

# Conversation starters for the holidays



J.D.  
**SMITH**

FROM THE HEADWATERS  
OF DRY CREEK

**M**y maternal grandpa was a carpenter, a quiet guy who was addicted to dog racing.

When he was in his mid 70s, he left my grandma in Loveland, Colorado, and spent a winter in Florida working on a farm where they raised greyhounds.

There he learned they train the dogs in large fenced areas with live rabbits and that a rabbit will slow down just a tiny bit before it darts one direction or the other. In a race situation the dogs chase a mechanical bunny mounted to the rail around an oval track.

Grandpa discovered that dog races could be fixed if the person operating the mechanical rabbit would slow it just enough so the lead dog would break stride thinking the rabbit was going to change directions and the next dog would be in the lead. A good operator could shuffle the pack so that any dog chosen could win. This pretty

much soured him on dog racing.

I saw him only during family holidays, but I most remember him from his method of filling conversational voids at the table. When most of the niceties about weather and cousin Donita's divorce were exhausted, my grandpa would lean back in his chair and ask, "Why do they call shoes shoes?" — at which point some semi-educated member of the family would say that the word "shoe" comes from the German word "shuh." His rejoinder was, "Why do the Germans call shuhs shuhs?"

I bring him into our column this month because it is December and we are entering the holiday season. There will be gatherings, even during these plague-ridden times, of family and friends when the dinner conversation stalls or heads off into contentious issues and the reader may need a diversionary tactic to keep family meltdown at bay.

You are welcome to try Grandpa's shoe question, but as backup topics I have gathered the following list of factoids that might divert real arguments into Google sessions. Stay safe out there.

There are 333 squares on a toilet paper roll.

Alfred Hitchcock didn't have a belly button.

The toothbrush was invented in 1498.

If coloring were not added to Coca-Cola, it would be green.

Two-thirds of the world's eggplant is grown in New Jersey.

The king of hearts is the only king without a mustache in a standard deck of cards.

One pound of fat represents 4,000 calories.

Rubber bands last longer when refrigerated.

Winston Churchill was born in a ladies' room during a dance.

The Eiffel Tower has 2,500,000 rivets in it.

The average age of a major league baseball is five to seven pitches.

In 2006, 18 Americans fractured their skulls while vomiting in a toilet.

The longest recorded flight of a domestic chicken is 13 seconds.

A metal coat hanger is 44 inches long when straightened.

French toast isn't French. It was invented by Joseph French in New York.

A whale's penis is called a dork.

The average human creates 25,000

quarts of saliva in a lifetime.

Every minute six people turn 17 years old in the United States.

The average house fly lives a month. A bowling pin needs to tilt 7.5 degrees to fall.

Americans eat 18 acres of pizza per day. Dolphins sleep with one eye open.

The inventor of the Pringles can is buried in one.

Canada eats more macaroni and cheese than any other country.

Selfies cause more deaths than shark attacks.

Porcupines float.

The Philippines consists of more than 7,000 islands.

It takes a drop of water 90 days to travel the entire Mississippi River.

A dime has 118 ridges around its edge. Marrying a cousin is legal in 26 states.

Every human spent about half an hour as a single cell.

Non-dairy creamer is flammable.

Hostess can make 55,000 Twinkies per hour.

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## Having a positive impact on others through the art of giving



BRYAN  
**GOLDEN**

OTHER VIEWS

**A**mong other things, the holidays are a time of giving and receiving gifts. The question most often asked of people is, "What did you get?" Much less frequently asked is, "What did you give?"

Invariably, the inquiries concern material gifts. Purchasing a gift can certainly be thoughtful and a wonderful gesture, especially when it's backed up by your actions.

However, the most valuable presents are those that aren't sold in stores. When you give your love, your time, help someone in need, aid another in solving a problem or overcoming an obstacle, you give something priceless.

The true spirit of the holidays is giving. When you give, you receive. You can get

anything in life you want by helping enough others get what they want. But only if you give without expecting anything in return. The impact of giving isn't limited to just the holiday season, it's something that has value all year.

The power of giving is often underestimated. When you give unconditionally, you don't just impact the recipient; you start a chain reaction. By brightening the life of one person you also affect all those who they then touch.

No gesture of giving or kindness is too small. Holding the door open at a store, helping someone carry groceries to their car, letting another car in front of you, saying please and thank you, and saying hello to a stranger you pass on the sidewalk, are some of the many things you can do daily.

For family and friends, your time is one of the most precious gifts you can offer. Are you there for others when they need you? Do you offer a hand without being asked?

Do you help out when asked?

Too often, people get caught up in their own desires, thus losing sight of the needs of others. A person who tries to get through life by looking out for himself or herself first is invariably frustrated. Often this person views life as a competition to determine who can accumulate more.

On the other hand, those who are concerned for the well-being of others are happier, more content and more satisfied. By giving without expecting, they in turn receive the things they need.

Giving is a simple concept that works every time it is applied. There will be people who don't appreciate what you do, but it doesn't matter. You are giving without anticipating anything in return. Besides, there will be many more who are thankful for your efforts.

If you don't treat others well, buying a gift won't compensate for your behavior. The recipient might like what you give them but it won't make up for your actions. You

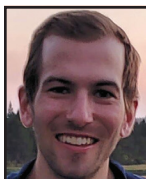
can't bribe someone to forgive the way you treat them with a present.

