

I do not know if I have ever watched my spending more than I have this Christmas season.



I think the last time I actually had a budget for gift purchases was back in the days of “Christmas Clubs,” seasonal savings accounts my Mom helped me open at the neighborhood bank, where I would deposit my babysitting money and earn interest in anticipation of a November payout. If I spent my limited funds wisely, I might have enough left over to buy myself a record album, the makings of a minor vinyl collection that now resides in my garage.

This season frugality is “in,” and a recent essay in a December *New Yorker* written by Patricia Marx features the headline “What to wear in the recession.” She jokes, “...this season, sixty percent off is the new black.”

This year’s Christmas shopper enters the mall with an expectation of minimal profit margins for retailers. I was blessed by a nominal commission check in November, and essentially, I put it aside for holiday spending, my windfall “Christmas Club” savings account of my middle age. Like many Americans, my discipline for saving has diminished over time. A considerable chunk of my sales bonus proceeds will be distributed in cold, green cash to college age nieces and one nephew. Because Beaufort is not brimming with American Eagle or Hollister type stores, picking up gift cards is not handy or gas-efficient, and I do not want to confine their spending to locations or items that may not suit their true needs or desires. A bit of cash can go toward a movie, maybe a couple of iPod downloads, or a new pair of jeans whose size and make is always a very personal purchase.

My husband and I are heading to Michigan for Christmas like we have for almost every one of our twenty-two married Christmases. Neither of us made it back to the “thumb state” in 1990, the year Mac was deployed in Desert Storm. He did make it home safely for the following year, a Christmas wish I hope comes true for all of our military families, even though I understand that the cycle of sacrifice our soldiers, sailors, and airmen make, never really has an end.

My personal Christmas list is essentially devoid of “stuff.” I asked for a couple of CD’s and a corduroy jacket, but I don’t really need anything. Instead, I need to shed my belongings - again. Unused clothing, dusty objects that line the shelves and workbenches in my garage, and of course the ten extra pounds of padding around my waist line, all need to disappear from my life for the benefit of myself and others.

I have already received what will probably translate into my most valuable gift of this holiday season – the vacation time and money my sister has invested to visit my mother and me, helping my mom with her holiday shopping, accompanying her for cataract surgery so that I can travel to New York on business, and providing me peace of mind and respite from my caregiving responsibilities. Stacie also delivers the bonus gift of taking care of our beagle Toby, and recently, she was crowned “his favorite Aunt” by Mac, a title I know she will brag about to friends and co-workers when she returns home to Buffalo. Who wouldn’t?

I will be lucky enough to see my brother and his family during the holidays, rounding out what is left of the circle that forms my immediate family. No Christmas passes without some reflection on the missing link of my father in our family chain. This past Thanksgiving, I watched

an eighteen year-old video of a Christmas morning in Pennsylvania, and revisited Christmas past, watching my dad open a present I had taken great care in preparing for him. It was a shadow box that I have since passed on to my brother, a memory-keeper housing my dad's golf tee, the miniature, green pencil, and his scorecard from the La Quinta Resort & Club. That year, he had treated himself to a golf outing in Palm Springs, an extravagance for a guy who routinely played public courses, honing his self-taught skills in a game he loved, and eventually lost, because of a stroke.

In a recent Advent mission held at St. Peters, Fr. Scott Seethaler, a Capuchin friar from Pittsburgh, taught his audience the word "FAMILY" as an acronym. He said the word stands for "Forget about me. I love you." In a year of economic turmoil, political exhaustion, war, recession and job loss, we have the ever-present opportunity to reach out to our human family. It does not cost anything. We do not have to budget love, and there is no shortage of people in our lives who need the warmth and generosity we have at our fingertips. When we are afraid we will have less, we need to give more.

Seethaler explained that the word crisis is derived from the Greek word krisis, meaning "turning point." As the seasons turn, and as we slowly sustain change, putting on the armor of endurance we will need to become better persons for the future, my Christmas wish for you and for myself, are the priceless gifts that MasterCard cannot buy – hope, trust, and love.

So, send a long lost friend your very own, handmade, Hallmark knock-off, and toss the \$1.49 you saved into the red bucket at the entrance of the Big K. My sister is making nut roll during her visit to the Lowcountry, a Bikulege tradition passed down from my grandmother, to my mom, to my sister, and to my belly. I bought the ingredients, but it did not break my budget, and I have plenty of time to contemplate my New Year resolutions.

For now, I wish each of you Happy Hanukkah, Merry Christmas, Joyous Kwanzaa, and Jolly Holidays. Enjoy the season and thank you for reading in 2008.