

Gifts from the Heart

Praise for *Gifts from the Heart*:

"Yes, Santa Claus, there is a Virginia! *Gifts from the Heart* is a gift that keeps on giving, a miracle disguised as a book. It offers an array of imaginative and inspiring alternatives to a Yuletide spending frenzy."

— Janice Kennedy, the *Ottawa Citizen*, the *Vancouver Sun*

"A Christmas book that gives and gives—innovative and caring."

— The Canadian Centre for Philanthropy

"*Gifts from the Heart* has become my Christmas manual. Virginia's focus on giving, her very practical ideas, recipes and crafts, and her contagious upbeat attitude have helped *Canadian Living* readers through the hustle and bustle of Christmas. The extra bonus: the book sales help fight cancer!"

— Catherine Gray, editor and producer of *Canadian Living Online*

Gifts from the Heart

Simple Ways to Make Your Family's
Christmas More Meaningful

Virginia Brucker



INSOMNIAC PRESS

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This book is dedicated to families everywhere

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*Do all the good you can,
In all the ways you can,
To all the people you can,
In every place you can,
At all the times you can,
As long as ever you can.*
— Shaker Creed



*The best parts of a good man's life are his little, nameless,
unremembered acts of kindness and love.*
— William Wordsworth



Introduction

After teaching for almost thirty years, I've seen many Christmas concerts, but each December I can't wait to see those tiny angels with shiny silver haloes and wonky coat-hanger wings and the elves dressed in oversized T-shirts with red and green crepe-paper hats. Some of the little ones stand gazing out at the audience, so amazed by the lights and the size of the crowd that they forget to sing. There are always a couple of "live wires" who spend their time on stage jumping up and down and waving excitedly. And no matter what they do or do not remember to do, somehow the kindergarten class always manages to steal the show.

Everywhere you look, love is visible—you can almost reach out and touch it in the auditorium. Our Christmas concert is a special gift from the heart that we give to ourselves and to our school community, and each year we confidently announce that *this* year's concert is the very best one ever. Overwhelmed by the magic of the evening, many of us quietly wipe away a few tears. It is so incredibly beautiful that it makes our hearts ache.

Several years ago, I was sitting on the sidelines, waiting for my Grade One students to perform. I was hoping to see a father from our class who had been very ill with cancer. As I looked out into the audience, I noticed an absolutely radiant young mother sitting in the front row. I asked the teacher sitting next to me who the woman with the gorgeous smile was and learned that she was new to our school. She had three children and had been fighting cancer too. As she looked up at her kindergarten son and his class on stage, her face was incandescent—she was truly luminous with joy.

A little later, a Grade Four/Five class sang “All I Want for Christmas is to Keep the Things I’ve Got.” As I looked past the beautiful mommy out to all the mothers and fathers and children in the audience—to all their eager, loving, expectant faces—to the grandparents sitting next to their adult children, to the tiny ones snuggled up on their parents’ laps, I wondered how any of us could bear to face a Christmas without the people we love most. That evening, I decided to write a book to raise funds for cancer research so that more people would be able to spend the holidays with the family and friends they cherish.

When I visited libraries and bookstores to research what had already been written, I saw dozens of Christmas books about making the holiday more glamorous. But I had an unwavering belief that there was a place for a different sort of book, a Christmas book that would encourage readers to connect with family and friends in small but meaningful ways, a book that would help them create a “feel good” rather than a “look good” celebration. I wanted to share simple traditions that would bring closeness and laughter in times of joy, and comfort and consolation in times of sorrow. As an adult whose own heart has been affected by loss, I knew that that holidays can be an extraordinarily lonely time for people who are depressed or ill or trying to hold it together after a family breakup, so I decided to include chapters about the difficult aspects of Christmas too.

Over the next few months, I began collecting children’s writing and artwork, and I listened to their discussions about what makes the holidays special. We often underestimate the perceptiveness of youngsters. When you look at their contributions to *Gifts from the Heart*, I think you will agree that children have a remarkable talent for capturing the true essence of

Christmas. While we may *think* they want the latest toy, what they *really* want is our time and our love. They too want to experience the joy of giving—those jigsaw puzzle wreaths and paper doily angels lovingly made by small hands are how children show their love.

I know, you are busy—we live in a stressful time. But our leading such busy lives is precisely the reason why it is important for us to make good use of the time we *do* have. Children learn best by example. When we take the time to create a more thoughtful Christmas, we help them grow up to be the kind, caring people we wish them to be. I hope *Gifts from the Heart* helps you and your children to create a holiday rich with loving memories and simple traditions and to experience the joy that comes from reaching out to others not only at Christmas, but also throughout the year.

