

Christmas: Passing on the Lyrical Gift of Language

By [Edward Curtin](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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"The most incomprehensible talk comes from people who have no other use for language than to make themselves understood." – Karl Kraus, Half-Truths & One-and-a-Half Truths

Things, possessions, life on the installment plan or credit card. This is the season to buy, to accumulate more folderols, to give things to one's children and each other, which, we like to believe, will bring joy. It's make-believe, of course, an adult lie conjured up out of guilt and fear that our lives, the stories we live, the stories we dream, and those that dream us, are insufficiently meaningful to bring our children and ourselves the joy we say we seek.

Driven by a pure sense of guilt devoid of any sense of redemption in a capitalist materialist culture, we buy and buy, accumulate and accumulate, in the vain hope that such tangible "gifts" will bring a magic that we can possess. Our exchange of gifts is a consumer culture's parody of the true meaning of a gift: that gifts are given to be given away, to be passed around, like the peace pipe of native American Indian tribes.

As Lewis Hyde writes in his extraordinary book, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, "... a gift that cannot be given away ceases to be a gift. The spirit of a gift is its constant donation." What we are given, in the inner and outer world, must be shared, allowed to circulate.

But we like to own, to stop the flow. As a result, we have become stuck, selfie people who can't understand that to possess is to be possessed.

Stop, pose, click. Got it!

Describing art as a way of life, or walking life's way as an art, the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke put it thus:

Not any self-control or self-limitation for the sake of specific ends, but rather a carefree letting go of oneself; not caution, but rather a wise blindness; not working to acquire silent, slowly increasing possessions, but rather a continuous squandering of all perishable values. This way of being has something naïve and instinctive about it, and resembles that period of the unconscious best characterized by a joyous consciousness, namely the period of childhood.

The truth is that we are sustained by stories – oral, written, existential – not by things, as a commercial civilization would have us believe. From infancy to old age, we crave stories that will allow us to make sense of our lives, to give them shape and spiritual significance. And the greatest gifts we can give each other are stories that draw on the mystery and sacredness of existence, stories that express, in ravishing language and a musical spirit, clarification for our lives. Stories that help us resist the nihilistic ethos of our times, the violence and deceit that defines them.

For example, long ago a Jewish boy was born in a stable because his parents couldn't get a room anywhere. The parents then had to flee with the boy because the government was murdering children and was out to get him. Later in life, this child Jesus, became a radical opponent of church and state, preached peace, love, non-violence, and living by faith, not money; he embraced the outcasts, condemned the hypocrites, and was finally executed as a radical criminal by the state. But his spirit was undefeated; he conquered death; and his name has become synonymous with love and kindness to such a degree that we celebrate his birth as the light of the world as the darkest days of the year turn brighter.

It's a beautiful story from beginning to end, and if heeded, would bring massive resistance to the way things are throughout the world. No wonder it has touched the hearts of so many for so long.

Sadly, however, Wordsworth put it perfectly when he said that, "getting and spending we lay waste our powers." And the consumer-gift-stories we indirectly tell our children by participating in the madness of holiday shopping are tales unfit for young ears.

To live to buy is to tell them lies.

Our children (and all of us) wish not things but stories that will help them face life with enthusiasm and courage. When I was a young boy, my father would ease me to sleep with "Jiminy Cricket Stories," imaginary improvisations on Pinocchio and his conscience. They were in no way trendy like the most recent Pinocchio film adaptation, but fundamentally sound as in the song *As Time Goes By* – it's still the same old story.

I can't remember any of his stories today, but what stays with me is their underlying theme, their spirit: to become a real boy, a genuine person, one must determine to tell the truth. One must be brave, truthful, and unselfish. Yet even more, when I think of them, I feel my father's unconditional love and the timbre of his lilting voice.

These stories about truth and bravery contained hard but vital lessons for a father to pass on to a son, but he did it in such an entertaining way that I took the lessons to heart. Ever since, in gratitude and wonder, I have been trying to make my story adhere to that spirit of truth. Trying; for as we all know, truth is a hard taskmaster. We never hold it, only seek it, and can only approach it if we are possessed by language and allow its musical spirit to carry us on into the unknown.

When I became a father myself, I tried to pass on to my children a love for stories and the words we use to express our lives. Without words, and the ability to use them meaningfully, we are lost in the world of things, a place where consuming replaces creating. So from infancy onward, my wife and I would read to them, and eventually I began to tell them imaginary stories of my own, "Willy Daly Stories," inspired by a boyhood pal. They would hang onto each word, and swing into depths of reverie as I strung them together into tall tales.

