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Christmas returns rolling in already

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A note from Susan: Thus began my campaign for holidays with less stuff, which I've promoted almost every year. Hundreds of readers have thanked me, saying their families were inspired by my own. But this week a colleague told me her neighbor doesn't much like my work, saying, "She makes me feel guilty for buying anything." Oh well.

Not one of the economic forecasters called upon to predict the size of Christmas spending this year has noticed my family's new approach: No gifts at all.

Sometimes I suspect we are on the bold cutting edge of a trend that will stun retailers who seem to think the more money you have, the more you'll spend on gaudy jewelry, cashmere sweaters, espresso machines and Salad Shooters. Won't those merchants howl when they realize how many of us don't need or want yet more stuff in our lives?

But sometimes I think my family is just . . . dysfunctional.

Does our No-Gift Christmas mean we are more secure in each other's affection than the average family? Or does it suggest we're self-centered, too absorbed in our own petty lives to plan or shop? The worst possibility is that it means we just don't care like we used to.

"That's it!" my husband said wryly as I wrung my hands over our new plan, which my mother suggested sometime in July. "You should have tackled your mother and shouted, 'No! No! We want to buy more for each other this Christmas because we love each other so much more than we did last year!'"

"But you didn't do that because you obviously don't love each other anymore. So now that the truth is out, why not save your money?"

Good will to all

The truth is, we're not really out to save money, although that will be nice, especially for my brother and his wife, whose gift to each other will be a new dishwasher, theirs having died in May.

Mostly we're out to save anxiety and guilt and a sense of "enough, already!" My mother said she decided to proclaim a No-Gift Christmas when, having entered her 60s, she looked around her home and saw too many miniature pewter Hummel figurines, too many special-occasion serving dishes, fancy breadboards, driving gloves, etc. etc.

She didn't want anything else. And my dad has never wanted anything except the love of his children, his daily newspaper and a Snickers before bed.

We've tried other Christmases:

- The \$10 Christmas. None of us remembers what we gave or got, although my mother insists she was the only one who followed the rule.
- The Make-It-Yourself Christmas, which also allowed the giving of previously owned things. I think I'm the only one who complied, giving my sister-in-law one of my extra cookie sheets, and slaving over a hot stove to make mustards and jams nobody liked.

The No-Gift Christmas is yet another experiment, limited to adults only. We'll continue to buy toys for the boys, my nephews Christopher and Brian, who at 6 and 7 still believe more is better because they've never had to stage a garage sale.

Peace on earth

So far this year everyone in my family -- including me when I shut off the second-guessing -- reports an unusual euphoria. Part of it is relief from all those enduring Christmas questions: Is this good enough?

Didn't I get him one like that four years ago? Will they think me cheap? Or weird?

Mostly, though, it's knowing we're creating our own Christmas, unbullied by profiteers, unswayed by sentimental Christmas advertising. On Christmas morning at my brother's place in Minnesota, where normally we take turns unwrapping things, all we'll have to open is our hearts.