

ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING

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Holiday shopping: Making it a rewarding and environmentally-friendly experience

December is a celebratory month for many of us. Whether you celebrate the birth of Christ, a festival of lights (Hanukkah) or something secular such as Kwanza (derived from a Swahili phrase "first fruits") or just family togetherness, it is time for many of us to share with those we love. There is one other aspect of these holidays that make them unique. It's the time of the year that many "shop till they drop." For many merchants, more sales and profits are made in the last two months of the year than for the other ten combined. Thus, these holidays are also a time when advertisements, which already dominate our media and landscapes (via billboards, truck panels, park benches, and sprawling strip malls), go into a frenzied state. In this environment of gluttonous consumerist messages, it is difficult to know how to behave, especially if you are aware of the environmental costs of conspicuous consumption and our "throw away" society. However, don't despair because there are many ways to be environmentally conscientious in your shopping (and giving) this season without being caricatured as the "Scrooge."

Responsible shopping may sound like an oxymoron to the staunchest environmentalist, but it can be done, even though it requires a bit more awareness and effort than typical consumerism. Here are six ways to act environmentally responsible this winter holiday:

- Get gifts online at environmentally-friendly and/or fair trade merchants
- Give books and subscriptions to magazines that educate and promote environmental causes
- Give energy saving products
- Give something alive and nurturing
- Dedicate something to someone
- Offer your time and labor

These actions will not only allow you to be generous and express your love and admiration, but will enable you (and others) to adopt sustainable practices for a healthy future. Since some of these ideas are a bit vague, let's now look at the details.

When you decide to purchase something for someone, how do you go about doing so? Do you, as so many of us do, browse local malls and department stores looking for something that jumps out at you? Or rather, with some planning, do you decide on the item and then go looking for it at a well-publicized vendor, either locally or on-line? Well, let me suggest another way or perhaps several alternatives to these common practices. Rather than allowing what is "available" on a conspicuously placed kiosk or in a newspaper insert, consider going to merchants that are environmentally conscientious and/or dedicated to supporting living wages for everyone involved in the manufacture and distribution of their goods. These types of merchants aren't typically found in our neighborhoods (at least not in our strip malls or megamalls). However, one can find these merchants on the web. The following are a few websites that point visitors to vendors that tend to be much more responsible to our planet and its people than transnational corporations: EcoMALL (www.ecomall.com) contains lists of links for green products in at least a fifty broad categories including (footwear, furniture, flowers, crafts, food, vitamins, paper, etc.); GreaterGood (www.greatergood.com) allows buyers to purchase items from traditional merchants (i.e., the name brands that we are familiar with) knowing full

well that all commissions will be donated to a cause of the purchaser's choice; FAIR TRADE CERTIFIED™ (www.transfairusa.org) provides hordes of information on fair trade products and allows visitors to type in their location/city and find out what stores are selling fair trade items nearby. In particular, if you are planning to purchase coffee, tea, chocolate or fruit for some lucky person, you should get them from fair trade dealers because it is these products that are most easily obtainable in fair trade form and the impacts of your purchases can go a long way to eliminating hazardous farming and dangerous labor practices overseas. Let your recipient know that their gift was grown by farmers that earn a living wage and in fields that are organic (if applicable). This recognition by the recipient will undoubtedly make the consumption of the food item even more scrumptious. The FAIR TRADE FEDERATION also lists retailers in the fair trade arena: (www.fairtradefederation.com/memcof.html). Lastly, for "a directory of products and services for people and the planet," there is nothing better than the *National Green Pages* which can be obtained from Co-op America (www.coopamerica.org).

One way to combat the utter lack of responsible coverage of environmental issues by the media and our educational systems is to expose people (of all ages) to the wealth of information on environmental topics found in a growing number of written sources. There is no doubt that the foundation of my current knowledge about and concern for the environment has come by the way of reading cogent, insightful, and inspirational texts and articles. My recommendation list is too long to list but a select number of books (and movies) are listed at my college website (faculty.knox.edu/pschwart/). Regarding magazines, there are also too many to name (though EcoMALL provides a good list at www.ecomall.com/biz/mag.htm). Yet, one that I highly recommend is *E: The Environmental Magazine* (www.emagazine.com). Its articles are chockfull of relevant and timely information and are accessible to most readers. *World Watch* (a magazine put out by the Worldwatch Institute; www.worldwatch.org) is also very good albeit a little more academic. There is no doubt in my mind that a \$10-\$20 book (or subscription) might just be the most important (and thoughtful) thing that a person can give to someone else. (I still get goosebumps when I think about my great aunt Sylvia—who I hardly knew as a boy—and her gift to me of a multi-year subscription to *Natural History* soon before her untimely death to cancer.)

With energy costs climbing rapidly, everyone is feeling our wallets squeezed even further. In this environment, might it not be time to introduce a new type of gift—one that will spare the recipient's pocket book well into the future. This new idea comes in the form of seemingly mundane materials such as light bulbs, batteries, chargers, shower heads, and water purification devices. Since many people are already using these items, a gift consisting of an energy efficient version of them can be easily installed and readily used (rather than filling up attics like so many gifts do these days). Two examples illustrate how much savings can be achieved via these sorts of gifts. In terms of light bulbs, a typical compact fluorescent (CFL) are four to five times more efficient and last up to ten times longer than incandescents (the ovular light bulbs that we all grew up on). Thus, if

one were to replace 20 incandescent light bulbs (each, let's say, which is used 5 hours a day) with high-efficiency fluorescents, one could save \$258 a year. And achieving this level of savings requires only a \$100 initial investment, since incandescent bulbs are going for about \$5 a piece these days. San Diego Earth Times' provides a cost savings calculator that I urge folks to visit: www.sdearthtimes.com/ET_Lighting_Work.html; for more information about fluorescents go to eartheasy.com/live_energyeff_lighting.htm.

