

When Happy Holidays Means No Gifts 📺

By MICHELE M. MELENDEZ

c.2007 Newhouse News Service

Scrap the gift lists. Trash the wrapping paper. Blow off the mall.

That's the mind-set of Americans who can't stomach exchanging holiday presents. They aren't grinchers or scrooges. They just reject what they consider the wastefulness and stress of the season.

"Over the years, I have watched as the gift-exchanging part of the family Christmas slowly became more and more the reason to get together and how it eventually seemed to become the showcase event of the day," said Lora-Lee Blalock, 42, a homemaker and artist in Austin, Texas.

Blalock's childhood memories of the holiday radiate warmth: "We'd all travel from our homes and gather at my grandparents' house to spend the day eating, playing games, making music together, watching Christmas specials on the TV and just spending time talking and being a family." Gifts were secondary.

Blalock said that in recent years she pestered her family to drop the gifts. This year, they're trying it.

Pam Frese, an anthropologist at the College of Wooster in Ohio, said the practice seems to be a dismissal of commercial obsession. "The consumer culture doesn't mean anything to them," Frese said.

That's the Rev. Billy's message. No, beneath the blond pompadour and white suit, he's not a real pastor, but he does preach with a Jimmy Swaggart lilt about what he calls the "Shopocalypse." The New York-based performer-activist travels the country with his Church of Stop Shopping Gospel Choir — evangelizing uninvited at chain stores — and is the subject of the new film, "What Would Jesus Buy?"

The Rev. Billy (aka Bill Talen) says corporate gluttony has whipped holiday sentiment into an obligation to spend on gifts recipients might not even want, generating "the opposite of excitement, which is dread."

"This year, we need to take Christmas back," the self-proclaimed minister said. "Let's have a creative Christmas."

The Parsons family has made that a goal.

Last year, Noah and Sabrina Parsons of Eugene, Ore., were disgusted by the mounds of wrapping paper and packaging encasing their two young sons' gifts, which required a trip to the dump. The Parsonses, who run a software company for small businesses, decided no presents this year.

"At the end of the day, you really don't feel you've gained anything with all this stuff," said Sabrina Parsons, 34.

This Christmas, the couple and their children, Timmy, 3, and Leo, 15 months, will funnel what they would have spent on gifts into a family trip to Mexico. It's the kickoff to what they hope becomes a holiday tradition.

The parents figure they'll start now, so when their sons are old enough to start asking questions, Mom and Dad can respond: "You're not going to get gifts, but you're getting to go to the beach or getting to go skiing or you're going to this really cool place you've never been to before," said Noah Parsons, 33.

Besides, the Parsons boys would be hard-pressed to recall what they got last year.

Gift amnesia strikes adults, too. Online polling may not be scientific, but consider this: 41 percent of Americans 18 and older polled via the Web said they couldn't remember their best holiday gift from last year. San Francisco-based Zoomerang conducted the survey in November for Excitations, a Sterling, Va., company specializing in experience-oriented gifts, including hang gliding.

From a religious standpoint, some are put off by how gift-heavy the holidays have become.

Sister Mary Louise Foley, campus minister at the University of Dayton, said worshippers should reflect: What is your perfect Christmas? Then try to come as close as possible. If that means no gifts, so be it.

If you wake up stressed about Christmas preparations, Foley said, think about "what does a woman in Iraq feel like as she gets up this morning? It makes some of our worrying so small in comparison."

With Hanukkah so close to Christmas, the Jewish holiday has become subject to the same purchasing pressures.



The Rev. Billy (performer-activist Bill Talen) preaches about the evils of holiday gift-buying during a Nov. 27 show at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, accompanied by Laura Newman, a member of his New York-based Church of Stop Shopping Gospel Choir. (Photo by Bob Black)

"Hanukkah was a very minor celebration in terms of gifts and hoopla," said Rabbi David Fass of Temple Beth Sholom in New City, N.Y.

It's OK for families to exchange gifts during Hanukkah, Fass said, as long as the children know the genesis of the holiday — it marks the victory of Jewish rebels over the Syrian-Greeks and the rededication of the temple in Jerusalem — and do not regard it as just a time for presents.

Professing appreciation for a sense of community during the holidays, some have shaped their aversion to frenzied gift-giving into a tongue-in-cheek crusade.

Nina Paley, 39, an animator in New York, said her no-gifts awakening happened about 15 years ago, when she produced a comic strip called "Nina's Adventures" for alternative weekly papers. One holiday season, she based one of her strips on a friend who plunged further into debt buying presents.

From this, Paley's Christmas Resistance Movement arose. [Its Web site](#) proclaims, "No Shopping — No Presents — No Guilt!" The campaign is equal opportunity, applying to Hanukkah, Kwanzaa or any holiday when people might feel compelled to give gifts.

Paley herself grew up in a secular Jewish home, though her family did exchange presents for Hanukkah. Whatever the occasion, mandatory offerings cheapen the moment, she said.

Obligatory "material gifts often function as a distraction from love — or lack thereof — rather than a conduit," Paley said. "By making material gifts representations of love, love itself becomes a commodity. How can that not make one feel empty and hollow?"

(Michele M. Melendez can be contacted at [michele.melendez\(at\)newhouse.com](mailto:michele.melendez@newhouse.com))