

BY LETTING OTHERS ENJOY YOUR HOME, YOUR TABLE, YOUR CHILDREN,

AND YOUR TIME, YOU CAN BRING RICH NEW MEANING TO THE HOLIDAY SEASON.

by Joseph Newton

HAVE YOU ever considered what Christmas really means in your home? If you want an eye-opener, take your children aside and ask them, "What's the most important thing about Christmas?"

Chances are, you'll get the same answer we did: "Getting presents."

This jolted us, because we had worked hard at explaining to the children the spiritual significance of Christmas and the importance of sharing. After we realized that explanations were useless and that only by living these precepts could we impress the children, we began *really* to make Christmas a time for sharing. And we've enjoyed every minute of it.

How many times—especially around Christmas—have you pointed out to your children how much more satisfaction can be gained from giving instead of getting? Probably often; this is one of the standard lectures parents inflict on their offspring. Yet children learn by example, not by lecture. And what do children see around most homes at Christmastime? They see their parents return, tired and harassed, from shopping expeditions just in time to get ready for a round of holiday parties. They are surrounded by catalogues, advertisements, window displays, television commercials, and dozens of other persuasive devices, all showing them the things they would like to *get*.

Still, most youngsters today dig into their coin purses to buy their parents a Christmas gift and in this way lift at least a corner of the curtain of selfishness with which grownups often hide the fuller meaning of Christmas. But this is such a small thing compared to the more expansive meaning of sharing which children are ready and able to accept if it is presented to them.

This is the responsibility of the parents. And it's a sad fact that not only do most parents fail to meet this responsibility but most of them don't even recognize it. Too often, sharing—even to adults—means only material possessions. To those grownups who think of it at all, rounding up an assortment

of broken toys and sending them off to the local fire department is considered an act of ultimate kindness.

But there are so many more important things to share—things that you can give easily, painlessly, and which will bring tremendous happiness. Things, too, which will rub off on your children and make them aware of the joy and satisfaction and importance of sharing. This should be a year-round philosophy, but what better time to begin it than at Christmas, when hearts are close to the One who made love and compassion His way of life?

When we decided, a few years ago, to try and shift the Christmas emphasis in our household from getting to sharing, we began to look for ways of setting the example for our children. We found a good many—yet none of them is peculiar to us. You and your neighbors have them in quantity, too. What are some of the things you can start to share this Christmas?

First of all, there's your home—not in the sense of four walls and a roof, but in its broader meaning as a place of love, kindness, understanding, and peace. These are qualities many people seek with a special longing at Christmastime. To them—and to all who will come—you should open your home and your hearts. Once you open wide your doors, you'll be surprised at the people who will gratefully drop in and partake of your home and what it offers.

Then there's your table. Many people are hungry, not so much for turkey and dressing as for friendship, congeniality, conversation, and the warm human relationships that go along with holiday meals. Share the turkey and dressing, certainly, but—much more important—share the friendship and warmth. We've made it a point to share all of our Christmas meals—breakfast included—with people who might otherwise have spent them alone. It's a rewarding and wonderful experience.

You can even share your children. Christmas belongs to children. They represent the joy and buoyancy and excitement of the holiday season.

And it isn't just doting grandparents who would like to share your children. I'll never forget the plaintive request of a bachelor friend who had dinner with us one Christmas Eve. He lingered after the other guests were gone, and finally, as he stood hat in hand at the front door, he said, "There were seven children in my family, and one of the most wonderful memories I have is of Christmas morning when we all raced downstairs to see the Christmas tree and open our gifts. Would you let me come over tomorrow morning and watch your children open theirs?"

When I came down to turn on the tree lights very early that Christmas morning, he was waiting outside in his car. And every Christmas morning—until he married and started a family of his own last year—he became a part of our family. Along the way, he was joined by several others, all of whom have added tremendously to our Christmas pleasure while finding for themselves an extra measure of joy through our children.

