

Michael Kun

REALLY, YOU ARE TOO KIND

My father didn't like to receive gifts.

Especially Christmas gifts.

He is no longer with us, as they say, and that is one of the first things I always think of when he comes to mind: my father didn't like to receive Christmas gifts.

I can recall the pained expressions on his face whenever he would open his Christmas presents, steeling himself for the horrors that awaited him inside the box he held on his lap. He tried to smile, but it was an unnatural, forced smile. It was the smile of a man who'd learned to smile by reviewing a series of photographs of men smiling, each step of the smiling process coming a little too slowly.

"No knick-knacks," our father would always say when we asked him what he wanted for Christmas, and we would respond by buying him knick-knacks. Not because we were trying to be brats, but because we kept seeing things that we liked, not realizing that they were the very things that he didn't like.

What kinds of things did we give him for Christmas?

A "World's Best Golfer" trophy.

A Ziggy coffee mug.

A Ziggy tie.

A baseball cap with moose ears on it.

A monkey with a clock in its stomach.

A New York Yankees beer stein.

A Lynda-Carter-as-Wonder-Woman poster.

Only years later did I realize what he was thinking when he unrolled the Wonder Woman poster, the forced smile beginning to form: *what the hell am I supposed to do with this?*

Exactly.

What the hell *was* he supposed to do with that?

Was he supposed to frame it and put it up in the living room? Or the master bedroom? Or his office?

What were we *thinking*?

As we handed over our money to the cashier at Spencer Gifts, what in the blue hell were we thinking?

The answer, I'm afraid, is this: I don't know.

I honestly have no idea what we thought our father was going to do with a Wonder Woman poster. Or the fake trophies and silly coffee mugs and iron-on t-shirts we always gave him. They always seemed like a good idea at the time. In fact, the "Welcome Back Kotter" t-shirt seemed like a *great* idea at the time because, well, it just did. It was "Welcome Back Kotter"! Who wouldn't want a "Welcome Back Kotter" t-shirt, with all of the Sweathogs pictured? Look, it's Vinny Barbarino! On a t-shirt!

But, like many things, what seems like a good idea, subjectively, to a 12-year old is not in fact a good idea, objectively, to the rest of the human race.

An example: Putting a bumper sticker that reads "Hairdressers Do It With Style" on your parents' car seems like a great idea to a 12-year old.

Putting a bumper sticker that reads "Hairdressers Do It With Style" on your parents' car in fact is not a great idea.

Unless your parents are hairdressers, in which case the subject might arguably be appropriate.

And unless they are also blind, in which case they would not see the bumper sticker.

And, if they were blind, they probably would not be hairdressers or have a car to begin with.

Why do I mention all of this?

Because after years of going out of my way to try to be different than my father, I have come to realize that, in too many ways to count, I am just like him. I do not contend that this is a profound thought. Just the opposite. Almost every man I know has come to the same conclusion, that, often against his wishes, he has turned out to be precisely like his father. (And I understand women often draw the similar conclusion that they have turned into their mothers.)

When we went to a ballgame, my father used to park far away from the ballpark so we would be able to leave the parking lot faster after a game. At the time, it seemed silly and pointless. Didn't it make more sense to park closer to the stadium so we didn't have to walk as far? Now, I do the same thing whenever I go to a ballgame. My father was right. Who wants to sit in the parking lot for an hour after a ballgame? Not me. And not anyone who's with me, if they know what's good for them.

My father didn't want anyone to reveal anything that was in the newspaper before he could read it for himself. At the time, that seemed absurd. News is news, no matter how you learn it. How on earth does it matter if someone tells you or if you read it for yourself? Now, God help the person who wants to spoil my newspaper reading. It was the experience of reading the paper that my father was trying to preserve, that's all.

This could go on and on.

And on.

But it ends with this: I don't enjoy receiving Christmas gifts.

Not that I don't enjoy Christmas. Heck, I love Christmas. And I love giving Christmas gifts. I just don't enjoy receiving them. The sight of a box with a tag that says "To Mike" can practically make me shudder.

I know that when someone gives me a Christmas gift, it's supposed to let me know that they have some level of affection for me.

Which is great.

I'm very fortunate to have many close friends who feel some level of affection for me. I'm not sure that such a miserable human being like me deserves so many friends, but I'll take them all, every single one of them.

But all they have to do to let me know they're thinking of me is give me a Christmas card or a hug, and I'm happy.

Giving me a Kleenex holder in the shape of a human face, with the tissues to be pulled from through the nostrils, is completely unnecessary. Really, you shouldn't have.

Giving me a pill remover, to remove the pills from the sweaters that I don't have because I live in Southern California, is completely unnecessary. Really, you are too kind. It's too much. You should take it back. Get something nice for yourself instead.

There's no need to give me a coffee cup with a drawing of Homer Simpson saying, "D'oh" on it because, as much as I love "The Simpsons," you know I don't drink coffee. Oh, I can just display it in my house, you say? I hadn't thought of that.

A one-month pass to Gold's Gym, well, you were kidding, right? Oh, it wasn't a joke? Sorry. Yes, it's a great gift. I really should go to the gym. Thank you for reminding me that I'm not in very good shape these days.

The New York Giants sweatshirt would be absolutely perfect if I weren't a Jets fan. Oh, you're right. I'm sure I must have mistakenly told you I was a Giants fan. My bad.

The new Bruce Springsteen CD? Great idea, and I'm so glad you remembered that I'm a huge Springsteen fan. But, knowing that I'm a huge Springsteen fan, aren't the odds pretty good that I ran out to get the CD when it first came out? But, seriously, it's great. Now I'll have one for my home and one for my car. This way, I'll never be too far away from the Boss. It's perfect.

Bowling ball salt-and-pepper shakers? They'd be great if I collected salt-and-pepper shakers. Or bowled. But I don't do either. And I don't even use salt or pepper. Oh, they're supposed to be displayed? In my house? I guess I'll put them right next to the Homer Simpson coffee mug.

Now, of course, I don't say any of these things.

Instead, I just smile. Slowly. Just like my Dad.

If there's an afterlife, I hope he knows that I'm sorry about the "Welcome Back Kotter" t-shirt.

Very, very, very sorry.