

# Grace in the Gray Areas

BY KAREN KULLGREN

Several years back, my son and I went to pick up my mother to go out and celebrate my birthday. She had been very mysterious when we talked that morning, asking that I park close to the front door and that Sammy come up to her apartment. When the two emerged from her building, Sammy was carrying gift bags that were clearly heavy, piquing my interest. And when it came time to open the many wrapped bundles, the first tissue paper parted to reveal—a rock. I'm sure people around us at the restaurant were puzzled. But I knew. My mother had heard me months before, half joking, half griping, about not needing more tchotchkes to clutter up my home but needing rocks to hardscape my tiny front patio. Since that time, my nearly 80-year-old mother (who no longer drives) had been collecting beautiful smooth river rocks as she went about her daily routine, painstakingly putting them in the shopping cart she pushes everywhere and schlepping them back to her apartment. I unwrapped more than a dozen rocks that day, with the certain knowledge that my mother got me.

The gifts that blow us away are not necessarily the most expensive or the fanciest. What distinguishes them is that they give us a sense of being known, at a deep level, by the gift giver. It's also wonderful when someone sees something in you that you don't realize, giving you a piece of clothing you would never have thought would look good on you but that suits you perfectly, or some music you wouldn't have chosen for yourself but ends up stirring your soul.

You might buy something for a loved one's collection, unconsciously hoping that it will bring a smile to her face and that, maybe, every time she sees or uses it she will think of you. Over the years, when I have opened birthday and Christmas gifts from one couple (a lavish hand-beaded necklace in spectacular shades of purple, a lushly soft lavender throw, funky fine crafts), I love the gifts in the concrete, but I love them even more in the abstract. I am known.

A knowing gift can be a nice surprise from someone (and let's admit it, often that someone is a man) who is clueless about gift-giving. My grown niece's stepfather recently bought her a stuffed sea turtle for her birthday. "It was the best thing ever," she said, touched. "You'd never think he would think of that."

One Christmas I opened a gift that would have baffled anyone but the giver and giftee. It was a plastic bag full of tea leaves, a scrap of paper with instructions, a compact fluorescent bulb and a can of sweetened condensed milk. This friend and I always ended up at a Thai place when we went out to eat, and I must have remarked how much I loved Thai iced tea, wondering what kind they used to give it that orangey color. Also, my friend and I had recently seen the film *An Inconvenient Truth* and vowed to do more to save the environment.

Gift-giving can be taken too far. I used to spend too much money on gifts until I realized that just because I saw something that would be perfect for so-and-so, it didn't mean I had to buy it. My gift list is shorter now. With friends further away geographically or those I haven't seen for years, we have simply ceased gift-giving in unspoken agreement. Even close friends and I have agreed not to give gifts some years, rather enjoying a shared experience (a cultural event or a spa trip). This year with the economy in significant decline, I suspect there will be less gift-giving, and those bought will be less costly (and perhaps more thoughtful).

Two of my friends have a great tradition for birthdays. They bring over any kind of food and movie the birthday girl wants for a party "in." One year they brought me my favorite Moroccan food, but what I remember was the feeling of love that came with their gifts. One friend brought me a stick wrapped in a gorgeous silk scarf—a wand with which to make three birthday wishes—and a simple bamboo chime. She didn't know when she bought it that I actually collected chimes and gongs, she just knew that the sound would soothe me. The other friend brought a white ceramic lotus leaf, which she could not have known was the twin of one I had recently eyed at a shop in Charlottesville but didn't buy because I was trying to be "good."

Maybe that's what the real excitement of Santa is for kids. Not just getting fun stuff but the being known part. Somehow Santa knows just what you wanted. Sure, it may have been from your list or a whispered wish in his ear, but even then—wow, he got you!

As one friend put it at her birthday party, "It's just wonderful when people get you. That's the best."

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