You can share your time, too. It takes very little time to bake an extra fruitcake for the maiden lady up the street; to telephone grandparents in a distant city and let the kids talk with them; to set an extra place for someone who would be eating alone; to pay a call on a friend who isn't able to call on you; to wrap an extra gift to put under the tree for someone who has no tree; or to open the Bible and think aloud for a few minutes with your family and friends about the spiritual significance of Christmas.

Then you can share your interest. People who are away from family, home, or loved ones have stored up many things they want to say. And often it comes out in the generous atmosphere of your home at Christmastime. These people need interest, real and sincere, and you can give it to them and thereby profit yourself.

An elderly gentleman from a nearby old people's home spent his last two Christmases with us. His wife was dead, and his only surviving son lived

some distance away and showed no interest in inviting him to visit there for the holidays.

The old man always loved to watch our children open their gifts, and one Christmas, after the gift-opening, he told me in great detail of a Christmas morning in his home when his children were small. It took him almost an hour as he described every tiny occurrence, every gesture, every exclamation. When he finished, he fell silent a few minutes, then rejoined our family activities.

I thought he had forgotten the conversation, but when I took him home that evening, he looked at me with the sort of simple gratitude that warms your heart, and said, "Thanks for listening to me today."

Many of us have become poor listeners, so immersed in our own seeming problems that we close out others who want and need to communicate with us. Christmas is a good time to begin letting them in. We can't help growing in the process, because we are also letting in kindness and understanding and compassion. This is especially true with older people. When they come to your home at Christmas, or you go to theirs, show a genuine interest in what they want to tell you.

With whom do you share? Everyone, of course, but especially with the lonely. Christmas can be a very sad season for people who have lost their families or are far away from them. It can also be lonely for those who are surrounded by other people but are hungry for love and understanding and kindness. You can bring meaning to these people's Christmas by sharing with them your home, table, family, time, interest, and spiritual enlightenment.

When we think about Christmas sharing, we should remember that we are the heirs to the example of Jesus, Whose birth we celebrate at Christmas. From Him, we inherit love, compassion, kindness, grace, goodness. Can we do less to honor Him—and to teach the children He loved so well—than to make Christmas truly a time for sharing?

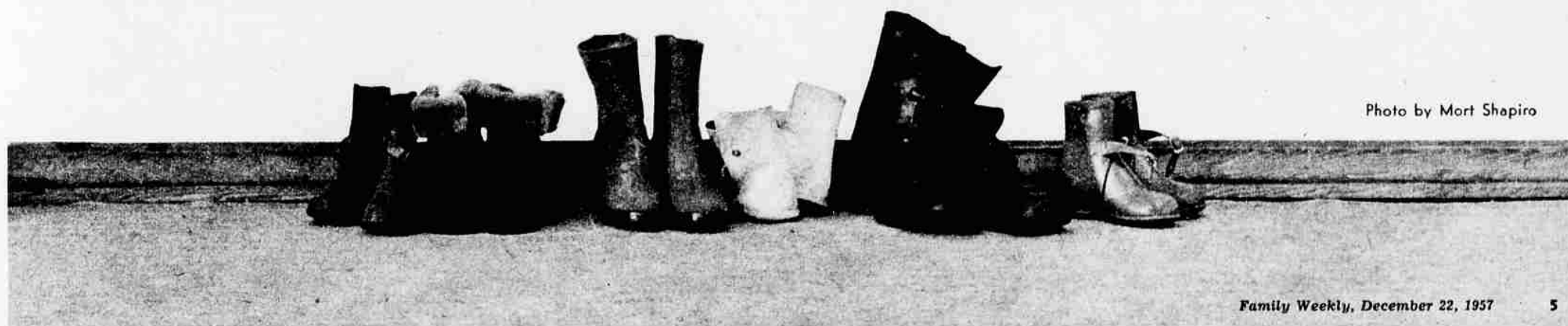


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