

The Last Gift



What kind of gift do you get for someone who is dying? I wrestled with this question in the weeks before Christmas 13 years ago. My mother was in her last weeks of life, having fought long and hard with breast cancer. That October, with tremendous grace and courage, Mom decided that enough was enough and that she was ready to move on to whatever was next for her. She discontinued all treatment and we shifted from hoping to waiting.

For the most part, the Christmas spirit was lost on me. I managed to get requisite gifts for the important people in my life, but I was completely perplexed by what to give Mom. We weren't sure that she would even live to Christmas, let alone be able to open gifts. Yet it didn't seem right to get her nothing at all.

I agonized over the decision, knowing that it would be the last gift I would give her. Eventually, I settled on two things. First, I got her a fluffy pale pink robe with beautiful dainty pastel flowers embroidered on it. It was warm, light, soft and very pretty. I gave it to her two weeks before Christmas. I wanted her to feel comfortable and beautiful in her last days, and she was. I also gave her me. I took time off from work and spent as much time as possible at her side. Not doing anything special, just being — together.

Mom had managed to get her Christmas shopping done before the serious downturn in her condition. I imagine that she faced

a similar dilemma: what to give as a last gift to each of her children. On Christmas Eve we found three identical packages from Mom for my brother, sister and me, under the tree.

Mom was with us on Christmas Eve, but was comatose. While we went through the motions of carrying on the family traditions, there was not much joy in our world. As we were eating our customary Swedish meal, complete with lutefisk (No, they don't use lye anymore.), we noticed that Mom, who was in bed, was very agitated. When the time to open gifts arrived, we acknowledged that it didn't seem right to exclude Mom. So we moved the gift opening into her bedroom. This meant piling nine people and lots of gifts around her bed.

It was a bit chaotic, but once we were all gathered around her, Mom became very peaceful. One by one the presents were opened. Finally, there were three remaining — Mom's gifts to her three children. Upon opening them we discovered that she had given each of us a king-size down comforter. Mom's last gift to her children was comfort. So needed. So fitting. So like Mom.

As the holidays approach, I invite you to choose one person in your life to whom you will give a gift as if it was your last. I wish you and yours much love and many blessings this holiday season.

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