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How The 'Buy Nothing' Philosophy Is Alive And Well In Our Home — And Always Will Be

BY JOSEPH WILSON

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When I was a child, before I was trusted with any money, I was encouraged to make Christmas gifts for family members. I still remember wading through the craft box full of egg cartons, packs of glitter, wads of construction paper and glue sticks that never had the ability to glue anything.

Most people had this experience when they were young, when the ability to mix papier maché and colour in block letters was at its peak.

With the heady thrill of receiving an allowance for the first time, however, most of us left crafting behind. At the age of 10 or 11 I remember carefully selecting gifts for my sister at such august establishments as the It Store or Biway.

While the holidays can be synonymous with waste, Janice Quirt has an approach for an eco-conscious season. Here's how she did it (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/as-an-eco-conscious-parent-heres-how-im-doing-christmas-for-my-kids>).

A Handmade Approach Runs Deep

However, my wife and her four siblings, all in their 30s and 40s, never stopped making their own gifts.

Buying something from a store is forbidden; I've never seen any of them do it. It's less an opportunity to show off finely honed skills of decollage or zine-making, and more an opportunity to poke consumerism in the eye.

They're not anti-capitalist exactly, they just don't understand why people buy stuff. My wife just recently bought a winter coat to replace one she'd been using since the late '90s. And even then it was under protest.

It's not for the faint of heart. Forty years of gift-making has made it tremendously difficult to think of something that a) has not been given before; b) is useful enough that you want to keep it in your house; c) looks good enough that your neighbour won't say "aww, did your nephew make that?" and d) will not take so long that you're at risk of losing your day job.

"One year my brother-in-law made cheese, a process that employed an old-timey cheese press, melted wax to seal it and two years of aging in a cellar."

Decorated garbage cans, clocks, wooden puzzles, knitted gloves, flavoured salt, scavenger hunts, books, picnic blankets, belts made from car seatbelts and earrings have all appeared over various Christmases.

Food is popular. But they don't just settle for cookie mix. One year my brother-in-law made cheese, a process that employed an old-timey cheese press, melted wax to seal it and two years of aging in a cellar.

The next year he made grappa in his bathtub, poured it into a flask and hid it in the cut-away pages of a biology textbook that still, as I write, sits on our shelf. One year in the '90s my wife spent the fall touring around Europe and didn't have time to make anything so she (gasp!) bought some trinkets. But she "wrapped" them in gingerbread houses she made from scratch and sealed the gifts inside with icing.

Joseph Wilson is a father who likes to educate his kids in a variety of ways. Find out how drywalling became an education for his daughters here (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/drywall-projects-with-daughters>).

Back To Basics

Now that we have kids of our own, the crafting tradition has become more youth-focused again. Instead of making something for adults, we make stuff for their kids — which is a relief, because the bar on quality is way lower when you're making something for a four-year-old. And the kids make stuff for us. They distribute, with pride, their Christmas tree ornaments and their smushed-up drawings of a half-lion-half-bee-who's-also-a-princess.

It's my turn to watch the kids dive into the craft box, discarding one glue stick after another until they find the tape.

Learning To Stand Back

They come up with ideas, get frustrated, break a few popsicle sticks and then finally settle on something that meets their standards. When they're struggling with something, there is a tremendous urge to just jump in and do it for them. Watching a six-year-old try and tie off a thread is agonizing. And, yeah, sometimes I do muscle my way in.

But I always regret it because they then usually lose interest in the project and I'm left holding a half-wrapped reindeer antler while the dinner burns on the stove.

So now I wait for them to ask for help. That way, they retain ownership of the project and, crucially, they get better at whatever it is they're trying to do. If they continue down that road, eventually they'll reach the grandmaster level of the homemade-gift game, a position that only five people I know have ever attained.

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