

Ask EcoGirl

By Patricia Dines

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From Gratitude to Action

Some years ago, I celebrated Christmas Day with a small family at their beautiful Marin home, which I enjoyed.

However, during the gift-giving segment of the day, I was quietly astonished to see the two young boys rapidly opening their presents at the same time, devouring each one in a flurry of desire, an orgy of consumerism, until all that was left were random piles of wrapping paper, ribbons, toys, and children immobilized as if in a drunken stupor. Throughout this, the parents largely talked with each other, paying little attention to what gift had been given to which child and by whom.

I went with their flow, but afterwards wondered what the purpose of it all had been. It certainly wasn't about a relationship between the gift givers and recipients, or even about the children enjoying their actual gifts, just some kind of momentary drug-high of getting.

This experience made me appreciate something I hadn't even really considered about my own childhood: that we had all watched as each person opened one present at a time, shared each other's anticipation and delight, and heard each person thank the gift giver, either directly or in absentia. Afterwards, using my mother's helpful list of gifts and givers, we wrote thank you letters that expressed what we liked about each present. I now see that this allowed the givers to feel appreciated and helped us value each item.

Cultivating Reverence

I bring this up first to suggest that parents establish gift-opening traditions that help children respect each gift and the person giving it, thus nurturing their graciousness.

But I also share it because I think that our culture's relationship with

the earth's gifts is too often like that blind and voracious Christmas experience.

The earth is literally the foundation of our lives, making everything else possible. But, rather than reciprocate that with an ongoing commitment to nurture her health and well-being, our culture often takes the planet's bounty for granted, treating her as optional backdrop scenery, a mere adornment to our human-constructed reality.

Meanwhile, our cumulative actions are rapidly converting precious beautiful sacred ecosystems into barely-noticed momentary objects that quickly become trash but cause great harm to people, communities, and creatures during their production, use, and disposal. Are we really getting a level of pleasure that matches that cost?

So I'd like to suggest that we can nurture more authentic happiness for ourselves and others if we pause to feel grateful for each object we buy and use, recognizing the ecosystem, the tree, the ocean that gave us its gift, and seeking to ensure that it was nurtured, not harmed, in return. This simple act of love and reverence will likely encourage us to buy more selectively, enjoy items more fully, and feel better about our actions.

The holidays are a particularly useful time for us to consider this approach, because our culture's harm to the earth greatly increases during this season. Thus any improvements we make now have a relatively larger benefit.

What You Can Do

1) Look for tangible ways to express your gratitude for the earth's gifts by joyfully integrating the planet's needs into all of your holiday activities.

You can check out my Holidays webpage for lots of organized ideas

for greening your gift giving, greeting cards, family meals, celebrations, and cleanup. Also consider giving money or time to community nonprofits, to nurture their work for our shared well-being. www.patriciadines.info/EGHolidays.html

2) Watch "The Story of Stuff" and share it with others. This fun, useful, free 20-minute film helps us see the lifecycle impacts of our things, thus inspiring us to reduce the harm done in our name. www.storyofstuff.org/movies-all/story-of-stuff

3) Support the restructuring of our economy to better honor nature's ways. For instance, read David Korten's book, *Agenda for a New Economy: From Phantom Wealth to Real Wealth*. We need to remember that our survival comes not from money but from the earth. www.livingeconomiesforum.org/agenda2

4) Model earth-friendly holiday traditions for your children. When you focus more on connection than consumerism, they get both warm family memories and eco-healthy habits. Plus you help ensure that nature's beauty and sanity will continue gracing the days of generations to come.

Thank you for acting for a better world. I wish happy holidays for all!

Ask EcoGirl is written by Patricia Dines, Author of The Organic Guides, and Editor and Lead Writer for The Next STEP newsletter. Email your questions about going green to <EcoGirl@AskEcoGirl.info> for possible inclusion in future columns. Also see "Ask EcoGirl" on Facebook! And contact EcoGirl for information about carrying this syndicated column in your periodical.

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Published in the Sonoma County Gazette, December 2011.

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