

# The Gift and Its Real Value

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An scene from "A Charlie Brown Christmas." Melendez Films



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## Commentary

Did you ever give a gift that the receiver did not like? It's surely happened. Sometimes the person can fake it. Good. Maybe honesty in

this case is worse. If it has happened to you, you know. It is devastating when a person flat-out says: “I consider this tacky and don’t really want it.”

That is a real blow. Why does that affect us so much, even to the point that it provokes memorable trauma, even a lifetime of resentment? It’s because of the real purpose of a gift. It’s all about conveying to another person that he or she is valuable and valued.

If that does not work, and the person turns it back on you with an implicit disparagement of your efforts and thought, it surely amounts to among the worst-possible insults.

Long reflection after years in management and working with others has taught me the following. Most unhappy people are that way for one main reason: they consider themselves to be insufficiently valued by others. And there is a second part: that is always true.

Think about the messaging you hear from family members and co-workers when they are complaining about something. It could be anything. It nearly always comes down to the belief that their efforts are not appreciated. Even salary increases cannot substitute for a genuine belief that others truly appreciate who you are and what you do.

When people do feel valued—when they are ennobled by others—they will always go the extra mile or ten. Being valued by others provides extra energy, enthusiasm, and the willingness to sacrifice. It could be doing a day of yardwork instead of golfing. It could be doing an all-nighter to get the work project done. It could be spending the hours following the dinner party cleaning up and making the place spotless. It can even be financial: giving up your hard-earned money for others.

Regardless, feeling value is like a narcotic. It inspires you to new heights. That’s a major part of what it feels like to be in love: it’s the emotional rendering of the perception that someone else really gets you and wants you to know it. Feeling love is like being granted the ultimate gift of being valued for who you are.

That's the mirror image of what it feels like to be undervalued or devalued entirely. Again, most all life unhappiness comes down to this one central point. It's the theme of nearly all complaints about everything.

If we could fix that problem, nearly all problems in the world would be fixed.

The idea of the holiday gift is a once-a-year effort to address this problem by letting others know of their dignity as humans, their contribution as individuals, and the high worth as people just as themselves. Gifts are exchanged but it is not strictly an economic exchange. It is an exchange of affection.

That's why we use the phrase "It's the thought that counts." Indeed that is all that counts. This is why sometimes a card alone suffices, even a warm text message or baked goods. It's purely a symbol to the receiver that he or she is elevated in dignity in your eyes.

Economists for decades have pushed this tin-eared gibberish that we really should not be giving gifts to others but rather funds. This is because money is more liquid than any gift, which is likely to be the wrong one. Money permits the receiver to use the cash however they would like. This, they say, is how to maximize the utility of the receiver.

This theory is ridiculous because it misunderstands the whole point. We give gifts because we want to give of ourselves to others: that's the utility that the giver gains. The utility that the receiver gains is the knowledge that others care. That is true irrespective of the particulars of the material goods you receive.

Cash alone, unless from a family member, drains away all the core meaning of a gift. To be sure, gift cards can be nice but notice how they are typically tied to a particular experience or place to shop, a special restaurant, a store you like, or an experience you want from a spa or club. The reason for this is to make tactile the abstraction of money, to make it more like a genuine gift.

When I was very young, there was a popular special called “A Charlie Brown Christmas,” released in 1965 before the world fell apart. It’s only 25 minutes. I rewatched it from the original version that is [posted](#) on Rumble. It includes no laugh track. It is surprisingly stark. The music is of course great and the storyline seemingly simple.

Charlie Brown—naive, earnest, and a bit insecure—begins the show wondering what the whole point of Christmas is. He is essentially sad for the reasons I laid out above: he feels undervalued and underutilized. He doesn’t say this because he doesn’t know it. He goes to Lucy—diva, privileged, and never doubting—who is operating a psychiatry stand.

After celebrating that she snagged a nickel for her services, Lucy ticks through a long list of maladies he might have but Charlie Brown cannot identify one that applies to him. Insightfully, she gives up her psychotherapy session and suggests instead that he be the director of the Christmas play.

That changes everything. He doubts himself but is thrilled to both have a job and be valued by others.

As he starts rehearsals, he realizes that they have no Christmas tree so he takes Linus with him to the tree lot. The place is filled with beautiful and sparkling trees everywhere. Sure enough, he finds a tree that is just like he has felt: undervalued, a bit beaten down, sort of sad and wilted, and swears that he will make it beautiful. He tries and fails but others see what is happening and decorate it. The tree becomes beautiful.

The tree of course is the stand-in for the human personality. We’ve all felt like that tree, the shape of the thing but neglected, overlooked, undecorated, and undervalued compared with everyone else.

In short, Charlie Brown wanted to give the tree the very gift that he wanted most, which is to be noticed, fussed over, looked at, and appreciated. The tree is all of us. It is also Charlie Brown who finds his happiness in giving to others even as others give to him.

In the midst of the drama, Linus tells Charlie Brown the true meaning of Christmas by repeating word-for-word the story straight from the Gospels. There were shepherds who saw a star and followed to find a baby in a manger, a gift from God to humanity, a person born to die so that we all might live.

The gift of death is eternal life. In the story, three prophets arrive from the East to bring gifts, which many suppose is the origin of the whole Christmas idea of gift-giving.

The little cartoon is brilliant and timeless, stark, sometimes funny, poignant, and emotionally gripping. It starts with its primitive cartooning forms and is over before you know it. Every filmed Christmas movie before or since has been some version of the same story.

In our times, we are overwhelmed by stuff and most people simply do not want more. Christmas cards are more difficult than ever. That's a problem for gift-giving until you realize that the real reason for gifts is to exchange something of value with others as a means by which we celebrate the dignity of the human person. If we can come to realize this, there are many creative ways to give.

A small plant. A pie. A card. A note of appreciation. Some symbols of affection, knowledge, and appreciation. Everyone needs that. We need that, both as givers and receivers. The materialism of our times makes it all the more crucial that we understand that it is not ultimately about the thing but the idea. And that idea is the dignity and value of each individual person.

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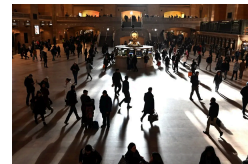
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