

***‘Tis the Season to Feel Inadequate;
Holidays, Special Occasions and Other Times
Our Celebrations Get Out of Hand***

Chapter 1: Christmas

The Christmas Letter to Make You Feel Better About Yourself

Merry Christmas friends!

I bet you're surprised to be getting a Christmas letter from me. I know I'm surprised you're getting a Christmas letter from me, especially before Christmas. But seeing how people who get their holiday letters out early get more letters in return, I thought I'd join the ranks of the organized this year. I would have sent this in June if I thought it would get me more gifts.

Besides, I have a lot of news to share this year. For one thing, I finally finished writing this book I've been working on for about twenty-five years. It's all about holidays and the way they bring out the worst in us. And I start with Christmas and work my way through the year because no holiday makes us feel more inadequate than Christmas, except maybe Nude Recreation Week. But I don't really cover that one in this book.

Much of the damage our self-esteem suffers at Christmas is caused by...well... Christmas letters. That's why I don't always send them. I care about other people's feelings.

I'm sure you've gotten those letters where the writer carries on about the exciting adventures and numerous successes their family has had over the past year, leaving you feeling jealous, inferior and as interesting as a tree sloth. This won't be one of those. In fact, you should be feeling pretty good about yourself by the time I'm finished.

It was actually kind of a tough year for me. For one thing, I had a preview of how you'll spend all eternity if you die and go to hell. I didn't actually keep track, but I'm sure I was on hold for approximately three full days back in March. I'm not normally a patient person, but I was encouraged to persist by the elevator version of Eric Clapton's "You Look Wonderful Tonight," which was repeated at least 175 times. That and the message reminding me that "all calls are answered in the order they're received, so hanging up only means you'll have to wait all over again later."

Then I had a little lip balm emergency this summer. You probably didn't know it was possible to have an emergency involving lip balm. Me neither. But one day when I was digging for mine, I heard a voice from the depths of my purse saying, "Nine one one. What's your emergency?" I had accidentally dialed 911 on my cellphone, which is amazing considering the chaos at the bottom of my purse. I doubt I could do as well in an actual emergency. I hung up fast because that seemed wiser than saying, "I lost my lip balm."

Actually, a lot of my problems this year can be blamed on technology, though that was the only one I can blame on lip balm. My printer died, my computer crashed and I had email troubles. If you emailed me last summer and didn't hear back right away, that's why. Either that or I was mad at you.

At one point, I was under my desk with the telephone jammed between my ear and my shoulder. “Now make sure it’s plugged in,” the tech person said, a little patronizingly I thought. I wanted to yell, “Why wouldn’t it be plugged in? I’m underneath a desk tangled up in cables and cords? Who in their right mind would have crawled under here to unplug it?” I didn’t though because the call was being monitored for quality assurance purposes.

If that’s not bad enough, I also had some minor health issues, proving that old saying that if ain’t one thing, it’s two others. In fact, I started this year out on the couch with my feet up. You may wonder how that’s different from any other year. Well, this time I had a good excuse. I had foot surgery and had to quit walking for a few weeks. Incidentally, in September I had to quit walking again because I lost my fitness tracker.

The surgery wasn’t a big deal. I just had a bone spur removed from the tip of my big toe. As you can imagine, this is an inconvenient place for a bone spur and I’ll tell you what else is inconvenient: trying to get in out of a bathtub on one foot so you don’t get your bandages wet. Save a toe; break a leg.

I also had a bad case of tennis elbow. I’d tell you that’s why my handwriting is unreadable but I hate to lie during the holiday season. The funny thing is, I can’t even remember the last time I played tennis. I think they call it tennis elbow because that’s easier to pronounce than “lateral epicondylitis,” its official name. Plus, it sounds more interesting than “inflammation of the elbow tendons” and more glamorous than “washing the windows elbow” or “chopping vegetables elbow.” According to my health consultant, Google, any activity that involves repetitive use of the forearm can lead to tennis elbow. That’s why plumbers, painters and cooks are all candidates for it, and it explains why I’ll be avoiding plumbing, painting and cooking from here on out.

And here’s another reason to avoid cooking. Our dishwasher isn’t working right so if you’re wondering what to get me for Christmas, I could really use a new one. Using ours these days is a lot like having a couple of kids do the dishes. There’s a lot of noise coming from the kitchen but nothing is really getting clean.

For about twelve seconds I thought about not replacing it. We’re empty nesters. How many dishes can we dirty? As it turns out, a lot. You don’t realize how many dirty dishes you’re personally responsible for until you have no dishwasher to wash them and no child at home to blame them on. We’ll definitely be replacing the dishwasher, just in case washing dishes causes tennis elbow.

On a more positive note, I celebrated National Root Beer Float Day on August 6. But because I’m not particularly fond of root beer, I had chocolate syrup on my ice cream instead of root beer. I enjoyed it so much that I’ve decided to celebrate it again next year. I may not wait until August though, because truly, National Root Beer Float Day was the highlight of my year. Do you feel better about yourself yet?

Inadequately yours,

Dorothy Rosby

Lie—and Other Tips for Writing the Perfect Christmas Letter

When I was growing up, my father strung all the Christmas cards my family received in a big X across the ceiling in our living room. I don’t receive enough Christmas cards to make an X on my ceiling. I probably couldn’t even make a Y or an I. I might be able to make a semicolon.

I used to get more cards, maybe because I used to write more cards. And yes, I mean *handwrite*. Here’s how I did it: I’d start with the first person in my address book, my friend Sue Allen. I’d write out her card then painstakingly copy its contents to my card for the Barbers. Then I’d use the Barbers’ card as

a model for the Belmonts and so on. I wrote out my cards in much the same way things were done before the invention of the printing press. My handwriting got worse with each card but my stories probably got better.

It was tedious and time-consuming. In fact, the year I sent my last batch of handwritten Christmas cards, everyone from the Johnsons to the Zieglers didn't get them until St. Patrick's Day. But it was so easy I hardly had to think about it. Or anyway, I hardly did think about it. That may explain why over the years several friends complained that they'd received someone else's card. Someone named Sue.

