

Gifts of the Heart

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One of my daughter's all-time favorite books is *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein, a delightful book for all ages that begins, "Once there was a tree...and she loved a little boy." The story tells the tale of a boy who came to the tree to eat her apples, swing from her branches and slide down her trunk. "And the tree was happy." But as the boy grew older, he wanted more and more from the tree until she finally had nothing left to give except her stump on which the now-old man could sit and rest. And he did. "And the tree was happy." Simply written, it's a reminder this holiday season of the joys of selfless giving and the power there is in the ability and willingness to receive.

At this time of year, the media encourages us to buy, buy, buy. Discount shopping days like *Black Friday* and *Cyber Monday* try to get us to open our wallets and spend beyond our means. I happen to think the best gifts are ones of the heart, given thoughtfully and freely, purchased locally if possible, created by one's hand if able, gifts that mean something and even change lives. Whether practical, like a warm meal or a wild extravagance like a sprig of French lilac in the dead of winter, these gifts of the heart can make all the difference—in the life of another, ourselves and in the world.

With limited resources in these recessionary times, the problem in giving is deciding how much, where, and what will make the most difference. Our mailboxes fill with end-of-year appeals from charities, all of them doing good work. We learn that the Labor Department estimates two million people will be out of unemployment benefits by Christmas, and we know many people are hurting. We want to do the right thing, be socially responsible and make wise choices. But where to start? Maybe the answer lies in asking ourselves what we want to see more of in this world. What do we value most and what can we do to create more of it?

The answers to these questions can direct us to our own path of giving. We might want to act locally by supporting our local North County Food Bank, Hope Chest, Tillamook County Secret Angels or a host of other worthy organizations trying to make a difference in our own communities. We can purchase gifts like those offered at the Alternative Gift Fair, gifts that bring hope, encourage sufficiency, fair trade and sustainability. We might want to do what we can to end world poverty, to provide clean drinking water for everyone on the planet or help women become self-sufficient in war-torn countries through organizations like Kiva.org, Women for Women International, Oxfam, UNICEF, or Heifer International.

And for our dear ones, we can give gifts of the spirit, gifts we've thoughtfully created with our own hands and hearts. A loaf of freshly baked bread, a quilt we've stitched, a poem we've written, a framed photograph of that great day last summer, a jar of jam from the plums in our garden—expressions of our love and connection to each other and the earth—can make a difference. I believe each of us is born with a unique creative gift. If we think not, we should remember Walt Disney who, in grade school was scribbling flowers in the margins of his paper when his teacher told him flowers don't have faces. His response? "Mine do."

The story is told of a young boy walking along a rocky coastline much like our Oregon coast. He's gently placing starfish back into tide-pools after they'd washed ashore in a violent storm. An adult comes by and says to the boy, "I don't know why you bother. There are so many starfish; you'll never be able to save them all. It won't make a difference."

The wise young boy looks up at her as he places yet another starfish into the sea and says, "It makes a difference to that one."

Reminds me of a quote from Mother Teresa: "If you can't feed a hundred people, feed just one."

Happy Holidays my friends. Remember to stay open to the magic.