

# The gift of time

Ellen Tout decided to stop giving presents on birthdays, and to spend time with friends and family instead. It proved a rewarding, but sometimes challenging, decision

**M**um and I shriek as we wade into the cold lake, bracing ourselves to try flyboarding. The instructor has demonstrated how to launch ourselves from the water into the air and glide along the surface – like James Bond meets Aquaman. With our feet strapped to jetpacks and ready to go, I am excited. What an amazing birthday gift from my mother, and a complete surprise!

I'm hoping to have lots more outings like this because I've asked friends and family not to buy me presents any more, and I've said that I will stop buying for them too. Instead, I want us to plan ways to spend time together.

This has been coming for a while. Too often, I find myself rushing around the shops in a frantic spin after forgetting the birthday of someone I barely see, or searching for an unusual flavour of jam for a relative who's difficult to buy for. I try to get it right, but I know the chances are these items are unwanted and may be unused. It feels like we're exchanging gifts because that's what's expected – a custom that, when I think about it, doesn't feel right for me.

I love to treat those I care about but would rather do so by cooking their favourite meal or sharing an experience and creating memories together. I'm also conscious of the waste involved in giving gifts and am keen to cut back on it. James Wallman, author of *Stuffocation* (Penguin, £5.15), echoes this: 'By having less and doing more, we can be happier, healthier and richer in every sense: less clutter, less anxiety, more meaning, more flow, more intrinsic enjoyment, better conversations and connections, and a stronger sense of belonging.'

Flyboarding is not something I thought my mum would want to try. As I wait for my turn in the chilly water, I feel nervous and nearly back out, but we are soon laughing, helping each other master the technique and shouting encouragement across the water. It is so much fun, and even more so because I am sharing it with my mum. As I take one final dip, she watches from the jetty, grinning and mouthing that she is proud of me.

We're both buzzing afterwards and reward ourselves with coffee and cake at a cafe on the coast. I often spend time with my mum >>>

– walking our dogs, running errands or sharing DIY tasks – but I don't remember when we last spent the day together simply having fun. I treasure our flyboarding experience long afterwards. We were both truly present, chatting for hours and even splitting seconds of cake. I go home on such a high and feel closer to my mum.

### Togetherness unwrapped

Sharing time doesn't have to mean anything as elaborate or expensive as flyboarding. Many of my friends are turning 30 this year and, when I meet up with one of them, she tells me she's worried about how she's going to afford all the gifts and celebrations. I tell her about my experiences idea and she's keen, but what shall we do? We look to the past for inspiration – one of our favourite things as children was a sleepover, so why not as adults?

When our birthdays come around, her husband and baby are sent out for the evening and her living room is filled with cushions and blankets. I arrive with nibbles, wine and chocolate. She's dug out our favourite old movies and bought face masks – she's going to give me an old-school makeover. Hours later, with glitter smeared down our faces, we're giggling over school memories and have *Dirty Dancing* on repeat. The evening cost very little, but we go to sleep grinning and decide an annual sleepover is going to be our new tradition.

Time with those you care about can be a rarity in our hectic schedules. Also, when you're not giving a physical gift, it's a chance to be creative. What have they never tried? What do you miss doing together? What do you want to show the person? For me, this mindset puts the play and joy back into giving.

### Remember when we...

My girlfriend shares my ethos of presence over presents. We've never exchanged gifts for Valentine's Day

or birthdays and prefer spontaneous treats, such as baking a cake or cooking a fancy dinner together. I love how impulsive and romantic that feels. For our anniversary, she left me a note saying to meet at our car. She had packed blankets, a picnic and torches. My present was an evening on the beach. We watched the sunset, shared a takeaway pizza and snuggled on the sand. It is something I'll remember way beyond the lifespan of a bunch of flowers.

With my sister, I love trying something unusual. Our 'gifts' have included everything from climbing over the roof of The O2 in London to feeding rescued meerkats and taking alpacas for a walk! As for my dad, who lives further away, we meet up for a nice meal out for our birthdays, and treat each other.