The second unique gift would be a low-flow shower head. Since showers consume huge volumes of water, and most of us take hot showers much more regularly than cold ones, it is not surprising to find out that showering represents between 20-40% of our indoor water use and significant amounts of our energy usage as well; it costs between ~\$0.02 to heat one gallon of water to typical "hot" temperatures and ~60% of shower water is hot. Thus, replacing a traditional high-flow shower head with a low-flow one can save a family between \$10-20 a month on their energy and water bills. The EPA provides a good overview of how to conserve water and use it more effectively at: www.epa.gov/OW/you/chap3.html. So, while light bulbs and shower heads might not appear to be flashy or elegant gifts, they might be the most practical and the most appreciated (especially a year or two down the road when the recipient reflects on the money you saved them). Add to cost savings the reduction in carbon dioxide and mercury pollution obtained by reducing electrical usage and it might be fair to say that light bulbs and shower heads are the most thoughtful gifts for this holiday season.

If the modern age can be characterized by something, the ubiquity of plastic is certainly one way to do so. Everything now seems to contain plastic—our containers, our children's toys, our furniture, our computers, our rugs, our clothes (i.e., polyester, nylon, acrylic) and even our Christmas trees (see endnote). And since most plastics consist of chemically processed petroleum, it is no surprise that by using them in such abundance we create and foster many environmental and political problems—e.g., the dependence on foreign oil and the pollution of air and water. Thus, instead of getting someone something made of plastic, why not give them something alive, like a flowering plant or a tree. Not only will this gift provide a beautiful green backdrop to any decoration scheme, it will also provide endless hours of air cleansing for practically nothing. You see, plants do wonders to detoxify our indoor air. For a list of plants that are particular well suited for cleaning the air, consult: Ed Hume Seed's website, www.humeseeds.com/purify.htm or the book, *How to Grow Fresh Air: 50 House Plants that Purify Your Home or Office* (by Dr. B.C. Wolverton; Penguin). On a related note, it is better to provide a living plant rather than a bouquet of flowers because the former will live a lot longer (all the while serving as an air freshener) and the floral industry has recently been exposed for its high levels of pesticide use and its dangerous work environments on flower farms around the world (Lallanilla).

While a plant can do a lot of good in one's home, fostering pro-plant values on a larger scale can be another fantastic way to give a gift with environmental sentiment. Many conservation organizations today will dedicate a tree, a nestbox, a park bench, or

even several acres of land to a person of your choosing for a modest donation. People have probably heard the advertisements on the radio that cajole listeners to name a star after someone for something like \$49.95. And while I have no ill will for stars (as I was an astrophysics major as an undergraduate), isn't it much more sensible to use one's money to promote conservation and preservation of the planet that we live on? The following organizations offer dedications that support ecological systems worldwide: TreePeople (www.treepeople.org) focuses on restoring ecosystems in the Los Angeles basin; The Texas Blue Bird Society (www.texasbluebirdsociety.org/TBF/) allows donors to dedicate a nestbox; The Nature Conservancy (nature.org) provides donors a way to Adopt an Acre (in a rainforest) or Rescue a Reef in the name of someone. Usually these organizations will send the honoree a plaque or certificate detailing where and when his/her tree was planted or his/her acre was protected.

If nothing from the above lists suits your fancy (or applies to every person you want to acknowledge this year), then how about considering my final selection: offer your time or labor. All of us have a skill that can benefit others. Whether it is cooking, crocheting, massaging, tutoring, mowing, or painting, such a skill, if donated, would come as a wonderful surprise to its recipient. For my wife's birthday a few months ago, cheapie that I am, I gave her a simple card which read, "The recipient of this card can redeem it for one hour of massage (in 5, 10, or 15 minute increments; I didn't want to get too sore myself J) by the giver." (Corny I know, but I am still learning; in retrospect, I am sure she would have been happier if I had offered to scrub the floors or dust.) She held me to my offer and I obliged. Be creative and spread your physical and emotional (rather than your material) wealth. If we all decided to offer our assistance to others in this way, we could reduce the financial impact of the holidays and make the world a friendlier and more social place.

Since this list is far from comprehensive I encourage creative minds of our community to offer other ways to be environmentally-sound this holiday season. If you happen to try any of these (or other) suggestions, please let us know how things turn out. Have a happy, healthy, and environmentally-friendly holiday!

Endnote: There is a lot of question of whether it is more environmentally sound to get a natural Christmas tree each year or to get a "fake" one that can be used for many years. More and more people are choosing the "fake" ones over the real ones; in fact, more homes now have synthetic trees in them than real ones. I think it is somewhat of a toss up, since there are so many considerations at play and neither option is environmentally-friendly. Yet, the decided edge goes to the natural ones for two main reasons: (1) they are much healthier for the household (as they aren't oozing out petrochemical gasses all the time); and, (2) it is better to have something grown locally/regionally in one's house than something synthetic which is manufactured thousands of miles away. Better still, pick a favorite houseplant and make it the "tree" for this year's holiday.

Works Cited

Lallanilla, Marc. (2004) "Floral Industry's Use of Pesticides Has Some Consumers Wary." ABCNEWS.com, February 13.