The year Sue got someone else's card I decided to quit sending cards. And I didn't for years. Unfortunately, in return I got fewer and fewer Christmas cards myself until I was down to two—one from my insurance agent and one from a company that sells prepaid funeral plans.

That's when I decided to try a Christmas newsletter. And since then I've started to hear from people I haven't heard from in years. Of course, they're not sending cards; they're sending letters. And those just don't look good strung across my ceiling. Still, I appreciate them.

I also learn from them. As you can see from the actual letters I've included in this book, I do try to heed the most common complaints about holiday letters. If you decide to write one yourself, follow my guidelines:

1. Don't wait. The earlier you get your letter out the more you can enjoy the holiday season. At least that's what I've heard.
2. Embellish. If your life is like mine, your Christmas newsletter could be—how can I say this diplomatically—dull enough to induce coma. I'm not admitting to anything here, but a lot of people think Christmas letters can be honest or they can be interesting.

Still, you'll want to balance the need to embellish with consideration of your readers' feelings of inadequacy. Sure, write glowingly about your many travel adventures but then mention your credit card bills. And be sure and tell them if you lost your luggage, your passport or your temper.

Along with writing about all your successes, tell them about the speeding tickets and overdraft notices you've received during the past year. If you lost anything in the stock market recently, now would be a good time to mention it. Also, legal issues are always interesting.

3. Be brief. A holiday letter should be the trailer, not the whole movie. Don't overdo it when describing the many accomplishments of your children and pets. Avoid blow-by-blow accounts of remodeling projects. And leave out the details of minor and elective surgeries—unless there were complications. Write more than one page and your letter will look like work to read. Your readers may set it aside with the intention of getting to it after the busy holiday season is over. But then it could get tossed out with the wrapping paper and they'll never know about your legal troubles.
4. Include a family photo. A picture really is worth a thousand words—and given the choice I think most people would choose the picture. Besides, a photograph can say a lot that those on your Christmas list would enjoy hearing: You're alive and well. You appear to be happy. And you've gained weight just like they have.
5. Personalize your letter. If you aren't careful your Christmas letter will be about as intimate as the back of a cereal box. But you can easily individualize it by typing the phrase "Merry Christmas" on the salutation line and then handwriting the first name of your recipient beside it, preferably in their favorite color. If you still don't feel your letter is personal enough try enclosing a lock of your hair or your child's tooth.
6. Introduce. If you feel the need to discuss people not all of your readers know, make it a point to explain who they are. For example, "We went to Bill and Ann's for Thanksgiving," should be expanded to "Bill is Nick's cousin who moved here from Phoenix after he met Ann on the

internet. Nick is our next-door neighbor who is married to Ann's sister Arlene who worked with me at the first job I had when we moved here in 2017." You get the point—if you made it this far.

7. And finally, keep your wits about you. Never put on a little Christmas music and curl up by your Christmas tree with a cup of cocoa while you write your letter. This is no time to be overcome with Christmas spirit. If you're not careful you may say something to everyone on your address list that you only mean for a few of them. Something like, "If you're ever in town, you're welcome to stay with us."

How to Choose the Perfect Gift or Get Out of Giving One Altogether

'Tis the season to run up our credit card bills and give our friends and family good head starts on their next garage sale. It doesn't have to be that way. The year I bought two talking trout and a fruit cake at 4 p.m. on Christmas Eve, I decided it was time to change my gift-giving ways. As a public service I'm going to share with you my new rules for gift giving:

When to shop:

- Don't wait until the night before Christmas when all through the house, not a gift has been bought, not even for your spouse. More worthless gadgets, doohickies and thing-a-ma-bobs are purchased just before Christmas than at any other time of the year. And most of them are bought in those last frantic moments before the reindeer appear. Shoppers who started out with high hopes break down on December 24 and settle for an electric carrot peeler—or a talking trout.
- But don't buy your gifts too far in advance either. You could forget you bought them—or where you put them. You could accidentally sell them at a garage sale. Or you could find that by Christmas you're not even on speaking terms with the potential recipients, let alone gift-giving terms.

Where to shop and where not to shop:

- Never shop for Christmas gifts on television infomercials. The promise that if you buy one dumb thing, you'll get another dumb thing free is not necessarily a sign of quality. Also, if the infomercial claims the items is not sold in stores keep in mind there might be a really good reason why this is so.
- Avoid shopping online. There's no guarantee that what you see on the screen is what you'll get in the mail. Do an internet search of online shopping scams and you can see a stylish jumpsuit that looked more like pink surgical scrubs when the buyer received it, and an attractive three-piece bedding set that was only one pillowcase when it arrived—and not an attractive one. Your recipient may not appreciate these.
- Shop locally. It's good for your community. When my son was young I spent many hours watching Little League baseball games and I never once saw the name Amazon, Wayfair or Overstock.com emblazoned on the back of a uniform. Doing business with the good people who are regularly hit up for all manner of donations and sponsorships seems like the least we can do. Anyway, it's easier to return a gift you bought locally and your recipient may want to do that, especially if you got them pink surgical scrubs.

How to maintain your Christmas spirit as you shop:

- Before you leave home, before you spend two hours filling a shopping cart to the brim, before you wait in line for twenty minutes, and before you unload thirteen Christmas gifts, two bottles of shampoo, a bag of Doritos and a case of toilet paper at the check-out, make absolutely certain that you have your wallet. I know from experience that the peace and goodwill everyone feels during this joyful time of year doesn't extend to someone holding up the line at Stuff-Ko.

- Have more than one idea for each person on your gift list. Coming to blows with another shopper over the last sixteen-piece Speed Lock Cordless Drill has a way of dampening the old Christmas spirit. So does calling home from jail.

How to ensure your loved one will appreciate your gift:

- Think long and hard before buying a loved one a personal care item like a tube of cellulite reduction cream or a snore stopper. But if after careful consideration you still think it's a good gift idea, write "from Santa" on the tag.
- If you're tempted to buy a clothing item that looks so perfect for someone on your gift list that you can practically see them in it, consider the possibility that it looks so perfect for them because they already have it.
- Before you purchase a particular gadget or thing-a-ma-bob for some unsuspecting individual on your Christmas list, ask yourself if they'll use it often enough to keep it within reach. Or will they store it away until that annual or semi-annual occasion when they want to use it but are unable to find it behind their home snow cone machine and their frittata flipper?
- Whatever you choose, be sure to include a gift receipt when you wrap it up. Your recipient will appreciate it and you'll never have to know that they returned the fake tattoo sleeves you bought them.

