

*Names are changed to honor client confidentiality*

## **Gifts: The Unboxable Kind**

“The best things in life aren’t things.”

This little piece of wisdom came straight from a bumper sticker.

So, in the midst of the gift-giving season, I randomly posed this question: “How would you define a gift?”

Here’s a sampling of the responses I received:

“To me, a gift is a symbol of appreciation—when someone lets me know that I’m appreciated.”

“Acceptance. By that I mean when I’m simply accepted for who I am.”

“Being given something without any strings. It’s never a gift if I’m expected to give something in return.”

“When I’m totally surprised. An unanticipated gift—coming out of nowhere, and the person knows it’s something dear to me.”

Amazing. Of the many people I surveyed, not one mentioned a particular material object.

The message is loud and clear: Gifts aren’t defined by wrapped boxes topped off with lovely bows. Authentic gifts—those we treasure most—come straight from the heart, not from department stores.

Gifts show up in an assortment of “unboxable” packages, such as smiles, thank-you’s, compliments, gratitude and various acts of kindness. Time is a gift, especially for those are lonely and isolated. And halting our frenzied lifestyle long enough to offer the gift of listening is priceless.

And we mustn’t underestimate the gift of forgiveness. It accompanies the gift of understanding. The famed poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow said it best: “If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should see sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.”

Sometimes the gift is letting others give to us. For many people like Melanie, receiving gifts is

difficult. She has a generous spirit, tirelessly giving freely of herself in a multitude of ways. But she finds it much too uncomfortable to be on the receiving end. So she refuses to let others give to her. Her partner wants to do things for her and give her things, which troubles Melanie. Her partner, too. That's understandable. It's disheartening when others reject our acts of giving.

In a counseling session, I explained to Melanie that she's mastered the art of giving only halfway. The other half entails being able to graciously and fully receive.

"You see, allowing others to give to you is a gift," I told her. "In so doing, you're granting them the opportunity to express their own charitable spirit. What a gift!"

It's rewarding to give, so when we let others give to us, we're doing them a favor. Low self-worth is typically at the root of our reluctance to receive. Likewise, low self-worth can block our capacity to give. If we don't believe in ourselves, we doubt that we have much to offer.

Kay is a good example. In a counseling session, her manner was downcast as she expressed her dismay over not having anything to offer others. "I have nothing to give," she lamented.

"What do you love doing?" I asked Kay.

Without any hesitation, she said she loves taking care of toddlers.

As Kay talked about her fondness for young children, I noticed how her face lit up for the first time. And I was struck by how she chatted nonstop over countless delightful moments she has shared with them. She has worked with that age-group in the past and is utterly comfortable doing so.

Challenging her self-doubt, I asked: "What do you mean, you don't have anything to give? Not everyone can tend to that age level. You have a gift to give, Kay."

Tears trickled down her face.

"Not only that," I continued, "everyone you meet has a toddler somewhere tucked inside of them, just needing someone like you to show them love and acceptance."

Gift-giving possibilities are endless, inexpensive, and fairly easy.

For something to qualify as a "gift," it need only be paired with the heart.