"At the bottom of each word/I'm a spectator at my birth," wrote the French poet Alain Bosquet.

Entering into this creative spirit, Susanne and Daniel would ask me. "Is that really true?" And I could not lie and say no. So they would laugh, I would grin, and we would go on.

Like all children, they loved these stories, the ones I told and the ones we read. They entered into them and they, into them; their inner worlds germinated. When they were very young, each started to read, not haltingly but fluently and with amazing comprehension. "Out of the blue" something clicked (and neither was "taught" to read, but was read and talked to by my wife and me as though they comprehended everything, even the most abstruse words), and from that day on the words that they previously heard became theirs. They received the gift, even when they didn't understand the meaning, they grasped the music.

Now it has passed to my grandchildren, Sophie and Henry, who are children of the word, lovers of the epiphanies stories can disclose.

"The bright book of life," as D.H.Lawrence called the novel, opened to them. Novel: New. New life forever arising out of the old. Miraculously (is there any other word for it?), they were in possession of the gift of words that they could pass on; they had the power to hear and tell their own stories, to understand their lives, not as the pursuit of things, but as the pursuit of meaning. They felt proud and I felt blessed.

"Art tells the truth," wrote Chekhov. Indeed. And the wheel of life turns with the seasons. The gift of stories is passed on. Christmas turns to New Year's. People pass on, but so do stories. The things are forgotten.

The wordsmith Leonard Cohen sang in his song, "Famous Blue Raincoat," that "I hope you are keeping some sort of record." The words stick on the page, but the beautiful melody carries them into our present and into the future and we imagine stories carrying us on as the music and the words don't stop and we keep humming the tune and imagining as we move along to that which cannot be said and about which it is impossible to be silent, to paraphrase Victor Hugo.

My daughter: Susanne. Leonard Cohen's Suzanne: "There are children in the morning/they are leaning out for love/and they will lean that way forever/while Suzanne holds the mirror."

My son: Daniel. Like brave Pinocchio being swallowed by Monstro, and Daniel in the Lion's den, the stories of courage and derring-do, told indirectly.

Daniel Berrigan, my friend and mentor, the puckish fierce poet of beauty and peace, whose fierceness belied his tenderness.

The Biblical Susanna, the falsely accused, and Daniel her liberator.

Names contain multitudes, tales never told, stories traveling on. Daniel and Susanna ever new.

The gifts must be given away, like playing or listening to live music. Here and gone; one time only. Like life.

I recently saw a book for sale at my local library – *From my Father, Singing* by David Bosworth – a beautiful book, a true work of art. I read it once at the suggestion of my storyteller father, and have just reread it. I am grateful to Bosworth for his gift and to my father for passing on the word. It is a tale in the form of a letter from a father to a son, a father in search of the meaning of his own father's life, that elusive gift that can only be found in a story, in the telling.

The letter writer, our author, is in flight from a life lived “according to script,” a wife in love with money, shopping, and things, his dead-end job – “the place where I pretended to earn our living” – a life of pretense and lies, a living death in which all efforts were made to deny its meaninglessness: “to have fun, to keep busy, to buy something, to face the bleak descent of Sunday evening by preparing already for the following weekend.”

In order to explain himself to his son, a young infant, he explores his own childhood, the life he lived caught between his parents' conflicting worlds. In the end, by fashioning this letter, by putting word behind word behind word, he comes to understand and appreciate his father and consequently himself; he composes a letter to his son (who cannot yet read but whom we know will) “intended as a gift, a living legacy in words.”

Yes, art tells the truth.

Pass on the word, the true gift.

[Here is Bill Joel's gift to his daughter.](#)

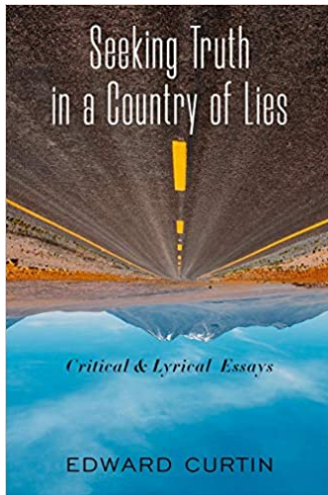
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This article was originally published on the author's blog site, Behind the Curtain.

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He is the author of *Seeking the Truth in a Country of Lies*

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