How to get out of shopping altogether:

- Give gift cards. If you hate to shop, your recipient does it for you and still feels like you're doing them a favor.
- Consider re-gifting. It's thrifty, earth-friendly and only a little tacky. But be careful. I once received a gift-wrapped cheese board with two tags on it: one to me and one to Joyce and David. I'm not Joyce—or David. And I don't need a cheese board, so I gave it to Bill and Karen. I removed the other tags first—I think.
- Make your gifts. Homemade gifts can be very meaningful. Unfortunately, how meaningful depends entirely on whose home they were made in. If like me, you're not the crafty sort, you'll want to stick to buying gifts—or gift cards. While it truly is better to give than to receive, that's not what you want anyone thinking when they open your gift.

Please Put Me Back on Your Christmas Card List

Hello there! Remember me? I always figured everyone assumed no news is good news. Unfortunately, I've discovered that if some people don't hear from you for a few years they take you off their Christmas card list. So, in an effort to get back in your good graces and back on your Christmas card list, I'm sending my Christmas letter for this year—and possibly next year as well.

I hope the year was a good one for you. Mine began in a courtroom, which I think you'd agree is no way to start a new year, especially if you're the defendant. Fortunately I wasn't. It was still stressful though. I was already running late when I arrived at the courthouse for jury duty on January 4, and then my necklace set off the alarm on the metal detector. By the time I got to my seat I was in no mood to be fair and impartial. In the end, I wasn't selected to be on the jury anyway. Maybe that's why.

In July we moved our office to our guest room, our guest room to my son's bedroom and my son's bedroom to our office. We had a really good reason for doing this, but for the life of me, right now I can't think what it was. Actually, about halfway through the process I couldn't think what it was. At the time I nicknamed the ordeal the Great Order Restoration Project, but now I see that was naive and overly optimistic since order has yet to be restored.

My cellphone died this year. The good news is all it took was a factory reset to revive it. The bad news is the factory reset locked it. In other words, for several days my phone thought I was a thief trying to break into it. This is the world we live in. Hackers can break into giant corporations and steal all our financial data but we can't get into our own cellphones.

Fortunately, I was able to unlock it after an hour and a half talking on a borrowed landline to an Apple representative. *Unfortunately*, until I got everything reloaded, my cellphone couldn't do a thing except make and receive phone calls. And yes, I realize there was a time when that would have been enough.

After all that, we still felt optimistic enough to buy a harness and leash for our cat. It seems insane now. The cat thinks so too.

Before you judge us you should know that I have several friends who regularly take their cats for walks. Plus there are hundreds of YouTube videos of people who've successfully leash-trained their cats. There are also hundreds of YouTube videos of people who've failed to leash-train their cats. We ignored those.

It turns out that putting our cat in the harness was a little like dressing a greased toddler. And when we finally had him in it, he sank to the ground looking embarrassed and uncomfortable and crawled under the bed as fast as he could go. I'm hopeful about many things in the coming year but taking our cat for a walk isn't one of them.

My husband and I celebrated our anniversary with an Alaskan cruise. We had a glorious time and I hope we don't have to be married for another thirty years before we get to go on another vacation like that one. I will say, a cruise ship is more luxury than we're used to. It's a rare thing for me to eat in a place where you have to dress for dinner, though I do always have something on.

Our steward left chocolate on our pillows every evening too. You don't see that everywhere. But it's not as special as you'd think. It's only one little piece—actually two, one for each of us, but my husband doesn't know that. And why on the pillow? By the time I found it I'd already brushed my teeth.

We did a lot of camping this summer, or as I like to call it, weather modification. Our camping trips are more efficient at causing precipitation than a cloud seeding program, which is why last summer we gave up our tent and built ourselves an ark. I'm joking. Actually we bought a camper, which was easier.

We also did a bit of canoeing. This presents a challenge for me because it means assisting my husband to lift our seventeen-foot aluminum canoe off the top of our vehicle, and I'm not as strong as I look. Fortunately, after so many years of marriage we're a good team. Working together, we've developed a very efficient system that involves lifting the canoe, then flipping it while my husband calls out instructions and I complain about them.

We didn't bring our canoe or drag our camper along with us on our southwest trip this fall. It's cheaper to stay in a camper than it is to stay in a hotel but staying with relatives like we did is cheaper still and it doesn't affect your gas mileage. We took a ton of photos on all of our travels. Hopefully we can get together soon and I'll show you every single one of them on my phone. I know you'll enjoy that.

Your fair and impartial friend,

Dorothy

P.S. Now would you please put me back on your Christmas card list?

A Few Christmas Tunes I'd Like to Roast over an Open Fire

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this essay are mine alone. But it is my book so I can do that. You may feel differently. I won't hold it against you.

I'm fond of Christmas music and I'm sincerely grateful to those radio stations that play it all day, every day from Thanksgiving until Christmas. I can't help singing along with all my favorites, which I'm sure is as entertaining to the people next to me at stoplights as it is annoying to those in the car with me. I'd never get my tree up and my Christmas shopping done if it weren't for music getting me into the spirit of the season. And sometimes even that doesn't work.

I love "O Holy Night," "Away in a Manger" and "Silver Bells." Every time a snowflake falls I burst into a chorus of "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas," even if it falls in April. I like "White Christmas" as much as anyone, as long as I don't have to shovel. And "Winter Wonderland" is one of my favorites. You know it: "Later on we'll perspire, 'cause it's warm by the fire. Plus we're afraid of the plans that we've made, walking in a winter wonderland." It's something like that.

But there are a few Christmas songs that make me grateful Christmas comes but once a year, and "Santa Baby" is at the top of the list. "Do You Hear What I Hear?" (See how I did that? I really like that one.) The singer is flirting with Santa, who, as far as I know, is a happily married man. And all she wants for Christmas is...a lot. Just a fur coat, a convertible, a yacht, a duplex, some checks, a ring, decorations from Tiffany's and the deed to a platinum mine. All I want is to never hear her ask for it all again.

