

Chicago Tribune

PERSPECTIVE

Expanded coverage in the
Chicago Tribune

The attitude of gratitude

BY JOANNE CLEAVER

The other day, I corralled a platoon of gingerbread men from the army we were taking to dinner with friends in the suburbs, then went across the hall and knocked on the door.

It took a moment, as it usually does, for Naomi to answer.

"Oh! You are so sweet to think of me! I haven't baked cookies since my husband died three years ago." When we had moved in, he had been gone for 18 months. Our presence was marked off by his absence.

"You're quite welcome," I said and my husband and I caught the elevator. As the door closed, I saw her taking a bite from one of the gingerbread men as she backed into her apartment.

The season of giving is over, and wasn't it better, for you, to give than to receive? I hope it was. For me, Christmas generosity is wrapped with double-sided tape. I want to give freely, but I cannot help expecting a thank you. A written thank you. A thank-you note. I have a hard time with people who are too busy to say thanks for gifts that others were not too busy to buy.

Or to make. The whole "gratitude attitude" escalates when you give something you made. To believe otherwise is to invalidate the entire preschool-industrial complex built on gifts made of macaroni, beans, glue and glitter, and who would want that? Who would admit to not preferring the empty-toilet-paper-roll angel with pipe-cleaner wings over anything with a designer logo?

Not me. I see your toilet-paper-roll angel and bid one handmade quilt, though it boosts my gratitude barometer to heights too lofty for some to scale.

When a girl who grew up with my daughters became engaged, I designed and stitched a wedding quilt for her. She said she liked it; I'll have to take her word for it — I never saw anything in writing. We heard of the heartbreaking divorce of a couple once held up to our former congregation as the very prototype of fidelity and affection. For my newly single former friend, I designed and stitched a quilt in colors I knew she loved and entrusted it to a mutual friend for delivery. Six weeks later, I asked that mutual friend if the quilt had been safely handed over. Yes, she said, they had unwrapped it together. That was five months ago and all I know of it.

A few years ago, I tried to exorcise my expectations by indulging in random acts of generosity, seeing as how the deliberate acts of generosity kept me in an echo chamber of annoyance. In the grocery store checkout line, a clerk commented that she liked the purple art pen I was using to write out my check. "Here," I said, handing it to her. "All yours!"

"Oh, no ... are you sure?" she asked. She looked at my then-12-year-old daughter, who rolled her eyes and studied the People magazine in the rack.

"She just gave me this pen," said the clerk to the clerk at the next register.

"What? You need a pen?"

"No, she just gave me this pen. This cute pen."

"Right," I said. "And now, unfortunately, I have to borrow it back to sign my check."

"Oh," said the clerk. "I've lost track of where we were. Did you want paper or plastic?"

Sighs of irritation were starting to puff from the line behind me.

I turned around and said, "Sorry." I turned back to the clerk. "Sorry."

"No," she said, "Nobody's ever done anything like that for me. But I messed up your check approval, so we have to start over."

This explains why I'm the one ahead of you at the toll plaza who did not throw in enough extra quarters to pay for you too. But I thought about it. And that's what counts, right?

Giving is quite demanding of the giver, who must not only figure out the right gift, but then release both the gift and the expectation of gratitude. Give with ribbons attached, but not strings. After all, it is better to give than to receive, so you should be satisfied with your boomerang blessing and nothing more. The receiver rides shotgun, enjoying both the journey and the destination with no responsibility for results.

That's the dark underside of generosity: No matter how much better it is to give than to receive, most of us still expect some gratitude. Well, I do, anyway. But I'm trying to give it up. The less you expect, the less disappointed you will be, says my husband, who is as surprised when he gets a thank-you note as I am when I don't.

Like all rules, it proves itself by the exception. Having survived the suburbs and having left behind the remnants of the gingerbread corps, we stepped off the elevator and I saw from halfway down the hall the lavender envelope half-slid under our door. It took me a moment to realize what it was.