

New gift-giving rules to get in the true holiday spirit

BY STEPHANIE JOSEPH LONG
Special to the Record-Eagle

Who should I include on my holiday gift list this year? What should I buy? Did I buy for her last year? Will he expect something fun or useful?

Ahhhh, stress! All too familiar rantings, but thankfully, no more. I vow to give differently this year.

When I was a kid, I loved making Christmas gifts and was happy to give macaroni pictures and pressed leaves. That didn't last long and by late childhood, I was doing extra jobs around the house so I could buy presents for my family. I came to learn, unfortunately, that real gifts were store-bought. I also came to learn that the older I got, the more money I was sup-

posed to spend. By my 30s, the rules of appropriate gift giving that I had learned from our culture became more confining and rigid, and I started to dread shopping. I hated what I perceived as the test of finding the "right" Christmas gifts and the inevitable spending binge and debt that would follow.

This year, I'm not having it. I'm tired of letting external forces dictate my gift-giving philosophy.

For starters, I'm going to start trusting my instincts. I had never realized before how much trust was involved in giving. We risk rejection every time we give a gift. William Arthur Ward, the noted American scholar and teacher, said, "Each of us will one day be judged by our simple good-

ness, not by our seeming greatness."

So I'm going to start the season of gift giving with simple goodness in mind because it puts all my gift-giving fears into perspective.

How many times before have I found what I believed to be the perfect gift for someone only to put it down in a flurry of doubt. It doesn't cost enough; they'll think I'm cheap. It's not fancy enough; they'll think I'm not creative. It's not fill-in-the-blank enough; they'll think I'm something bad. I've tortured myself with self-doubt for years.

It's my goal this year to give gifts, not because they will allow me to seem great, but because they come from a simple place

in my heart that is good. I take great pleasure in finding and giving what I think will be fun, unique gifts.

It's my doubt in the receiver's ability to appreciate my intent, though, that stops me from giving what I want to give and persuades me to give what I think the receiver expects to see from me. My first new rule for this season is to trust myself in choosing gifts that I think will be meaningful and to trust those whom I love to accept them.

Rule number two this year is going to be to give charitably. And not just to the local shelter or the needy. When I give to a charity, I often get a receipt for a tax write-off, and when I volunteer, I receive the thanks of those

I'm helping.

I want to ensure that there will be no external reward of any kind, whether it be a tax break or thanks, because the word "charity" suggests altruism, giving without expectation of receiving. It's the expectation of receiving that I've got to give up. I don't like admitting that I do secretly wish for something in return, that deep down I still have a small voice that is saying, "Please, please, please!"

Intellectually, I understand that this voice is selfish, so I don't ever speak it (until now), but there's still a small part of me who keeps score. This year I want to give charitably — freely and without strings.

Which brings me to rule number three. I'm going to

give anonymously in order to help myself not expect anything in return. It probably won't work with my family because each time someone opens a gift without a name tag, they'll eventually catch on that no gift tag equals me. I'll have to do it for strangers. This will require that I give to people who either have never received anything from me in the past and who, therefore, won't be expecting anything or to people who don't know me.

So this year, I'm going to give by my own rules. If it works, who knows? Maybe then I'll tackle the ever-repressive New Year's resolutions next.

Stephanie Joseph Long is a local teacher and freelance writer.

Some Christmas traditions have legendary origins

BY PAT STEIN
Copley News Service

"'Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.

"The stockings were hung by the chimney with care, in hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there ..."

There's hardly a holiday tradition that's more universally cherished than the Christmas stocking. Legend has it that the custom of hanging Christmas stockings for Santa to fill with gifts (for good little boys and girls) or lumps of coal (for those who have been bad) began in the olden days.

The legend tells of a kindly nobleman whose wife had died of an illness, leaving the widowed man and his three unmarried daughters in despair. To make matters worse, the widower lost all his money in bad investments and had hardly enough money for food and shelter, much less for dowries for his daughters.

The family moved into a peasant cottage where the daughters did their own cooking, sewing and cleaning. One night after they had washed their clothing, they hung their stockings from the mantel to dry.

As luck would have it, St. Nicholas was traveling through the village where the impoverished nobleman and his daughters lived and heard villagers talking about their plight.

That night, St. Nicholas stopped by the cottage and, looking through the window, spied the stockings hung out to dry over the fireplace. Also seeing that the family had already gone to bed, he took three small bags of gold from his pouch (some versions of the legend say three lumps of gold) and threw them down the chimney. They landed in the stockings.

In the morning, the daughters discovered their stockings contained enough gold to provide them with the dowries needed to get married. The nobleman was able to see his daughters wed and lived a long, happy life.

Word of the family's good fortune spread through the village and then throughout the land. Soon, people everywhere were hanging their stockings by the fire in hopes that St. Nicholas would fill them with treasures.

In more modern times, an orange in the toe of the stocking has come to symbolize the piece of gold and some say that an apple in the toe of the stocking and an orange in the heel means you've

been good.

Children in many countries around the globe continue to hang Christmas stockings, but in some countries the custom is to set out shoes.

In France, children place their shoes by the fireplace, a custom dating back to when children wore wooden shoes. In Italy, on Jan. 5, the night before Epiphany, children put out their shoes for La Befana, the good witch, to fill. Good Italian children receive toys and candy in their shoes while those who have been bad get rocks and ashes.

