

## Hold family close, have sense of humor

It was my daughter's first Christmas—the first twinkling lights, the first "Silent Night," the first crinkle of red wrapping paper and gold ribbon.



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And while it is tempting to ply her with a sleigh-full of toys, we are searching for a truer meaning, in order to offer her this as well.

I was an only child and much adored by grandparents, my parents' mostly childless friends, my own mom and dad, and as a result, received more gifts each year than I knew what to do with. And although there were Barbies and bikes and Easy Bake ovens, my fondest memories of Christmas have little to do with monetary gain.

For example, I loved dolls and took very good care of all who ended up in my possession.

One year, I received two new additions, each with a suitcase packed with clothes. One was filled with clothes my mother had made, surreptitiously while I napped or went to kindergarten; the other was filled with clothes made by her friend's mother, an elderly woman with no grandchildren.

There were tiny bathrobes and pajamas, dresses and skirts, bonnets and coats. I've kept the dolls and these little clothes, still marveling at the velvet and corduroy, the perfect little buttons, the cut-out bear appliques adorning pockets, the

turned collars and bits of lace.

I think, even at five-years-old, I understood and appreciated the time and effort these women put into their creations.

Another childhood Christmas memory was a snowy, bitterly cold evening in the small midwestern town where we lived.

Despite the frigid weather, my parents and I bundled up and went to a tree-lighting ceremony downtown, where there was the promise of Santa Claus and Christmas carols.

While I don't recall much about the tree or Santa, I do remember standing in a large, cozy crowd between my parents, holding each of their hands, watching them sing, frosty breaths floating on the winter air.

A last memory occurred when I was in high school. Every year, my best friend and I baked cookies at my house—several elaborate kinds—and packed them in decorated coffee cans as gifts to the people we'd collected: certain favorite teachers, the guitar group leader from church, families we babysat for and admired, neighbors who made us laugh.

This particular year, we were irritated with each other, stressed out with school and work and shopping and our chronically misunderstood existence.

I remember our snappy tones, the mutual feeling of wanting to strangle one another.

Suddenly, without warning, I tossed a handful of flour into her face, coating her solemn features in a ghostly white. For a moment, she froze, our seven-year friendship floating before her eyes, and then she reached into the bin herself and doused me in a white cloud just as thick. We began to laugh and laugh, in my mother's overheated kitchen, steam on the windows, a batch of cookies cooling on the racks.

So how do I want my daughter to experience the holidays?

So far, we hope she will spend a Friday in December—as she did this year—following the illuminaria up Sutter Street to the live Nativity scene in front of the Chamber of Commerce, acted out by tiny shepherds and angels and a live donkey.

We hope she will ride on a horse-drawn cart around the boulevard, as the line grows to see Santa in his sleigh. We hope she will hear the children's choir in the art gallery, mumbling just a little through the difficult lines: now we don our gay apparel.

We hope she will spend a Saturday in December—as she did this year—in Sweetie Pies in Placerville, a Victorian house on Main Street filled with the smell of cinnamon, eating pancakes and making eyes at adoring teenage girls at the next table.

We hope she will follow this breakfast with a walk through a valley of Christmas trees off Apple Hill Drive, traveling home with a six-foot Douglas fir tied to the roof. We hope she will watch—and eventually help—us decorate this tree, with dancing white lights, reindeer, snowflakes and Santa ornaments.

We hope that every year the tree-decorating will end—as it did this year—with a ring of our doorbell and a crowd of Christmas carolers serenading us in our front yard.

We hope on Christmas Day she will enjoy the paper and ribbon as much as the presents, and will understand that behind every musical turtle and tin of Duplos—just like with my handmade doll clothes—is an adult who loves her madly.

Most of all, we hope she will remember that Christmas is not a time of getting, but a time of being with people you love, offering them something of yourself, holding them close, keeping your sense of humor.