The only wish list longer than hers is in "The Twelve Days of Christmas." I read that it would cost **\$170,298.03** to buy everything for that twelve-day gift-giving rampage and what would you have to show for it? A noisy mess. Our hapless gift recipient would be forced to sell her gold rings to buy an aviary for all the birds. Then she'd have put the ladies dancing and the lords-a-leaping to work cleaning it, which would be a real waste of talent.

"All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth" is a short but equally annoying Christmas wish song. There's not a child in America who would settle for that. That song should only be performed at elementary school Christmas concerts where it's still cute, even if it is a lie.

"I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus" is another song that should only be sung by small children, and the Chipmunk song, "Christmas Don't Be Late," should only be *heard* by small children. That song makes me long for a little "Silent Night" which, by the way, is one of my favorites.

And speaking of musical animals, hearing dogs bark "Jingle Bells" is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, by which I mean once in a lifetime is enough. I don't know about chestnuts, but that's one Christmas CD I wouldn't mind roasting over an open fire.

That and "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer." It's mean, it's disrespectful and there's no way it could have happened. Everyone knows reindeer fly.

Finally there's "The Christmas Shoes," a melodramatic song about a boy who goes shoe shopping for his mother while she's home dying. Hear that too many times and you have a hard time believing "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year." (Another favorite of mine.)

I'll get through it somehow. I'll sing along with the ones I like and change the station during the ones I don't. December 26 will roll around and I won't have to hear "Last Christmas" and "Baby It's Cold Outside" again for another whole year. "Joy to the World," which I love, by the way.

Merry Christmas from the Envyofall Family

There are two things that make me feel like a boring person. Actually there are more than two, but the ones that come to mind this time of year are writing a Christmas letter and reading everyone else's.

When I write a letter I come to the painful realization that the year has flown by again, that I've been terribly busy but I haven't done a thing worth mentioning. Worse, when I read all the newsy holiday letters I receive I think the writers must have had more days since last Christmas than I had, and apparently more money, energy and ambition as well.

I don't think I'm alone in my feelings of inadequacy either. Consider the following actual letter I made up. You'll see in brackets what an unfortunate reader might be thinking as she reads this holiday greeting from the Envyofall family.

Merry Christmas from the Envyofalls!

We hope your year was as wonderful as ours was! *[I'm pretty sure it wasn't.]* We started the year with a January vacation in Hawaii. *[Now I know it wasn't.]* Since the children are both doing so well in school we decided taking them out for two weeks would be acceptable, and they enjoyed themselves thoroughly. *[I'll bet their teachers did too.]*

In June Maxwell and I celebrated our twentieth anniversary with a month in Italy. *[What a coincidence! My husband and I celebrated our anniversary in June too—at the Olive Garden.]* You can see photos of both vacations on our family website. *[You can see our vacation photos too—if my phone is working.]*

Tad and Tillie are both doing great in school. *[You mentioned that.]* How blessed we are to have such clever, well-behaved children. *[That's not how I remember them.]*

Tillie is a senior. She's a computer whiz and has helped so many people with computer issues that she finally decided to start her own business. She's also a fabulous saxophone player and already has her own band which has won countless competitions. Between the business and the band she's earning lots of money just in time for college. But what do you know! She won a full-ride scholarship to Superior University and won't need any of it. *[She could send it to me.]*

Tad is a straight-A student and president of his class. He just became an Eagle Scout and he's fluent in Chinese, Spanish and French. He's also active in 4-H, football, soccer, basketball, baseball, track, band, choir, debate, theatre, orchestra and dressage. *[That kid never did have an ounce of ambition.]*

In June Maxwell was promoted to Vice President at his company. *[I don't see how. He's never at work.]* And I continue to run a successful import/export business out of our home. It's doing so well that I've been able to fully fund our retirement plan and purchase a winter home in Arizona. I also volunteer around twenty hours a week for the less fortunate. *[I'm less fortunate and you didn't do a thing for me.]*

And last but not least, Snookums won Best of Show at the Kennel Club Dog Show. We love him dearly and are so proud of him! *[Spotty peed on the carpet and bit my mother-in-law. We still love him...most days.]*

Happy holidays to you and yours! We think of you often and hope to see you soon. *[We think of you often too and desperately hope that when we see you next we'll have something to show for ourselves.]*

Sincerely, The Envyofalls

Peace on Earth and War at Home

Ah, the holiday season; a joyous time for families to come together, create new traditions and fight about the old ones. It's not that they're disagreeable people—well, some of them are disagreeable people—it's just that couples bring to their marriages the traditions of the families they grew up in. And they desperately want to pass their customs on to their children. Not only that, they feel that their partner's traditions are—how can I say this diplomatically—silly and stupid and therefore not worth keeping alive.

NOTE: The world's religions are outside the scope of my expertise, as most things are, so for the purposes of this essay I will focus on those couples who agree to celebrate Christmas. But that may be all they agree on.

Let's start with the most basic question: When to decorate? One partner believes that if the Christmas decorations are up more than two weeks out, the true meaning of the holiday season will be forgotten and boredom will set in. They also hope that if they wait long enough they'll get out of decorating altogether.

The other partner thinks that if they're going to go to all the trouble, they ought to enjoy the decorations for as long as possible. Not to mention it's easier to decorate the outside of the house while it's seventy-five degrees. Why not put the decorations up on an unseasonably cool day in July?

The family must also decide between a real and an artificial tree. One partner takes the emotional angle that artificial trees don't smell as nice or look as, well, real. The other side is more logical. "Yes, but artificial trees don't drop needles; they're never flat on one side; and we won't have to chop a lovely, living tree to death every year." Maybe that's a little emotional too.

If the family decides on a real tree, they must choose between buying one and cutting one. "Remember how much fun we had last year tromping through the forest and cutting down our tree?"

"Yes, and remember getting stuck in the snow and losing the chainsaw?"

