start. I also suggested that the other part of his gift must be sharing the difficult financial truth that faces them and planning a strategy together.

What to give someone who has everything doesn’t have to cost a penny.

I have a colorful giclée print hanging in my office by Vermont artist Stephen Huneck. It’s of two Labrador retrievers facing one another, holding a small piece of rope. The print is captioned “Love is Give and Take.” It is there to remind me that the greatest gifts we share are those acts of cooperation and empathy — seeing a problem from the other person’s perspective.

Because this is a holy season, I searched to find a definition of “holiness” that would apply to all faiths. I found words like “set apart, unique, pure, special and unified with what and who we cherish.” The word holiness is often used to describe the sacred union of marriage, that bond that signifies our

special relationship to one another.

His holiness the Dalai Lama writes, “My religion is loving kindness. Loving kindness reaches out and embraces the whole world. I have faith in our actions. The effect of holiness speaks without words.”

The most powerful gifts cannot be packaged. Patrick McDonnell, creator of the comic strip “Mutts,” has a book in which the cat Mooch, desperate to find a gift for his pal Earl the dog, decides that nothing is the best thing to give someone who has everything.

As we reflect on our abundant gifts at this holy time, let’s think out of the box — the gift box.

Honor the best in each of you by giving the gifts of love and understanding — gifts we hope will be returned.

Happy holidays.

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