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# A spoonful of remembrance

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*Reader comments: "My favorite column is a piece you wrote about the doll your mother made you for Christmas one year. It hangs over my sewing table where I read it each time I sit down to sew." Amy Wilson, Oak Park*

I never felt cheated or unloved at Christmas, so it's a mystery why I've forgotten all but one of the gifts I found under the tree as a child.

I was 11 when I unwrapped that box. I knew by then who delivered our gifts but was wise enough not to blow it for my younger brothers. That Christmas, the youngest was still in diapers.

I don't remember how or where, but that year my mother and I had seen the movie "Mary Poppins" together. She loved Julie Andrews and musicals, and told me she would have become a singer and a dancer if she hadn't become a full-time wife and mother.

Afterward, enchanted with the tale, I learned to spell "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" at the kitchen table and memorized all the words to all the songs. I remember my mother, standing at the sink doing dishes, singing "Feed the Birds" to herself.

On that Christmas morning, I must have opened plenty of other gifts, all marked, as usual, "From Santa." But this one said "To Sue with love from Mom."

## **A mother's secret**

Mary Poppins, 18 inches tall, was wrapped in white tissue paper. I gasped and held her up to marvel at her purple felt coat and big flowered skirt, her lacy blouse with a tiny pink bow at her throat, the inch-wide knit scarf around her neck, the saucy black hat with a flouncy flower, her felt boots with tiny pearl buttons, the white stockings pulled over her knees and the blue eyes and pink lips stitched onto her muslin skin.

In her gloved hand she held an embroidered carpetbag and, sticking out of it, a folding felt bumbershoot.

A wave of wonder rose up in me: Mom made this. Mom worked hard on this. For me.

But I was a child. What did I know, what do any of us really know, of love's midnight labors? Of the complex secrets our parents kept to give us joy? The new bicycle rolled through the snow from the garage of a neighbor, the train set erected in the quiet dark, the packages retrieved from their hiding places to wrap in gay paper for children so self-absorbed we believed Santa made it fun for everyone.

I did not wonder then, as I do now, how Mom pulled off Mary Poppins while tending a house and a husband and three children. Mom had no room of her own, no time of her own. She sewed, I suspect, late at night, while we slept. But where? How did she choose the fabrics and the eyelet for Mary's petticoat? How many hours did she pour into that gift for me, and why not just buy a doll or a book?

### **Mary Poppins lives**

I carried her with me to college, to my first apartment in Lansing, to San Francisco and, 20 years ago, back to Michigan. She sat on the top of a dresser, or on a bookshelf, growing dusty and fading in the sun.

A few years ago, regretting I hadn't taken better care of her, I wrapped her in tissue and laid her in a cardboard box in the basement labeled "Mary Poppins from Mom."

This week I unwrapped her again, and touched her boots and her scarf and her braided yarn hair with the same wave of wonder. My mother is gone now, and my questions unanswerable. But every stitch of Mary Poppins is secure.