Wherever they get their tree, some members of the family like pine, some like fir and at least one is still grumbling that an artificial tree would be easier. Finally, in the spirit of the season there are compromises made and pouting all the way home.

Then there's the subject of gifts. One parent panics if the gifts aren't bought and wrapped by August 1. The other holds out hope that Santa will show up rendering shopping unnecessary. When this doesn't happen, and it seldom does, this partner believes there is nothing wrong with shopping on December 24—except that his/her spouse grew up opening gifts on Christmas Eve.

"That makes no sense. Everyone knows Santa only works one night a year."

"If Santa did his job we wouldn't be discussing this. Maybe it's time we tell the kids the truth."

"Not yet! Remember how upset they were when they caught me filling the Easter baskets."

"You weren't filling them! You were eating out of them. Anyway, thinking about Santa keeps them awake."

"Perfect. They'll be alert for midnight services."

"Midnight? They might be alert, but I don't intend to be."

The question of staying home or traveling to share the holiday with relatives can also be divisive, and more so with certain relatives. If the family stays home there's the subject of what to prepare for holiday meals. Ham or prime rib? Turkey or tofu?

If they're traveling they don't have to decide but they do have to eat—or pretend to. And there are good reasons some holiday foods are eaten only once a year. It can take a full year to summon the courage to eat lutefisk, fruit cake or oyster stew again. Personally I could eat oyster stew on any holiday, including the Fourth of July. But I don't think my family would agree to that tradition.

Decorating: A Family Affair

A certain guest once criticized my husband and me because we didn't have any Christmas decorations up in our home. We pointed out that while there was not a plastic Santa or a wreath or even a Christmas tree in sight, we did have a manger scene on display. We told her that by having a crèche only, we were focusing on the true meaning of Christmas. She, with her emphasis on the trappings of Christmas, was celebrating only the commercial aspects of the holiday. All very true.

It was also true that the manger was the only Christmas decoration we could find. We hadn't yet unpacked all our boxes from our recent move—four years before—and the decorations were somewhere in the depths of our basement where Rudolph himself couldn't have found them.

Eventually our ornaments resurfaced. But we were still in no hurry to begin decorating, in part because we were afraid the above-mentioned guest might visit more often.

Besides, decorating takes time. The holiday season is so busy. Everyone has the same number of hours in a day, and some people like to spend theirs decorating. I like to spend mine on activities that are more meaningful to me, like driving around town looking at other people's Christmas lights.

Things started to change as our son grew older. After all, Christmas is for children—and retailers. One day he asked why there were pretty lights on houses all over town but none on ours. I told him, "As soon as you're old enough to climb a ladder we can have lights on our house." We never have had lights on our house.

At some point we began decorating inside our home, however, and none too successfully. My husband and I couldn't even agree about what makes a perfect Christmas tree. He didn't enjoy looking for them, but he never trusted me to pick one out alone. The one time I did that I bought the spindliest tree on the lot because I felt sorry for it. "It doesn't care," he said. "It's dead." But I cared.

One year we bought a giant tree. Then we didn't have enough lights for a tree that big, and it turned out, even fewer that worked. We purchased more lights until we had a grand total of 175, which was, according to the package, perfect for a six-foot tree. For taller trees, as ours apparently was, we were instructed to add thirty-five lights for every foot over six. Big deal, I thought. What difference can thirty-five lights make? I'll tell you. They'll cover the bottom of a seven-foot tree, that's what.

Still, it looked okay to people passing by outside our picture window—they couldn't see the bottom. Then one day the top string stopped working. Outside or inside, the middle of our tree was always beautiful.

Despite everything, now and then I catch myself getting excited about decorating our home this year. In my weaker moments I envision a happy family outing as we venture out to choose a tree together. I see us digging through our ornaments—if we can find them—and oohing and aahing over each one. We'll put on some Christmas music, start the fireplace and make hot chocolate. Then we'll spend the afternoon transforming our home into a Christmas showcase.

Then, just before I'm overcome with holiday spirit, I remember the other reason I don't like to decorate. To misuse an old saying, "Decorate and the whole family decorates with you, but you put the decorations away alone."

And I always do—eventually. What goes up must come down, so long after half the population has already given up on their New Year's resolutions I resolve to take down our decorations. It's never nearly as fun as putting them up and the longer I wait the worse it gets. I don't play Christmas music and drink hot cocoa while I work because some years it's July by the time I get around to the job.

Every year I find I either have more ornaments or fewer boxes than I did when we decorated. Plus I have a tangled-up, twenty-foot strand of mini-twinkle lights, half of which don't twinkle anymore. But dealing with them is no way to start a new year, so I toss them in the box in a heap on the off chance that by next year I'll have developed more patience and dexterity.

My husband helps me wrestle our now artificial tree back into its box, which seems to have shrunk. Then he gives directions and I complain about them as we attempt to haul it down two flights of stairs to the basement, quashing any good will we've developed over the holidays.

No Elephants Were Harmed in the Making of this Essay

There's a big box in my guest room containing one redneck coloring book (never used), four pink flamingos (brand-new), one wrench beer opener (still in the package) and an assortment of other equally useful items. I keep the box there partly because my guest room has become something of a storage unit and partly because I'm hoping one of my guests will steal it from me.

Unfortunately, so far everyone who's stayed with me has been too honest to steal. Or maybe they just have better taste.

It's okay though. I'm about to part with a few things. 'Tis the season for that curious tradition known as the White Elephant Gift Exchange. The term "white elephant" refers to a useless or troublesome possession, which is exactly what one receives during a White Elephant Gift Exchange. No actual elephants are exchanged at these events, which is lucky because my guest room isn't that big.

The exchange goes by various other names including Rob Your Neighbor, Thieving Secret Santa, Grinch Exchange and Yankee Swap. As far as I know no Yankees are swapped either, though I could fit at least a couple of those in my guest room.

The rules vary, but basically each participant supplies one amusing, impractical or downright dumb gift such as a set of muffin-top baking cups, a high-heel tape dispenser or soap in the shape of false teeth. The group determines order, the first victim opens a wrapped gift and turns to the next victim. Every partaker after that chooses a wrapped gift or steals from someone else who's already selected. When someone's gift is stolen, that person can either choose another wrapped gift to open or steal from another player. The game is over when everyone has a useless item to store in their guest room.

