SIMPLIFYING THE HOLIDAYS

by Susan Veihdeffer Vogt

Over the years I have written articles and books about simple lifestyle. Following are some thoughts about what I learned specifically about Christmas giving in my own family and finally how it might apply to others who wish to Simplify the Holidays – especially Christmas. It's not so simple, but it may deepen relationships and be kinder to the environment at the same time.

ONE FAMILY'S EXPERIENCE:

As I reflected back on my adult years of trying to simplify my own life, I think I can summarize my journey into 5 main stages.

1. Young Adult Life stage (20's & 30's)

During my college years I became awakened to the economic privilege I had grown up with. I started tutoring children with less resources and started a career as a social worker. This led me to try to simplify my own lifestyle from upper middle class to identifying more with the people I served. That meant that my husband and I tried to live modestly including gift giving around the Christmas holidays. It was a switch for my family of origin, but my understanding, good hearted parents accepted my simpler requests for gifts and offerings of gifts.

Lesson learned: Growing up meant starting to define my own values and not worry about societal norms.

2. Parenting Young Children (new-born to 12)

Once Jim and I started having our own children, however, it was hard to stay "simple." Our kids had needs, relatives lavished plenty of toys on them, and Christmas was the one time of year we even splurged a bit on ourselves. We loved our 4 kids and wanted them to have quality toys and experiences. Working for the Church we didn't make much money, but we had relatives that made up the difference, and they grew up well clothed and with plenty of modern toys.

Lesson learned: Relax, set a simple tone but don't overcompensate by being too stringent.

3. Parenting Teens and 20's

During our kid's teens and 20's it got a little harder because their Christmas desires became more expensive and our values were solidifying into a faith-based simple lifestyle. Luckily most of the friends they hung out with came from families that shared our simple lifestyle values, but when they looked at TV and college peers they must have wondered whether they wanted to continue the simpler life. Sure, we had a well-decorated Christmas tree, and each child got a special gift. They didn't complain.

Lesson learned: Focus on loving them generously but not necessarily through expensive gifts.

4. **Living as Empty Nesters**

Once we no longer had kids living at home, we had more money but our simple lifestyle hadn't changed. As our kids returned home for the holidays, they mostly wanted the warmth and security of family relationships. Of course we treated grandchildren to special gifts, but sharing stories and humor were more important.

Lesson learned: It got easier because family values were established and were more important than proving our love through gifts.

5. Living as Even Emptier Nesters

Now that Jim and I are 80 and 79, we still put up a Christmas tree, still give everyone a present, but the presents often are experiences rather than tangible gifts. (Of course, some experiences are more expensive than store bought gifts. For example, subsidizing one child's travel home from a foreign country can be more expensive than previous Christmas gifts.) But being together and sharing time, stories, food, and games together is the most important thing.

Lesson learned: Weigh the value of close relationships not the cost in dollars.

BUT WHAT ABOUT YOUR FAMILY?

My experience may not fit your life situation, but I think the value of *Simplifying the Holidays* can be universal. Following are some main takeaways:

1. Regardless of life-stage, focus on creating a spirit of connecting deeply with each person in you family, be it spouse, child, extended family or yourself. It's not about the stuff but about your loving relationship. Have meaningful conversation. Play together.

2. Gift-giving is not bad, but it should be focused on the needs and growth potential for the receiver (not to validate your position as giver). Does your child really need more clothes or toys or is the real need for being together and enjoying each other's company. What would bring him/her deep joy?

3. As the gift receiver matures, experiences (especially shared experiences) may become more valuable than store bought gifts: playing together, sharing a sport, enjoying a play, movie, trip together… Be creative.