The best gift you can receive is the joy of making someone else happy. Being unselfish is a wonderful way to live. When you give with no ulterior motives, your actions are seen as genuine. Should you expect something in return, your behavior is always suspect. We all know people who do nice things only when they want something in return.

Make giving a daily routine. Don't start and end with the holiday season. Every day is a good day to do something nice. When people feel good due to your actions, you can't help but feel happy yourself. And that is priceless. The most significant action you can take is having a positive impact on the lives of others.

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## State should invest in children



KEVIN  
**FRAZIER**

OTHER VIEWS

**A** comparison of the economic histories of Boston and Philadelphia teaches a lesson that every policy-maker should heed and every voter should act on. When faced with economic calamities and stumbling in the shadows of uncertainty, the resilience of a city, a state or a nation cannot be measured by the success of a single industry nor the profits of a few companies. Tech cannot save a state. Unicorns cannot save a city. Planners cannot chart for a nation to follow to a brighter future.

What matters most to a city's sustained and widespread growth is the quantity and caliber of its human capital, which "refers to the abilities and qualities of people that make them productive," according to The Economist. Knowledge is widely regarded as the key source of human capital, but other behaviors, such as soft skills, and attributes, such as good health, also determine human capital.

What leads to greater stocks of human capital? There's no single answer and there are certainly no shortcuts. Instead, the accumulation of human capital is a dynamic process that occurs throughout our entire life cycles. Families, schools, firms and other institutions all help form human capital. And though older individuals can still learn and employers can theoretically invest in the development of their employees, one time of life and a few institutions have an outsized impact on the prevalence of human capital in a specific area.

In economic terms, investments in human capital at an earlier age have a higher rate of return to the individual (and society) than investments made later in life. In more straightforward terms, the more you learn at an early age, the longer you can apply that knowledge. What's more, if you learn more early on, you're capable of learning even more later, learning begets learning.

Boston has grasped this lesson for generations. The city's economy survived the emergence of New York City as a regional rival, the decline of whaling and seafaring, and the transition from a manufacturing-based economy to one fueled by tradable services and innovation. No one leader oversaw the city's ability to ride these huge waves of economic disruption. The city was kept afloat by having a large, highly skilled workforce capable of adapting to new economic realities by quickly learning new trades and organizing new

business endeavors. High rates of literacy, a culture that reinforced self-discipline and strong educational institutions and apprenticeship opportunities all contributed to this workforce.

Philadelphia, on the other hand, relied too long on its "first nature" advantage to sustain its economy. For a while, being near two rivers and having a relatively mild climate allowed Philadelphia to ride the same economic swells as Boston. Since the 1920s, though, the city has struggled to grow at the same rate as its regional competitors. More highly skilled people left for New York or Boston and, once there, met several other highly-skilled people, a daily and iterative process that left the entire community smarter than the day before (and certainly smarter than Philadelphia).

The only plan that's ever made a community more prosperous and resilient over the long term is investing in human capital. When a politician promises to bring prosperity through quick fixes such as attracting a new business or subsidizing a single activity, you should be skeptical. The best way to foster innovative and encourage a more adaptable economy is to invest in as many younger residents as possible by supporting early education via the family and school, by making high quality health care available to everyone (but especially moms and youngsters), and by creating opportunities for knowledge sharing through things like diverse and affordable communities.

Oregon Gov. Robert Straub in 1977 declared, "Our most important resource is our Oregon citizen." He recognized that "the young will build the Oregon of tomorrow." And, he pledged to more robustly support our education system to aid the youth in their construction of brighter days.

In other words, Oregon has heard this message before (indeed, Oregonians have heard this from several administrations). Words don't improve human capital. More money into a flawed system also doesn't improve human capital.

Strategic investments in programs as close as possible to young Oregonians and their families can and will improve our stock of human capital. The question is whether our political leaders will do more than give speeches on the topic.

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## Memory of Pearl Harbor should never fade



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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

**T**ragic events seem to become collective milestones in our lives.

Think of the deadly terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and it is easy to look at that date as a dividing line between what once was and how we live now.

For millions of Americans, the attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, delivered the same type of feeling. The attacks by the Imperial Japanese Navy sank four battleships and damaged four others. The day pushed America into World War II and set the stage for a long, bloody ordeal in the Pacific that ended only when atomic bombs were dropped on two Japanese cities in 1945.

The attack on Pearl Harbor held a prominent place in the American collective consciousness for decades. More than 2,000 Americans were killed in the attack, a butcher's bill that would not be replicated until 9/11.

The day symbolized so much for so many for so long across the nation but, 80 years later, its significance and impact has faded. Most of the people who fought that day and survived have passed on. The

generation that lived through the attack also is depleted by death, and with their passing the meaning of the day — the sacrifice, the bravery — has faded as well.

Now, as a nation, the 9/11 attacks are the most recent national tragedy, and we remember that terrible day with respect and honor each year — as we should.

I hope, though, that somehow Dec. 7, 1941, doesn't become just another date. It shouldn't. That's because the day illustrates the American quality of resilience, of being able to respond to adversity.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor caught the United States unprepared for war. The attack shoved the nation out of the Great Depression and put it on a path to war and, after the guns went silent, to decades of economic growth.

The nation rebounded from the attack, went on the offensive and emerged from World War II triumphant.

What I hope we don't forget, though, are the brave acts of the men on that fateful day. Many of them died. For their sake, and really for the sake of our country at large, their sacrifice should not be allowed to fade away into the pages of history.

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