



## Bearing Gifts

Will George actually like and wear the tie? Is the notebook laughably cheap? The jacket too expensive? Is that the best an old friend can do? 🎁

By Nick Lyons

**S**ome friends have an uncanny flair for gifts—choosing and giving them. A gift from one of them usually prompts an immediate spark of delight. The object is so appropriate, so thoughtfully selected that the spark—unforced—reveals the giver's acute knowledge of something unexpected, needed, but perhaps unknown until then by the recipient. I admire, even envy, such gift givers. I am not one of them.

Frankly, too often the simple act of choosing a gift becomes a chore that sends tension knots into my chest. Receiving one can for me be almost as difficult.

Will George actually like and wear the tie? Claire loves books. She has a large and carefully selected library—but what new one does she want? If I spend so much, will my acquaintance think it a bribe? Does some strange ulterior motive lurk inside me in the first place? Does the very special soap carry a message I don't want to send? Is the notebook laughably cheap? The jacket too expensive? Will it arrive on time? Is the color right? Even for a grandchild—for whom I can say, "It's not really cash, it's the digital game you can buy with it"—will the \$20 buy anything at all worthwhile today? Is \$100 too much? I have four grandchildren! Is the medium-priced merlot too much like what everyone else will bring to the dinner? Will the gift be a burden or an embarrassment? Will it have to be returned? Will the person think, "Is this all Nick thinks of me?"

Often, to break the unsaid requirement of buying a present for some specific occasion, I have given a present simply because I felt like doing so—sort of like St. Augustine's "disinterested love," done with no hook attached, no whiff of anything transactional or required, no taint of having done it because I *had* to do it. I did this often with my late wife, saying merely, "Because it's Thursday and I love you." I found several dozen of these notes in one of her drawers after our 58 years came to an end with her passing.

A friend's grandson had an interest in Italian Renaissance art. He was a very

bright 15-year-old with a great appetite for learning, so I thought he might need a book or two from my ample library—a big one on Michelangelo, smaller books on Botticelli and Tiepolo; he looked like a Tiepolo kind of Italian art lover. So I gave him a handful and later heard that he told his mother, "You know, Nick just can't help giving books away." Actually, I can, but I have a lot of books, far more than an old fellow can possibly read, and I enjoy knowing that someone who might love them now has them.

So I'm not as misanthropic as my doubts about gifting might suggest. It's just that giving confronts me with a psychological bind: I hope I never do it because I want something in return, be it a compliment or something more tangible. My aunt Sadie once warned her daughter not to accept a young man's gift of five pounds of candy, saying, "It's too much. He's up to no good."

I think about such matters. They are part of my uneasiness with the whole subject.

Some people are able to give not just unselfishly but unselfconsciously, simply because they like someone and want to show it. But others view the whole process in investment terms. They don't say what they want back but may finagle to get it or hold a mean-spirited grudge if they don't. Some give gifts to repay an obligation, or to create one. Some give it because it's a party and "we always bring wine." Some have no idea that the wrong gift may be an insult—or a source of confusion. Lately I have offered paintings by my late wife to a dozen acquaintances and in some cases, despite their spoken "Thank you," I have wondered if they didn't really want the thing but felt embarrassed to say so—so here I was, thinking I'd given someone something I loved in the hope that they might love it too, only to have created burden out of a genial gesture, and another candidate for the closet.

To be on the receiving end is no less fraught. Why did I get this gift? Is that the best an old friend can do? I did that

fellow a thousand favors! What does he want in return? Why did he think I'd want a book on Irish elves?

The most memorable gifts, perhaps, are unexpected, *sui generis*, even profound. They may fill a real need or create a worthwhile new one. One of my children gave me some wonderful underpants that I needed. A friend gave me a lifetime supply of lined yellow pads, the kind I always use for first drafts and never have enough of. A few dozen of the only pens I use, a warm toque hat one winter. I loved these but still sometimes wonder if gifts of any kind are really needed among close friends.

Not long ago my sons held a party to mark my 90th birthday. It was a festive evening, stunted a bit because COVID still had some fangs, but most of my friends came. I did not expect gifts; I had long proclaimed that at this time of life I needed absolutely nothing. But I was happy as Winnie the Pooh with such a crowd of good friends, all having something nice to say about me.

I got a fat armful of gifts: bottles of good champagne; five interesting wines; an expensive and very special bottle of olive oil; three books by Nina Berberova, whom I had just discovered and already loved; a gift certificate for an expensive massage; an old breakfast menu from the Waldorf—fried eggs starting at \$75—accompanied by an invitation to eat there soon; and a bundle of cards with warm words as palpable as the strawberry cream cake, for which I lusted.

Who could be cool or analytic about such an outpouring of happy sentiment? It left me without one touch of my general allergy to gifts. I felt like a child again facing a mountain of toys and games beneath a tree, all welcome, all accepted greedily and with full thankfulness.

When the cake was cut, several folks had more good words, which themselves are a gift. A woman just shy of 60 began by telling how I had known her since she was born, and reflected on many warm memories from our long relationship, first with her parents, then with her. My

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sons added words of love and one of them read a passage from a book of mine about a tense time when I fell insanely, hilariously, in love with literature.

My granddaughter Elsa, now 17, was last. We had corresponded by post and e-mail for many years. It had started in the most natural way: a simple act of one of us writing with a question or observation, the other responding. She said it all had meant much to her—she had loved the sharing, loved my interest in her life, loved the bits of poetry I included, the new words to which I introduced her, loved what she had learned without knowing she was being taught. Now and again, I had played with words because I like to do so, perhaps writing something about prose style in a style that exemplified it, or introducing a word like “numinous” because I liked the concept and found something in her last letter that let me slip it in. I always had my questions and she mentioned that I had often asked that she tell me “everything.”

We wrote about the weather, our work, her passion for dance, her schoolwork, and, lately, her college choices and plans. We shared who we were and what we did and hoped to do, and I hardly noticed her incrementing maturity and wisdom as they unfurled; now I wished I could go back and read through what we both had said. Her words about the value and delight she took from our letters—and the enthusiasm of all my friends who heard this bright young woman speak—were a great gift. And when she had finished, she gave me another gift.

She gave me some printed stuff: about 400 pages, in two installments. They contained most of the letters we had passed back and forth, sometimes two or more in a week, since she was nine years old. Each volume was bound and numbered, and the set was titled what we had ended so many of our letters with: “Lots of Love.”

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