Sincerely,

Virginia Brucker
www.webelieve.ca

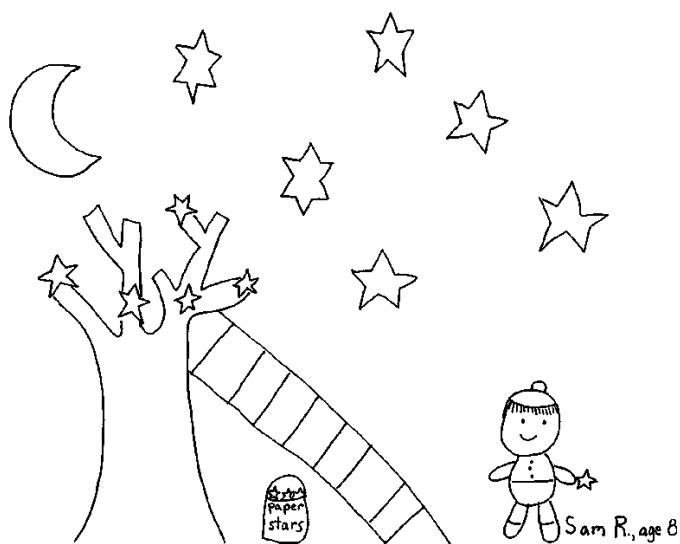


*Life is short and we have never too much time
for gladdening the hearts of those who are
traveling the dark journey with us. Oh be swift
to love, make haste to be kind.*

—Henri Frédéric Amiel

Chapter One

The Gift of Giving



Sam R., age 8

Christmas Acts of Kindness

- give money to the poor
- give love to your family
- be peaceful with your friends
- Send money to the red cross
- Send Food to the Food Bank

by Demitra B,
age 7



Example is not the main thing in influencing others.

It is the only thing.

—Albert Schweitzer

Children love to give—it's fun to watch a loved one's face light up when they open a handmade card or gift. Young children enjoy sharing; the challenge is helping them maintain their enthusiasm for giving as they grow older. If you model generosity at every opportunity when your children are young, they are likely to grow up to be generous, thoughtful people.

How do you begin? Early in the fall, have a meeting to brainstorm all the possible acts of Christmas kindness you can think of. Listen carefully to your children—they have lots of good ideas to share. When volunteering or making a charitable donation, let your children choose the organization they would like to help. Adults can then provide the support, the encouragement, and the materials necessary for their success. It's easy to become overwhelmed during the holidays, so try choosing just *one* project to get you started. Consider your family's strengths and interests to help you narrow down the choices. Are you great pet lovers? You'll find some wonderful ideas in Chapter Thirteen, "An Animal Lover's Christmas." Do your kids miss having older relatives around? You'll find lots of ways to connect with elderly people in Chapter Sixteen, "Remembering Seniors at Christmas."

If you have very young children, making gifts for grandparents is a great way to encourage giving. Chapters Twenty-One, Twenty-Two, and Twenty-Three have lots of kid-tested crafts.

In addition to considering the amount of time you can find, think about your family's finances. What kind of project best matches your wallet? You may have time to share, or you may find it easier to give money. Ideally, we'd like to give both, but it's one of the facts of life that we seldom have both time *and* money to offer. Make cash donations more meaningful for your children by having them count the coins or bills together, and involve them in the shopping, wrapping, or mailing of your family's gifts.

With your help, even very young children can make meaningful contributions. Here are some suggestions to get your family started:

- ★ Collect your change all year long in a family "giving box." Decorate a jar or box in early January and save as much as you can for next December's special projects.

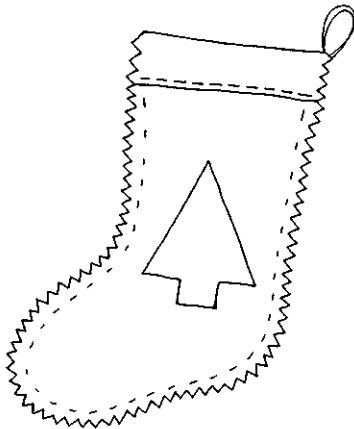
- ★ Sign up for savings-bond deductions through your payroll at work. Set aside some of your savings for your own shopping and donate a portion to a special cause.

