

Christmas Book & Gift Issue

THE LIVING CHURCH

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The 12 Days

Christmas gift ideas
for every taste
and interest

By Christie L. Manussier

There comes a moment in every relationship when you question the whole thing, a moment when you may find yourself staring at the person to whom you have plighted your troth and seriously considering whether he or she might be a member of a different species. The holiday season, when long-cherished family traditions collide, is full of opportunities for such moments.

Fortunately my darling and I averted true disaster in this regard, realizing well before the holidays that we had been raised in diametrically opposed traditions. His family opens gifts on Christmas Eve; mine opens them on Christmas morning. I am proud to say that our compromise was to establish a new tradition, which, in typically modern fashion, is also a “vintage” tradition: We observe the 12 days of Christmas. There are no partridges, pipers or pickled peppers, but we exchange one gift each day from December 25 through January 6, when we round out the season with a dinner party of close friends in observance of Twelfth Night.

I am happy to share some of the philosophy, as well as some concrete ideas, behind my 12 days of gift-giving. Because I sought a greater degree of intentionality in selecting gifts, I cast about for ideas in contrasting

categories. Following, for your perusal, are a dozen types of gifts. My goal was to be both original and not terribly difficult. Some examples will fit into more than one category, but this, after all, a list of suggestions, not a scientific taxonomy.

Something Tiny

A bookmark. I found one online made of hammered copper and sporting a wonderful arts and crafts motif, materials and a style of which I am very fond. You might call, check the catalog or search the online gift shop of some place that you or your beloved visited in the past year. Museum gift shops are a trove of unusual items at a variety of price points, including small items like bookmarks, key fobs and jewelry. New York’s Metropolitan Museum, Washington’s Smithsonian Institution, Chicago’s Art Institute, and Pasadena’s Huntington Library are among the hundreds of museum stores worth a look.

An antique coin. You would be surprised how little it costs to own a genuine Roman, Greek or Byzantine coin. eBay offers numerous examples. A gift of some small, old artifact of interest is also a terrific opportunity to know (or imagine)



more about its origins. What might that denomination of coin have bought? Who might have owned that modest metal cup when it was new? How was that medieval thimble unearthed?



Jewelry. Antique and estate sale stores yield fabulous items with retro appeal: charms for a charm bracelet, a pin for the lapel of a coat or jacket, cuff links. To shop at your computer, visit Ruby Lane, which specializes in jewelry, antiques and vintage collectibles. I adore the jewelry sold at Royal Exchange Jewelers and have my eye on an Art Nouveau crane pin (\$39.50) from the Old Durham Road catalog. If you live in Minneapolis, Chicago, Las Vegas or Boston, visit your Local Charm store. They don't have a web presence, but offer jewelry exclusively from artists located in and around those cities. Finally, check out the "Something Handmade" category that follows.



Fun luggage tags. Choose from vintage travel art styling at Hello Traveler for just \$4.99; shaped like a cello and made of leather from Levenger for \$24 (a portion of the sale supports Carnegie Hall); or bearing retro graphics with humorous, slightly snarky, modern observations from Anne Taintor for \$9.

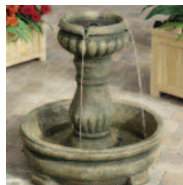
Something Large

Here are some items that may only be wrappable by shroud, but will pique the curiosity of everyone before opening, and prove crowd pleasers afterward:

A piñata. How much fun for the whole family to take turns whacking a piñata until it rains candy? You could buy one for \$12.99 at Target or Toys 'R' Us, or opt to make one and fulfill the "Something Handmade" category.

A tandem bike. What could be quainter? It's also a togetherness-building and activity-based, healthful gift.

Vintage-style personalized wood signs. You've probably seen these "Welcome to the Your-Name-Here's Lakehouse" signs. They vary in size and in price, with most signs from A Simpler Time in the \$75-\$125 range.



A piece of furniture or accessory. I've given a floor-standing, indoor/outdoor fountain, not unlike those found at Simply Fountains and Garden Fountains. You can also consider hat stands, life-sized busts and floor lamps. Items like chairs and writing tables are available for free on Craigslist, and doing the work to rehabilitate them would be a great gift.

See "Something Completely Unnecessary" for kites,

full-size popcorn carts and other large items.

Something Handmade

If you believe you're not crafty, you don't have to hand-make items *yourself* for them to qualify:

Food items. Check your community newspapers, neighborhood co-op and farmers markets for makers of goodies that you can share with your family or give as hostess gifts when visiting. Some of my favorites are Zara May's Handcrafted Fudge at \$5.95 a half-pound, Lucille's Kitchen Garden for some wonderfully unusual flavors of jam (like raspberry pepper!) at \$6 a jar, and Pemberton's Toffee and Truffles at \$13.50 a pound. Similarly, drink items are available from Peet's Coffee & Tea, Murchie's Tea & Coffee, Ltd. (located in Canada, so allow extra time for shipping) or Alterra Coffee, which offers a coffee-of-the-month gift subscription (\$165 for a year.)



