

Too Much?

By JOSEPH NEWTON

SEVERAL MONTHS AGO, I accompanied my wife to a local department store to pick out a wedding gift for the daughter of a casual friend. We visited the "Wedding Bureau" of the store, where the prospective bride and groom had registered their preferences for all types of gifts.

On the surface, this seems like a reasonable sort of thing. It prevents the couple from getting a hodgepodge of gifts that have to be exchanged, and makes selection easier. But a more thoughtful examination raises some doubts.

Take the gift we were seeking. We were greeted in the "Wedding Bureau" by a well-tailored lady who looked up our couple in an ostentatious, gold-crested registration book. She then informed us we could buy the bride and groom a place setting of silver (for \$27), a setting of china (for \$23), or if we didn't want to go quite that high, we could buy a piece of crystal for only \$12.

"What," I asked, "if we don't want to go that high?"

She was puzzled; apparently this question hadn't been raised before.

"Look," I explained, "this is for the daughter of a casual business friend. We scarcely know her. We just want to say 'good luck' in an unpretentious sort of way."

After several minutes of disapproving research, she told us that the most economical item we could buy within the couple's registered preferences was a towel—for \$5. My wife and I have been married 17 years and have never owned a \$5 towel, but we settled for the towel, anyway.

I was curious enough to take a look at the gifts after the reception (to which our towel won us an invitation). The room where the gifts were displayed looked like a well-stocked Fifth Avenue shop. There must have been several thousand dollars worth of expensive luxury items. And this was no society wedding. I suspect that the parents had never owned—or ever expect to own—three-fourths of the items their children collected.

Since then, I've attended other wedding receptions to satisfy the same curiosity. They're all alike—loaded with expensive loot piled high, wide, and handsome. And not just from close friends and relatives, but much of it from casual friends and business acquaintances.

I understand now what a minister friend of ours meant when he said: "Sometimes I think I should begin the ceremony with: 'Dearly beloved, casual acquaintances, and business associates of the parents, we are gathered here in the presence of a complete set of silver, china, glassware, and linen to join in holy matrimony...'"

ONE-THIRD of the 15 million marriages taking place in the United States this year will be large, formal assemblages of 100 to 300 guests, costing from \$1,500 up—but averaging about \$3,000. A recent survey of 1,000 middle-income families showed that the bride's father spent 20 percent of his gross annual income to marry off his daughter.

Fathers often go deep in debt to give their daughters opulent weddings. And the largesse seldom stops there. With growing frequency, it extends into putting the married couples through college and setting them up in house-keeping in a manner far beyond their immediate means.

What's the purpose of this plush system by which we inundate our children with expensive gifts? Is this really the way to help them find self-respect and live a full and purposeful life?

There's an immense amount of satisfaction in earning the good things of life. Many of today's youngsters have never had the chance. They're handed so many luxuries as gifts

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