

# Serendipity: Giving is Sustainable

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*The root purpose for Mom's Tree Party was always noble, but this year, it has blossomed into something even more beautiful.*

Mom's Tree Party has been an evolving institution for 47 years, but this year's version, what I'll call sustainable giving, may rank as its best iteration.



Karen Telleen-Lawton

The party began in 1961 as a Christmas gathering for close family friends of my parents. I was allowed to invite three school friends, since it was on my birthday. I always felt underprivileged for never having had a “real” birthday party, but in truth, many friends from my past remember my birthday because of the Tree Party.

The gathering's central feature was tree decorating, with an emphasis on gingerbread cookies, popcorn strings and homemade ornaments that transformed tall spindly pines into tantalizing delights for children and our dog, Shady Lady. Another party tradition was strolling around the block to ogle at parallel rows of 75-foot deodar cedars strung with thousands of colored lights.

When we grew older, we spent most of our time yakking instead of decorating the tree or circling the block. Not many years after that, a dozen young adults from a handful of families started bringing a new set of children to string popcorn, nibble gingerbread and plead to be taken to see the Christmas trees.

That is the continuing advance of generations. The evolution I highlight here is the gift-giving aspect, which has become increasingly cumbersome. There are hostess gifts, birthday gifts and gifts for each family, or each child, or each person. Not surprisingly, there are now multiple December birthdays.

After the first generation grew up, Mom instituted a blind draw, assigning each person to bring an inexpensive gift to one other. But there was never 100 percent attendance or 100 percent compliance, and often some itty bitty child burst into tears with nothing to open. Mom typically had a gift or two tucked away for this eventuality, but the time between discovering the child crying in the crowd and fetching an emergency gift was like that story about the boy who wanted a pony or nothing for Christmas. (His parents bought him a pony, but it didn't arrive until aching late Christmas afternoon.)

For the past few years, some of us have taken to giving goats or pigs or some other "in lieu of gift" to our assigned recipients. For my part, it is self-serving, since I feel better about providing to those in need, and I hate shopping. But I couldn't help noticing that some children needed encouragement to express their pleasure with my magnanimity. So when my godmother, Sally Kinsell, came up with an improvement, I cheered.

"Let's everyone give to a charity of Marge's choice," she proposed. Mom's choice was easy: Our Saviour Center in Duarte, an organization providing health care, employment training and a food bank, founded by the church she and Dad attend. Now we have a focus, and parents can prepare and teach their kids about the great work they will be contributing to.

Locally, more than 700 nonprofits would appreciate our gift dollars, most likely more than anyone on our list. A couple of timely ones are the [Foodbank of Santa Barbara County \(www.foodbanksbc.org\)](http://www.foodbanksbc.org) for those most affected by the economic crisis and the [American Red Cross-Santa Barbara County Chapter \(www.sbredcross.org\)](http://www.sbredcross.org) for those affected by the Tea Fire.

You can give alternative gifts for altruism or purely for your own happiness. In a study [National Public Radio](#) recently highlighted, subjects were given a small amount of cash. Half were instructed to spend it on someone else, while the others were told to buy

something for themselves. At the end of the day, the donors reported a higher level of happiness than those who spent on themselves. A good indication that giving is sustainable.

*Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: the Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at [www.canyonvoices.com](http://www.canyonvoices.com).*