Throughout the exchange, those who don't like their gifts, which is almost everyone, try to persuade others to steal it. "This bacon cologne is so you. You know you want it." "Come on! Everyone should have at least one propeller beanie." It's all quite entertaining and I never want to do it again.

I've had the dubious good fortune of attending many White Elephant Gift Exchanges which explains my redneck coloring book, pink flamingos and wrench beer opener. You didn't think I bought those myself, did you?

As someone who's trying to downsize, it goes against everything in me to attend a social event and come home with something I don't need, don't want and can't regift in good conscience. With that in mind, here's my strategy for winning at the White Elephant Gift Exchange game.

1. Before you choose a gift to bring to the party, make absolutely certain that it's a White Elephant Gift Exchange you're going to. You don't want to be the only one who brings fuzzy dice or a thirty-year-old macroeconomics textbook to the party.
2. Never buy a white elephant gift. That's a waste of money and it only encourages manufacturers to make more. Instead, dig through gifts you've been given. Often an item that was not intended to be a white elephant can easily pass for one. Just make sure the person who gave it to you won't be at the party.
3. Once at the party, make every effort to be the last person to choose a gift. Often order is chosen by drawing numbers. That means you'll have to cheat. I'm kidding. But the last person in the White Elephant Gift Exchange does have the advantage because they can choose the least dumb of all the dumb gifts. Still, don't cheat. It's not worth ruining your reputation over. Or maybe it is.
4. Never choose the most beautifully wrapped gift. Fancy wrapping is almost always a ploy by the giver to convince you to choose their *A Christmas Story* leg lamp or the stocking cap with a beard attached.
5. Never choose the largest gift. A large box often holds many smaller boxes, all containing baby elephants. This is usually a sign that the giver is trying to pare down the selection of white elephant gifts in her guest room. Meanwhile, a small gift in an unattractive brown paper bag is often a gift card purchased on the way to the party by someone who nearly forgot about the occasion.
6. If you get a gift you can tolerate, do all you can to discourage others from stealing it. Sneeze on it if you have to.
7. Finally, if you really don't want your gift, and most likely you won't, "forget" it when you leave the party. I was once at a party where all thirty-some guests hid the gifts we'd received throughout our host's home. That included the case of canned sardines I brought to give away. Our lucky host was finding sardines and white elephants until Valentine's Day. The rest of us went home gift-free if not guilt-free. Merry Christmas to us!

Keep Your Partridge; I'll Take a Roast Chicken

I saw where I could order "The Twelve Days of Christmas" as a cellphone ring tone. I didn't though. I don't believe anything would sap my Christmas spirit quite like hearing that song every time someone calls me—except maybe hearing "The Little Drummer Boy" every time someone calls.

The thing that's always bothered me about the "Twelve Days of Christmas," besides that it's repetitive and relentless and it takes twelve days to sing it, is that the giver's choice of gifts is just plain ridiculous. By day three, I'd be yelling, "Will you stop! The birds go or I go!"

I do give the guy credit for shopping though. It can't be easy to find four calling birds and seven swans a-swimming this time of year, let alone catch them and put them in the car.

Also, you could never accuse him of being cheap. As of this writing he'd pay a whopping \$170,298.03 for all those gifts. That's according to PNC Financial Services Group, which tracks the cost of the gifts in the "Twelve Days of Christmas" every year so that Christmas shoppers can budget better.

I like to think my true love could make better use of \$170,298.03. For starters, I need some new tires. I know tires aren't much of a Christmas gift, but with \$170,298.03 I bet he could buy me a really nice sweater too.

I've got some suggestions for saving True Love time and money, and more importantly, giving his lady some gifts she'll enjoy. For starters, while a pear tree might be a practical gift, the ground is too hard to plant one right now. You'd think True Love would know that. Instead of a partridge in a pear tree, why not a fresh fruit basket and a nice roast chicken?

And rather than two turtle doves, how about two Dove bars? The chocolate, not the soap. Soap might send the wrong message.

On day three True Love presents three French hens which, as it turns out, are nothing but chickens with accents. His sweetheart has already had roast chicken three times this week, so I suggest French bread—three loaves. She can freeze two.

On the fourth day True Love gifts four calling birds. According to my clever friend Google calling birds are actually European blackbirds but try singing that nine times. Considering the migratory habits of calling birds, I think calling cards might last longer. Plus it works in the song.

On day five True Love sends a real gift: five golden rings. Finally, a gift his girlfriend can enjoy—or hock after they break up.

He should really stop right there, but no. On the sixth day of Christmas True Love shows up with six geese a-laying. By now his lady is becoming concerned by her man's sudden interest in fowl, especially when he gives her seven swans a-swimming the very next day. At this point she might find a traditional gift reassuring. Maybe slippers and a robe. No fruit cake though. She's already got one of those.

If she hasn't moved out without leaving a forwarding address by day eight, our lucky recipient will receive eight maids a-milking. This would be a very useful gift if she has a dairy. If not, this is no time to give her cows. I suggest skipping the milk maids, instead presenting his darling with a nice assortment of cheeses.

On day nine he presents nine ladies dancing. Let me just say, anytime your true love shows up with dancing ladies, there's going to be trouble. The ten lords a-leaping scheduled to arrive the next day may help ease the tension by giving the ladies someone else to dance with. But True Love could save himself a lot of explaining if he'd just take his girlfriend dancing.

Having learned nothing during his gift giving spree, True Love sends an entire pipe and drum corps on days eleven and twelve. Before the neighbors complain, his beloved could announce to the musicians, "Put down your instruments everyone and come paint my house." That would be a lovely gift.

It's the Thought That Counts, So Make Sure You're Thinking

Aah, the perfect gift. Your loved one will cherish it for years to come. They'll tell everyone they know about it. And they'll think of you fondly every time they use it, which you hope will make up for the way they think of you the rest of the time.

But time is running out. At this point you're far more likely to purchase one of the following types of gifts for your loved one. They'll tell everyone about these too.