Crafted items. Make, or commission a knitting friend to make, a scarf or hat in a custom color or yarn. If you don't know where to start, stop by a craft store in your community and discuss it with the staff there for a referral.

Handmade soap. I receive compliments on soaps from Seventh Sojourn and Rocky Mountain Soap (located in Canada) the purveyors of my favorites, Arabian Spice (\$5/bar) and Alpine Air/Lemongrass-Rosemary (C\$4.99), respectively.



Fair trade items. Your phone book may include one or more brick-and-mortar stores for fair trade items made by cottage industries in the developing world. Ten Thousand Villages is a nonprofit chain of such stores, also selling via its website. Trails to Bridges, a Southeastern Wisconsin enterprise, also sells via a web store. The UNICEF catalog also includes a variety of gift items.

Miscellany. Peruse Etsy.com for all sorts of items that must be handmade in order to qualify for sale on the website, including jewelry, needlework and art items.



Something Sentimental

Photobooks. A number of online services can take your uploaded photographs and text and lay them out in a bound, hard-cover book. I've used MyPublisher with great success. Make a vacation or year-in-review keepsake, create a cookbook of favorite family recipes with pictures of the finished dishes, or use this as an avenue for a family history to commemorate a landmark event or anniversary. A small, basic paper-



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back book can cost as little as \$13; leather-bound deluxe versions start at about \$90. Mixbook offers a similar service that is exclusively photographic, creating scrapbook-like layouts from the photos that you upload.

Vintage postcards. Use eBay to find a variety of vintage postcards (or other genuine old-time photographs) of places that have sentimental meaning to your gift recipient: where they were born, lived once, attended school, etc.

Repair or transform a memento. My husband did this for his father with his old baseball glove, oiling it up and getting it into particularly attractive condition, and then having it mounted in a shadow box with lovely results.

Time: For them, with them and/or of yours

One night, while passing the mashed potatoes, ask family members how they would finish this sentence: "I wish I had time to ..." Another time, ask "What have you always wanted to know how to do?" You may just be surprised what you learn. The results will help you to give gifts of:

An event together. Spending time together is a great gift, and might include tickets to the symphony or another concert, live theater, an outing to hike or snowshoe together, or even a commitment to have a regular lunch or dinner.

An event alone. If your gift recipient hasn't had time to pursue an interest, you can offer to babysit the kids or otherwise free up the time, perhaps pairing the activity with a gift card you've purchased. Maybe the gift is the unscheduled time itself – offer to babysit to enable your friend or loved one to have a completely free afternoon off once a month for the next year!

Kids' activities. Inquire with your local public museum about sleepover opportunities for kids and their parents, which may involve behind-the-scenes tours and an opportunity to experience the exhibits in a very different context.

Games. If you enjoyed your intelligence-gathering operation, check out Table Topics and The Box of Questions. Each game has multiple versions, and provides a basis for spending more fun time together.

Custom gift certificates. Select from more than 100 designs using Vistaprint, or create your own, printing several lines of your text on a set of 10 or more gift certificates for as little as \$3.99 (unit prices fall

the more you order). Hand write the nature or value of your gift and pop it into the envelope provided.

Something in Support of a Hobby

Lessons, starter kits or accessories. These give the gift recipient the opportunity to discover if he or she really likes the activity or has a skill at it without investing in it right away. From salsa dancing to cake decorating, if someone's interested, you can help them out. Many hobbies and interests are the focus of classes at the YMCA or community college extension courses.

Something Useful, But Still Fun

Electronic gizmos or helpers. The Electroman surge protector is shaped like a stick figure, so you can plug his head into the outlet, then use the sockets in each of his hands and feet to plug in your electronics. Find him for \$25 at What on Earth. The Earbud Buddy tames your headset cords for just \$18 at Levenger, and comes in a handsome leather gift box.

The Roomba robot vacuum. It costs about the same as an average vacuum cleaner at Target, but men: Do not get this for your wife unless she is specifically yearning aloud for one and then fluttering her lashes in your direction.

Gardener's Supply Company. The company publishes a catalog full of do-dads and fun, interesting, time-saving outdoor and indoor items, like novelty watering cans and designer wellies.



Something Eccentric

Consult CafePress and Zazzle. These websites offer a trove of items appealing to every sport, hobby, literary interest, and attitude imaginable, and plenty that would never occur to you.

Whether your recipients are nuts about penguins, mathematical formulae, *Twilight* or Chaucer, there's a mug, T-shirt and mousepad to satisfy them.