While some people are happy to rethink giving, others still insist on bringing me a present. Perhaps they feel awkward stepping outside the custom – but I feel awkward and put on the spot by their gift. I have nothing with which



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to reciprocate and feel obliged to say thank you while reiterating that next time I'd prefer that they didn't. Their gifts serve as a reminder, though, about why I'm doing this. After not receiving presents for a while, the amount of wrapping, packaging and waste seems all the more unnecessary and startling.

To show how ingrained some of our gift-giving customs are, Tara Button, author of *A Life Less Throwaway* (HarperCollins, £12.99), gives the

example of the tradition that men spend three months' salary on an engagement ring. 'Where did his rule come from? Tradition? In fact, it was a clever advertising campaign by a diamond marketer. It set an arbitrary price on love and created the idea that engagement rings should be diamonds,' she says. 'The next time you find yourself buying something because it's "normal" or "everyone will expect it", remember we only expect it because we have been told to expect it.'

### Fill me up!

One friend tells me about a lovely tradition she shares with her sister. They have a large jar and take it in turns to fill it with something homemade. The contents have ranged from brownies to flapjacks and honeycomb. She enjoys taking time to make something for her sister, creating it with love. When they exchange the jar, they relish a good catch-up.

At times, I slip back into old ways of thinking – 'But I can't turn up empty-handed!'. Yet this happens more with those for whom arranging a day out seems over the top but giving nothing feels rude. When this happens, I remind myself to prioritise my values over societal expectations. I explain my reasons and people seem to understand.

A few months into this new way of giving, and I feel the benefits more and more. Each time a celebration comes around, I feel lighter without the need to give a physical gift – or to find space in my home for those I receive. I like coming up with new ways to treat and celebrate those I love. 'When someone surprises us with something beautiful, thoughtful and personal, it creates a long-lasting bond,' says Button.

Time can so easily slip by but giving experiences has allowed me to punctuate my year with things to look forward to and plan quality time to reconnect with those I love.

## Show you care with precious moments

Time offerings from the 'Psychologies' team

**1** 'On my last birthday, my children and I went for a walk in the countryside instead of an expensive meal in a restaurant. We spent several hours laughing in the fresh air, and it was so much more memorable.' **Vee Sey**

**2** 'Instead of sending a birthday present to my mother-in-law, we bought theatre tickets, she came to stay for a weekend and we all went together. We live four hours apart so don't see her as much as we would like, and this was an anchor for some lovely time together.' **Elizabeth Heathcote**

**3** 'I offered to babysit for my friend, so that she could go on a date with her husband, giving them some well-deserved time out from parenting.' **Leona Gerrard**

**4** 'I took my husband to see stand-up comedy. It was a chance to be entertained away from life's distractions and reconnect.' **Emma Coxon**

**5** 'My friend hurt her back and needs to rest – so I am walking her dog for her. She seems so grateful, I love helping her out and we make sure we have a cuppa when I bring him home!' **Lynne Lanning**

**6** 'My sister and I have started meeting regularly without our children. It's a potent little boost in our busy schedules of work and family, and a gift for us both!' **Laura Doherty**

## Gifts in numbers

- **One in 10** unwanted gifts go straight to landfill – what a waste on all fronts!
- **One in five** people plan to purchase an experience-based gift for a loved this year.
- **1/4 of the total weight** of Easter eggs is made up of plastic and paper wrapping.
- **30% more rubbish** is created during the gift-giving festive period.
- **37% of people** say they would be happy to receive a charitable donation as a present.
- **In the UK**, we buy more cards per person than any other nation – 33 each every year.\*

PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES; RECYCLING AND WASTE WORLD, 2016; BARCLAYCARD, 2018; WHICH?, 2019; YOUNG AND SEND A COW, 2019; GREETING CARD ASSOCIATION, 2018