

The Best Christmas Ever

Two years had passed since our family had moved from Sault Ste Marie to Sudbury. My husband had taken a job at Inco, and we were just starting to recover from the financial set back of a long strike at the Steel Plant. Our house back in the Sault, had finally sold, netting us just enough to pay off what we owed on it, and we were looking forward to easier times. Then Inco announced it's plans to shut down for three weeks in January in an effort to save money, and bring the price of nickel back up. Any other time this wouldn't be a problem, but having used up all vacation time, and having no savings, this was bad news. And Christmas was coming.

So my husband and I sat down together and crunched numbers and explored options. We decided to make sure that the rent and utilities were covered, we could manage that. The loan on our car and my tuition we would just pay the interest for that month, and the credit Union would be fine with that. There were other small expenses that we could cut out as well to save money, and we decided to stay home and not travel for the holidays, that way we could save money on gas. But even with all this, there would still be no money left to buy Christmas gifts, and we agreed that we were not willing to use the credit card for this.

When we explained the situation to our children, my eleven year old daughter tearfully asked. "Do you mean we won't have Christmas this year!" My thirteen year old son sat silent, but he looked concerned too.

"Of course we are going to have Christmas," I told them. "It comes no matter what you do. But this year will be different. We have just enough money to pay the bills and buy groceries, so all of our gifts will have to be made or recycled."

Both kids looked doubtful about the prospect of making gifts at first, but my husband and I told them that we would help them. The more we talked about it, the more excited they became. So the weeks leading up to Christmas we spent hours with our children, as we helped them plan and create Christmas surprises. Attending hair dressing school 40 hours a week and taking care of a family kept me kind of short of time, so I cheated a bit by saving my tips from working on clients, to buy books and games at a secondhand store. On the weekends I would bake up goodies for gifts to send to the grandparents. Our tree that year was glorious and well decorated by the entire family. It was our big extravagance that year, but well worth the money. My husband and daughter picked it out together. It

barely fit into the living room, and sometimes when I think about that tree, I can still recall it's piney fresh scent.

Christmas morning, we were dazzled by our creativity. My husband had made journals for both our children from scrap leather and computer paper. They were works of art with the covers beautifully etched and stained. My daughter had taken an empty gallon pickle jar, and various sized mason jars, and painted them to create a beautiful canister set for me. I treasured them for many years. Until a flood brought about it's demise, a brightly painted paper-mache waste basket graced our bathroom, compliments of my thirteen year old son. There were books, games, and other creative gifts under the tree that morning, and small stocking stuffer gifts for the kids, that we had bought at the drug store. Our yule feast was a chicken dinner with all the fixings, and a bottle of home made wine from the past summer's batch that my husband and I had made. As we cleared the table and began to wash up after our meal, our children informed us that this was our best Christmas ever.

Now that our child have left and now have homes and children of their own, they still talk about how it was the best Christmas they remember. I imagine it was the time that we spent with each of them, helping them plan and create something special. It was focusing on decorating the home, and celebrating together, instead of worrying about what you wanted someone to buy for you . And I believe that by realizing how fortunate we really were, we found joy in the season. So many families struggle for years to keep a roof over their heads, and food on the table; never mind buying gifts. Our lack of holiday funds was a temporary problem that time would remedy, but it gave us the opportunity to realize that true joy can not be purchased.

The following year, we were financially back on track, but our holiday mind set and spending patterns had made a permanent change. My husband and I no longer exchange gifts as a rule, and we only buy for our children and our parents. Most of the time, I prefer to send gift cards, money, or consumable gifts. We try hard not to go crazy spending big money on gifts for the kids, but when we see a need, we try to help them out when we can. The last few years have been asking, with limited success, for loved ones not buy us any gifts at Christmas. We are grateful for their generosity, but would rather a phone call, card, or time spent together. I don't like to think of someone I love stressing about trying to buy me a gift, I would rather they give me their love.

This time of year is often very difficult for folks, being dark and gloomy, with winter settling in. A celebration with bright decorations is a wonderful way to lift

spirits, but not if this holiday comes with unrealistic expectations, and overwhelming obligations. Everyone is so busy, and often dealing with colds and flu, that they are too stressed out to enjoy the holidays. Any time I find myself getting caught up in the insanity, I take myself back to that year, and remember how it felt to let go of all of those expectations, and just make the best of what you have.

This year my husband and I will not be able to spend the holidays with family and friends in Ontario, but we will be able to skype and phone them through out the day. I plan to decorate and put up a tree, and my husband and I will have a nice day together. As long as I have a tree with lights, or even just a candle to burn, I will find joy in being warm on a cold winter night with someone I love. And it will be the best time ever.

I wish you all love and happiness for the holidays, and joy in knowing that spring will always follow winter.

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