1. The gift you give because you want the receiver to have it. In fact, you *need* the receiver to have it—like when you give your spouse cooking lessons or a messy co-worker a desk organizer or your college-aged child a broom for his dorm room. You're convinced that if you wrap a razor or a gift certificate for tattoo removal in beautiful paper and put a giant

bow on it, the recipient will see it as a thoughtful gift instead of what it really is: an underhanded way to bring them around to your way of thinking.

2. The gift you give because you want it for yourself. Based on the shape, size and weight of the packages under your tree, you're pretty sure no one got it for you so you buy it on a whim. You feel guilty immediately, as you should. But you tell yourself the same story you plan to tell your spouse: You bought them the \$400 fishing rod or the Make Your Own Greek Yogurt Kit so that the two of you can spend more quality time together. The danger is that, out of spite, they may not even let you have it in the divorce.
3. The gift you give because you don't have a single idea and you're flat out of time to come up with one. The pressure is on. The store is crowded with panicked shoppers fighting over the last Stinky Pig game. You've heard the Chipmunks sing "Christmas Don't Be Late," one too many times over the intercom. And you know that if you don't get out of this store fast someone's going to get run over and not by a reindeer. You vow that next year you'll "know before you go." But this year you start tossing gadgets into your cart: a decorative toilet paper dispenser complete with AM/FM radio, clock and emergency siren; an alarm clock that will scold your teenager out of bed; a scale that politely informs whoever is standing on it that they've gained weight.

Stop! There's another way. At times like this, wise shoppers opt for gift cards. You may think gift cards are a cop-out but they have many advantages, the main one being that if you and your recipient aren't speaking by Christmas you can use the gift yourself. Not so if you bought left-handed golf clubs and you're right-handed. Or a small Minnesota Vikings sweatshirt and you're an extra-large.

Gift cards are easy to wrap and one size really does fit all. Plus they save you from buying one of those last minute, desperate attempts at a gift, like a set of fuzzy dice or a lawn elf.

And gift cards are practical. Those who don't have much can use them to buy things they need; those who have everything can use them to buy more things they don't need. Maybe they could even buy you something.

I admit gift cards do have some drawbacks though. For one thing they show the recipient how cheap you are. Of course they may already know that. Also gift cards aren't much fun to shake under the tree. I suggest you wrap them together with something else, say a box of candy or a large rock.

You can't buy gift cards on sale like you can actual gifts. They aren't cheaper by the dozen and you can't buy one, get one free. A twenty-dollar gift card is always going to cost you twenty dollars. I take that back. The last twenty-dollar gift card I bought cost around twenty-one dollars because of a handling fee. Unfortunately the recipient will still think I only spent twenty dollars on them...unless I tell them—which I might.

And gift cards are often a wash. You give your brother a ten-dollar gift card and he gives you a ten-dollar gift card. Or worse, you give him a ten-dollar gift card and he gives you a twenty-dollar gift card. Or worse yet, you give him a twenty-dollar gift card and he gives you a five-dollar gift card. Ouch.

Finally, it might be a slippery slope letting people shop for their own gifts. I picture a day when everyone on my gift list just hands me a receipt and asks me to reimburse them.

Santa, I've Forgiven You for the Barbie I Never Got

Dear Santa,

I know you haven't heard from me since I wrote to ask for that Barbie doll all those years ago. I might have written you more if I'd gotten it. But I'm finally willing to give you another chance.

Before I get into all I want for Christmas though, can I make a suggestion? I don't mean to be critical but seeing us when we're sleeping and knowing when we're awake is a little creepy. I wouldn't sleep the rest of the night if I ever caught you peeking through my window at 2 a.m. Just something to think about, sir.

Also, I know you're gonna find out who's naughty and nice, and I think I can help you with that. In the naughty camp, you can put litterers, spammers and identity thieves. Also shoppers who leave their grocery carts in the middle of the parking lot, people who spit out their gum on the sidewalk and anyone who doesn't return my phone calls.

On the nice side are volunteers, medical professionals, first responders and people who share their Christmas baking with me. Oh, and me. I'm nice—on most days. Or at least on some days. So when you're making your list and checking it twice, would you please consider the following?

I don't need much. In fact, I was thinking since your sleigh will be empty on the way home maybe you could haul a few things away for me. Then next year your elves could refurbish them for someone else who doesn't need them either.

I would like a new snow blower though. We had one but it worked best in light fluffy snow, which is exactly the same kind of snow I work best in. The heavy, wet stuff that fell last year did us both in, but one of us didn't get to quit.

I have a smart phone and I love it. So Santa, I'm wondering if I could have a smart smoke detector—one that can tell the difference between a kitchen fire and a little cheese spilled in the bottom of my oven. And how about a smart shredder that could warn me if I was about to shred my Social Security card? And maybe a smart spellchecker that knows what I mean to type, because even though they're both spelled correctly, being “inducted” into the Hall of Fame is very different from being “indicted” into the Hall of Fame.

Also could I have a year's supply of sunglasses and winter gloves? I know for some people that means a pair of each. But I'd need a lot more than that. I regularly leave sunglasses and gloves at locations all over town and I never notice until it's too late to remember where I've been. What I don't understand is why I need my sunglasses and gloves going in, but not coming back out.

And Santa, I need a new purse. But not just any purse; my new purse should look very small on the outside but be very large on the inside. Come to think of it, I'd like some shoes like that too.

I'm not sure you could arrange this, but I wish all vehicles could have two horns. I know we need the loud obnoxious one for emergencies, but I'd also like a kinder, gentler one that wouldn't scare the bejeebers out of an absentminded driver who is simply lost in thought when the light turns green. I hate that.

You might not be able to do anything about this either, Santa, but is there any way bacon could be good for me? And Cheetos? And ice cream with hot fudge, caramel sauce and peanuts sprinkled on top?

Also I think there should be more almonds in Almond Joys. I love almonds but four doesn't seem all that joyful to me.

And I'd like ice cream bars with chocolate coating that doesn't fall off when I bite and also bread without crusts. I know a lot of people like the crusts, so in the spirit of the season I'll save mine for them. I told you I was nice.

