

Spirit of Holiday Brings to Mind Worthy Questions

Christopher Uhl

We are now in the Holiday Season and this is prompting me to ask myself some questions that I'd like to share with you.

My first question, born or my concern for both the health of Planet Earth and human wellbeing, is: How many tens of thousands of tons of greenhouse gases will be produced across our great country this month as we brighten our cities and towns with holiday lights? And might there be other more gentle ways to bring light to ourselves and each other, without having to rely on electricity and fossil fuels?

Here, I am reminded of times when a single candle, flickering in the midst of darkness, had an impact on me far more profound than the blazing spectacle of holiday lights.

Less often is more! What if we were to turn off our holiday lights and live in the quiet of candlelight for a time during this holiday season?

My next question has to do with holiday shopping. Sometimes it seems as if the Holiday Season is simply the Shopping Season—devoid of any sacred context or meaning. But, remember this is the time of the Pagan Winter Solstice, the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah, the African festivities of Kwanzaa, and the Christian celebration of Christmas.

So here is my shopping question—just four words with the charge of a Zen slap: “What would Jesus buy?” This question is the title of a recently released movie. Clever title, no? I mean, really, “What would Jesus be buying this holiday season?”

The historical Jesus, by most accounts, was a simple man with few possessions. His messages—clothe the naked, feed the poor, love your enemy, eschew wealth—were radical.

Like other great souls—the Buddha, Mohammad, Lao Tzu, Confucius—Jesus' message was grounded in the importance of extending love, kindness, compassion—soulful gifts that money can't buy—to others.

I can imagine Jesus and these other great souls, if they were alive today, being proponents of “Buy Nothing Day”—a national day of consciousness raising, celebrated on Black Friday (<http://buynothingday.info/main.html>). Instead of shopping on this day, the “Buy Nothing” folks implore Americans to consume less by engaging in a shopping “fast”—a radical idea, indeed.

This leads me to my last question which has to do with the kinds of stuff that we actually put into our holiday shopping carts. Often we out buying gifts for kids, assuming that new toys will make them happy. I ask myself: Is this true?

A recent report published in the Journal of Happiness Studies reveals that all the time people spend shopping and wrapping gifts contributes little to holiday joy. Moreover, in those cases where individuals spend a substantial portion of their income on Christmas gifts, holiday happiness tends to actually decline. It turns out that what really brings holiday joy for adults is simply time spent with family and soulful celebration.

But what about kids? Could it really be true that presents aren't nearly as important as we imagine? In the latest issue of Yes! Magazine Colin Beavan tells what happened when he and his wife decided that—instead of buying lots of new toys for their daughter, Isabella—they would simply wrap up a few toys that Isabella's cousin had outgrown—gift recycling!

Beavan writes: “When the present opening time came, Isabella didn't care whether the present she was opening was for her or not.... She just wanted to open them. She didn't want something to have later. She wanted to participate now. And when her Uncle Joe started playing the piano and singing, she got bored with the present opening anyway and went to sit with him on the piano bench... What was important to her was what turned out to be important to us: the singing, the charades, the laughter, the time spent with family, and of course, the celebration.”

In a time of dwindling resources, diminishing economies, and deadening isolation, may we have the courage to extend love, kindness, and compassion to each other and to all beings and in so doing to celebrate the most precious gift of all—Life!