- ★ Give your children a small allowance and provide the following guidelines: one third is for spending, one third for saving, and one third for sharing. Let your children decide how to donate their sharing portion.

- ☆ Help your children save part of their allowance to purchase or make gifts for their brothers or sisters and other family members. It's easier for very young children to understand the concept of giving to the family first before extending it to a charity or the community.

- ☆ Decorate a large cardboard box with Christmas wrap early in the fall. Every time you shop for groceries, help your children pick out a nonperishable food item to put into the box. Try to include some treats as well as staples: pancake mix, syrup, hot chocolate, and marshmallows would certainly make someone's Christmas breakfast special. Drop it off at your local food bank together.

- ☆ Help your children go through the toys collected from fast food restaurants and check to make sure they are in good shape. Package them into simple homemade felt stockings or lunch bags decorated with Christmas drawings or stickers. In addition to the toys, include some well-wrapped Christmas



candy and drop the bags off at a soup kitchen. The kids who eat lunch there will enjoy receiving a special Christmas goodie bag.

- ★ Host a “giving party” where children or teens get together and make cookies, small gifts, ornaments, or cards to give away.
- ★ Make up a Christmas care package for someone at college or for a neighborhood family who has moved away. Include some drawings and letters, Christmas music, decorations, and, of course, a tin of their favorite Christmas treats.
- ★ Have a baby shower at your church, daycare, or school. Decorate a big box or borrow a cradle for the manger. Add a doll to represent Jesus. Encourage families to bring items a baby needs, such as warm clothing, crib sheets, formula, diapers, and sleepers. Donate them to a transition house, shelter, or young mothers’ group.
- ★ Slip a gift certificate for a food store into a Christmas card. Give it anonymously to a friend, family at school, co-worker, or neighbor who needs a little help this year.
- ★ In early November, help your children look through their toy box and closets for items to donate to your local thrift store or family shelter. Make sure the toys and clothing are in good shape—wash and mend anything that needs sprucing up.

Make helping others an annual tradition at your workplace.

- ★ Instead of exchanging gifts with co-workers at your office this year, pick a charity to help. If each person donates a few dollars, it will add up to a sizable donation.

- ★ Collect small items such as toiletries and candy for a shelter or hospital. On your lunch hour, have a “work bee,” where you all work together to fill small baskets, bags, or stockings. You can make simple felt stockings with pinking shears and some glitter glue! Serve hot chocolate and cookies and play Christmas music softly while you work.

- ★ Organize a collection drive for winter coats. Do any necessary mending and wash or dry clean the coats. You may find a local dry cleaner will volunteer to do them for free. (If so, make a large thank-you poster to be displayed in their window. Perhaps their customers will bring in more coats!) Publicize your coat

We can save coats.



By Jessica O.

Age 8

drive in the local newspaper. When the coats are ready to distribute, tuck some warm mittens or gloves and a Christmas treat into each pocket and donate your collection to a local shelter, the Salvation Army, a preschool, or a needy school.

- ★ Start a teddy bear drive. Police officers and hospitals often give bears to children who have been traumatized. Use the bears to decorate your office or school entrance until it's time for them to go to their new homes. If you put up a notice explaining your project, people who visit your office or business may also want to contribute a bear. Because kids love stuffed toys, this is a fun project for a school to undertake.

We Are Having A Teddy Bear

Toy Drive!

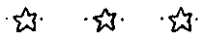


By Tygra S., 10

- ★ Organize a group from your workplace, church, or service organization to volunteer for Habitat for Humanity. This amazing organization helps build

housing so that low-income families can purchase their own homes. Sign up together to help in the New Year. You'll build team spirit while you work and you'll meet lots of wonderful people. Can't commit to help with painting or construction? Call your local Habitat office to see what items are on their wish list. They may tell you they need new paintbrushes, primer, neutral colors of interior paint, hammers, nails, and screws. Rather than exchanging office gifts this year, collect money to send as a group donation or hold a bake sale at lunch and send Habitat the proceeds.

- ☆ Organize children or teens to assemble shoeboxes filled with Christmas cheer for children in war-torn or developing nations. Millions of boxes full of grooming items and tiny treasures have been sent all over the world. You can read more about it online by doing a search under "Operation Christmas Child." You can modify the idea to share locally: schools can make up shoeboxes filled with items such as mittens, hats, snacks, and toiletries for homeless people.



Three things in human life are important:

The first is to be kind;

the second is to be kind;

and the third is to be kind.

—Henry James