In Hungary, children shine their shoes before putting them near the door or a windowsill for St. Nicholas to fill and in Holland, the children fill their shoes with hay and a carrot for the horse of Sinterklaas (Santa Claus).

In Puerto Rico, children put greens in small boxes and place them under their beds for the camels of the three kings.

In contemporary times, stocking stuffers range from trinkets to hand-held games to jewelry.

The origin of the first nutcracker is a mixture of legend and history. The first nutcracker is believed to have been carved in Germany some 250 years ago and it really was made to crack nuts — especially walnuts. As nutcrackers became popular throughout Europe and elsewhere in the world, they were carved in a variety of styles and depicting a variety of figures, from chimney sweeps to bakers and sellers of birds and cloth. Over the years, nutcrackers have become highly collectible pieces of yuletide ephemera.

The legend says that the first nutcracker was made by a farmer who was very wealthy, but miserly and lonely. Walnut trees grew on his property but he could not be bothered to crack the shells to extract the nuts. He put up a reward for anyone who could come up with a way to crack the walnuts. An old puppet carver in the German village of Seiffen is said to have come up with the idea for the nutcracker — a figure with jaws strong enough to crack nutshells. The farmer rewarded the carver with a special workshop and gave all the residents of the village German fruitcake studded with walnuts.

The message of the nutcracker is that it not only cracked walnuts but the hard heart of the farmer who ultimately poured forth generosity and kindness for all during the yuletide season.

'New' holiday music includes classy anthologies

BY RICHARD HARRINGTON
The Washington Post

Here's a sampling of holiday releases:

■ **"Genuine Houserockin' Christmas"** (Alligator). Mostly original holiday tunes from the Chicago label's roster of blues, soul and zydeco artists.

Highlights include harpist Carey Bell's hard-chugging "Christmas Train," Lil' Ed and the Blues Imperials' stomping slide-guitar-driven "Christmas Time," Shemekia Copeland's sly "Stay a Little Longer, Santa" and Little Charlie & the Nightcats' oh-so-true "It's Christmas Time Again (Spend, Spend, Spend)."

■ **"A Very Special Acoustic Christmas"** (Lost Highway). The sixth in the popular "A Very Special Christmas" series features acoustic-based songs performed by an array of country artists. Norah Jones' ruminative take on Horace Silver's "Peace" has long been featured in her concert performances. Other highlights include the sweet melancholy of Alan Jackson's "Just Put a Ribbon in Your Hair," Marty Stuart's jovial work plaint "Even Santa Claus Gets the Blues" and Ralph Stanley and Patty Loveless' high harmonies on the Stanley Brothers' "Christmas Is Near."

■ **"The Trojan Christmas Box Set"** (Sanctuary). Three CDs with 50 reggae/ska/dancehall/dub takes on Christmas and the New Year from the fabled Jamaican reggae label Trojan, many surprisingly straight despite obvious idiomatic flourishes. There are several tracks from Jacob Miller's classic "Natty X-mas" album, and seven from Yellowman, including a "Breadfruit Roasting on an Open Fire" that would make Mel Torme laugh out loud.

■ **"A Santa Cause: It's a Punk Rock Christmas"** (Immortal). The rap and metal label joins the holiday fray with 20 mostly high-energy tracks, kicking off with the A.K.A.'s tribute cover of Run-DMC's classic

"Christmas in Hollis." While there are mostly familiar songs done with good cheer, other titles reveal a certain attitude problem: "December Is for Cynics" (by the Matches), "Yule Shoot Your Eye Out" (Fall Out Boy), "I Won't Be Home for Christmas" (Blink-182) and "Christmas Night of Zombies" (MXPX).

The creators of the **Ultra-Lounge** series serve up a trio of albums under the banner **"Wonderland Adventures in Popular Culture"** (Shout).

■ **"Yulesville: The Other Side of Tinseltown"** features warm crooners Dean Martin and Leon Redbone and cool singers Julie London and Claudine Longet (the hilariously kitschy "Snow"), jazz explo-

rations like Duke Ellington's sublime "Sugar Rum Cherry" (reinventing the "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy") and Lionel Hampton's shimmering "White Christmas," and such spirited numbers as Pearl Bailey's "Jingle Bells, Cha Cha Cha" and Louis Prima and Keely Smith's "Shake Hands With Santa Claus."

■ **"Under The Mistletoe Reindeer & Romance"** emphasizes the latter, from Peggy Lee's gauzy "The Christmas Spell" and Sarah Vaughan's ornate "Goodnight My Love" to Lou Rawls' virile "Merry Christmas Baby" and Dinah Washington's languid "Ole Santa." Contemporary vocalists Steve Tyrell, Kevin Mahogany and Ann

Hampton Callaway was a challenge matching up to standard-setters like Ella Fitzgerald (who somehow elevates "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer"), Carmen McRae, Nancy Wilson and Rosemary Clooney, whose 1954 solo version of "White Christmas" was featured in the classic film "Holiday Inn" but never appeared on the soundtrack.

■ **"Cool December A Warm and Fuzzy Winter"** emphasizes the full range of romantic holiday idylls, from Bing Crosby's "Looks Like a Cold, Cold Winter" and Pearl Bailey and Hot Lips Page's "Baby, It's Cold Outside" to Billie Holiday's 1937 recording of "I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm."

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