How to Wrap a Million Dollar Smartphone

You can't tell by looking at my wrapping, but I was once a professional gift wrapper. Sort of. When I was a teenager, I worked at a hardware store in my hometown, Buffalo, South Dakota. Buffalo had a population of around 350 people and was many miles from a department store. Also I was in high school before the days of online shopping—about a hundred years before the days of online shopping. So the hardware store carried a variety of housewares, toys and other items that were often purchased for gift giving. We also had a fabulous selection of wrapping paper and bows but only a few people on staff who could really do them justice. I wasn't one of them.

Practice should make perfect and I wrapped many gifts, but they always had those big bulges on the sides of the package where the paper comes together—like I accidentally wrapped a hammer in there, which I may have once or twice. Even today I turn a gift on its side and put a big bow on the lump to cover it up.

But I can finally feel good about my wrapping, and not because it's gotten better. Recently I've read about several studies that suggest attractive gift wrapping can backfire by leading the receiver to anticipate an equally attractive gift. That means that when they open your beautifully wrapped package and find an egg slicer or a hair removal device, they're bound to be disappointed. They might be disappointed anyway.

But researchers say fancy wrapping can even dim the enthusiasm of someone receiving a nice gift. Meanwhile, mediocre wrapping can enhance the joy of receiving any gift because the wrapping hasn't built up expectations, though I don't think anything could enhance the joy of receiving a hair remover or an egg slicer.

It makes sense really. Imagine that a month before Christmas you receive a gift that's been professionally wrapped in gold metallic wrapping paper with a red satin ribbon and a giant bow. You see it under your tree every day and you can't help imagining all the wonderful things that could be in that package. Crystal? A new camera? A hundred-dollar bill and a big rock to add weight to the package? You can't wait for Christmas!

Finally, it's time. You tear into the package prepared to be wowed, and you find...a hot dog cooker or a snow cone maker. Naturally you're disappointed. Who wants snow cones in December?

If these studies had been done back when I was a professional gift wrapper it would have saved me a lot of embarrassment. I could have handed my customers their lumpy packages and said, "If your wife is disappointed that you bought mixing bowls for her birthday, don't blame me."

According to one researcher there's an exception to the gift wrap rule, and that's when the value of your gift isn't obvious. For example, let's say you're giving your teenager the \$1.3 million Diamond Crypto Smartphone. If she thinks the diamonds are cubic zirconia she might carelessly misplace her phone under her bed or accidentally throw it in with the dirty laundry. In order to signal that the gift actually *does* have great value you should definitely have it professionally wrapped. You should also have your head examined.

For gifts valued at less than \$1.3 million, consider more humble wrapping:

- Wrap your gift in newspaper, being careful to avoid the obituary page.

- Wrap it in brown paper and tie it up with string while humming a verse of “My Favorite Things.”
- Make the wrapping part of the gift. For example, use a tea towel to wrap a package of kitchen sponges.
- Go wrapless—the gift, not you.
- My personal favorite though, is the gift bag. Gift bags are attractive but not so much that they raise my expectations. They don’t require any special wrapping skill when I go to reuse them later. And they make it easy for me to peek.

All I Wanted for Christmas and Didn’t Get

My tires went flat, my oven died and my printer stopped printing—all just before Christmas. This was lucky because I was able to hint to everyone I know that all I wanted for Christmas was a new gas oven, a new printer and a new set of tires. Some people think practical items like these don’t make good gifts but those people have never priced gas ovens.

I guess my hints weren’t clear enough because I didn’t find tires, a printer or an oven under my tree. It’s not too late. I would still graciously accept all the above for early birthday gifts. My birthday isn’t until August, but even I can’t do without an oven that long.

Honestly I don’t see how I could have worn our oven out. When it started taking longer to finish the job I thought it was because of the dust that’s settled in it. Just to be sure I called a very nice oven repairman. He said it wasn’t the dust. We both thought he’d fixed the problem but my Thanksgiving turkey didn’t agree. Neither did the guests I’d invited to eat it.

So, I called the oven technician again. He did what he could, but in the end he pronounced my oven terminal. He told me it may work for a while but it won’t be very reliable—much like the cook who uses it. That was three weeks before Christmas. Some people would see this as a problem, but where other people see a problem I see an opportunity—the opportunity to get out of baking. Now that the Christmas baking season is over I could really use a new oven. Hint, hint.

My printer has been making more noise than seems necessary lately. It’s also been giving me error messages about something called an ink pump which sounds vital in a printer. Sometimes the printer prints, but more and more often it does not. The problem seemed to get worse just at that time when organized people were copying Christmas letters for those they care about. I care about people too, but my printer wasn’t working. Also I didn’t write a Christmas letter.

Around that time, my front driver’s side tire was low. I limped to the tire shop where the tire man told me the problem was the bead. Did I know what a bead is? “Yes,” I said. “I know beads when I see them but what does that have to do with my tire?”

“The bead,” he said, “refers to the edge of the tire that sits on the wheel.” Oh. Even I can see why it would be better if it sat there right.

He fixed the tire but a few days later my front passenger side tire was low. This time the problem was a nail. I do know what a nail is. The tire man fixed that too, but he told me nails and beads are the least of my worries. I said, “I know! Both my oven and my printer aren’t working.”

He said that I should add to the list that my tires need replacing. I refused to believe it. Everything can’t fall apart at once, can it? Someone suggested I try the penny test to see for myself. You place a penny upside down in the tire tread and if you still see all of Lincoln’s hair you need new tires. My good friend Google said a quarter works even better. I haven’t purchased a new printer or a new gas oven yet, so I still have some pennies and quarters left. And after consulting with Lincoln and Washington, both wise presidents with fine heads of hair, I decided that yes, I do indeed need new tires.

I guess that's how life is sometimes. You're going along fine when suddenly your Thanksgiving turkey takes an extra hour to cook, your printer stops printing and politicians can no longer hide in your tire tread. Don't feel bad for me. But if you do, send pennies and quarters. A lot of them. Hint, hint.

Website: www.dorothyrosby.com

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/author/dorothyrosby>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/rosbydorothy>

Goodreads: <https://www.goodreads.com/dorothyrosby>

Other books by Dorothy Rosby include:

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