Something Natural

Holiday greens. Wreaths, centerpieces and garlands of living balsam and fir can be sent as gifts from L.L. Bean, Gardener's Supply Co., White Flower Farm, and other nursery sources. Harder to find are balsam kissing balls, a charming, old-world item, but Holiday Greens.com offers them for about \$30.



Something Completely Unnecessary

Radio-controlled whatzits. They come in all forms, and who doesn't get a kick out of zipping a toy car or plane around using a handset?



A kite. Mary Poppins had it right: It's still fun to fly a kite! Any local toystore should be able to sell you a basic one, and plenty of less-basic ones are marvels of art and engineering.

A model ship, airplane or spacecraft. They serve little purpose other than the pride of construction, and possibly a certain Zen concentration that develops while working on the small pieces. But building one is fun, which is the point. The same argument suggests that jigsaw puzzles are still a good gift, especially now that there are so many options in the 3-dimensional realm.



An "old tyme" popcorn cart or cotton candy maker. – Tabletop versions start at \$40 and \$60, respectively, from Nostalgia Factory Outlet, with larger versions also available.

Books, Nonfiction

Every one of these topics could yield an excellent book related to it.

Books, Fiction

Browse the "bargain books" aisle at your local bookseller and you will have a trove to appeal to nearly every interest. My one named suggestion is for the grownup fan of Harry Potter: *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*, a novel by Susanna Clarke. Published in 2004, it is a journey into a version of Regency England where magic existed long ago, but has not been practiced for centuries ... until a magician comes along who is not satisfied with isolating himself to studying theoretical magic. This is a densely written work, 800+ pages long, that should delight a fan of history or pseudo-history, but may intimidate others. It is one of the most richly realized universes that I've ever encountered in fiction.

From this multitude of gift suggestions you should be able to pull a single item or idea for that hard-to-buy-for relative, or the friend or neighbor who went above-and-beyond in some way. If you are still high and dry, you are a truly hopeless gift-giver and should just buy gift cards! One final suggestion: As a gift to yourself, cap off the season with renting or borrowing a DVD of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*.

Christie L. Manussier is a freelance writer in Racine, Wis.

A Guide to Gift Sources

Bookmarks

Metropolitan Museum: <http://store.metmuseum.org>, 800-468-7386
Smithsonian Institution: smithsonianstore.com, 800-322-0344
Art Institute of Chicago: artinstituteshop.org, 888-301-9612
Huntington Library: huntington.org, 626-405-2142

Coins

eBay: ebay.com

Jewelry

Ruby Lane: rubylane.com
Royal Exchange Jewelers: royalexchangejewelers.com
Old Durham Road: olddurhamroad.com,
866-298-1627 to request a catalog, x1626 to order

Luggage tags

Hello Traveler: hellotraveler.com
Levenger: levenger.com, 800-544-0880
Anne Taintor: annetaintor.com, 718-483-9312

Piñata

Target: target.com
Toys 'R' Us: toysrus.com

Personalized signs

A Simpler Time: asimplertime.com, 888-851-9088

Furniture/Accessories

Simply Fountains: simplyfountains.com, 866-579-5177
Garden Fountains: garden-fountains.com, 800-920-7457
Craigslist: craigslist.org

Food items

Zara May's Handcrafted Fudge: zaramay.com, 818-823-7127
Lucille's Kitchen Garden: lucilleskitchengarden.com, 651-387-3218
Pemberton's Toffee and Truffles: pembertontoffee.com, 708-301-4238
Peet's Coffee & Tea: peets.com, 800-999-2132
Murchie's Tea & Coffee, Ltd.: murchies.com, 800-663-0400
Alterra Coffee: alterracoffeeopro.com, 877-273-3747

Handmade soap

Seventh Sojourn: soapmagic.com, 651-730-5793
Rocky Mountain Soap: rockymountainsoap.com, 877-229-7627

Fair trade items

Ten Thousand Villages: <http://www.tenthousandvillages.com>,
717-859-8100, 877-883-8341 to order
Trails to Bridges: trailstobridges.com/store/
UNICEF: unicefusa.org/shop, 800-553-1200

Miscellany

Etsy: etsy.com

Photobooks

MyPublisher: mypublisher.com
Mixbook: mixbook.com

Gifts of time

Table Topics: tabletopics.com
The Box of Questions: theboxgirls.com
Vistaprint: vistaprint.com/pricing.aspx

Useful but fun

What on Earth: whatonearthcatalog.com, 800-945-2552
Gardener's Supply Company: www.gardenerssupply.com, 888-833-1412

Something eccentric

CafePress: cafePress.com
Zazzle: zazzle.com/shop

Natural gifts

L.L. Bean: llbean.com, 800-441-5713
White Flower Farm: whiteflowerfarm.com/greens, 800-503-9624
Holiday Greens: holidaygreens.com, 413-648-9580

Popcorn machines

Nostalgia Factory Outlet: nostalgiafactoryoutlet.com, 800-629-3325