

The True Livelihood Series



Reflections from...

Denise Bissonnette



Denise Bissonnette is an internationally renowned writer, trainer and keynote speaker. For over two decades, she has inspired people and organizations throughout North America to look beyond traditional concepts of career development and to craft livelihoods rooted in the individual "genius" of each person. Her work is a rich tapestry of her talents as a poet, writer, storyteller, teacher and career developer.

Seven Simple Gifts: Not Easy to Give, Splendid to Receive

I am writing this in early December, before the force of the holiday season has fully struck and the sound of carols playing is a welcome backdrop. Like many of you, my Inbox has been inundated with marketing promos, coupons, and ads from companies big and small, local and international, legitimate and not so legitimate, touting "Gift Lists" for everyone in our lives including but not limited to: the traveler, the gardener, the reader, the fisherman, the culinary artist, the techno-freak, the athlete, the fashionista, and my personal favorite, "the person who has everything"! Sifting through these various and sundry gift lists inspired one of my own. I know what you're thinking: "Like I need another suggested gift list? What is this, Denise's version of Oprah's favorite things?" Well, kind of, but bear with me.

What makes my list super cool and incredibly SIMPLE is that everything on my list is FREE – no purchase necessary. There is no concern of size, shrinkage, stretching, wrinkling or dry cleaning. Not a single suggestion on this list requires assembly, batteries, or a near genius-level engineer to remove the item from its insane, crazy-making packaging. Every suggestion is toxin, gluten, dairy, and sugar free – no calories, carbs, MSG, or artificial sweeteners. Not a single item needs ribbons, bows, pretty paper or a fancy tag. This list is totally green and environmentally friendly. There are no shipping costs, and delivery is included. How SIMPLE is that?

Fair warning: while the gifts suggested are simple in all the ways stated, for the following reasons, that doesn't mean they are easy to give. Nothing on the list comes pre-packaged. None of them can be acquired in volume. None can be ordered on-line. Each must be homemade, and in most instances, given in person. Each requires more than simply opening one's wallet and handing over cash or a credit card to a cashier. Rather, these suggestions require the giver to open one's heart, to dip into the well of their most generous and charitable impulses. They require forethought and reflection, insight and consideration, and in many

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cases, selflessness and humility. (Yeah, Yeah, Amazon is suddenly looking more appealing.) So, let's get to the list.

Denise's Suggested List of Seven Simple, Splendid Gifts:

1. Visibility

Many people in the world feel totally invisible – unseen, unheard, unnoticed. What a lovely thing that we can, in any moment, offer someone the gift of visibility. I love the story of Mother Teresa who was interviewed on a radio show in Denver and asked by the commentator, "Mother, what can we do for you to make your stay here in Denver most comfortable and enjoyable?" She responded, "I have everything I could possibly need. If you want to do something for me, consider this. Go look into the face of someone who is on the street, someone who is homeless, or lost. Go, look into their eyes and let them know that they are not alone in the world – that you actually see them!"

What she is suggesting here is not so much about throwing a coin into a cup, but about connecting, even for a few seconds, as a fellow human being. What she is asking is that we not avoid eye contact and step over or around people because they make us feel uncomfortable in their poverty or misfortune, but to swallow our discomfort and respond, instead, out of our deeper sense of humanity. A smile, a bow of the head, a friendly "hello" – some small gesture that expresses, "I see you – you are not alone in the world" can be a profound gift, and we don't need to be Mother Teresa to give the gift of visibility! Many of the people who come to us for help and support feel "invisible" in their own way – unemployment has a tendency to do that! Think about ways to make people feel seen and heard, including the remaining six suggestions.

2. A heartfelt compliment

Nothing so feeds the spirit of another person than genuine affirmation and praise. Everyone wants to feel as if their presence is precious in the workplace, in the classroom, in the family, in the neighborhood. Every day we interact with people who are hungry for a little acknowledgment. To stop, notice, and comment on what a person is doing right is a gift we can give in just about any situation – to our spouse, our children, our co-workers, our students or clientele, and those who serve us in the world. The compliment may be about something specific like "I am so proud of how you have persisted in the pursuit of your goals", "Nice job yesterday on the report", or "You are showing so much improvement lately" to something more general like "You have a such a nice smile", "I really like how colorfully you dress," or "You have such a calming presence – I really like being around you." When we pause to consider what we might affirm in another, we will rarely fail to see something worth praising.

3. Thanks

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A lot has been written in recent years about cultivating “an attitude of gratitude” and I am all for it! Clearly, noticing the many ways in which we are blessed is a wonderful way to find joy in our everyday experience, to live in the present, and to gain perspective when facing challenges. What I would add to the “attitude of gratitude”, however, is the practice of expressing our thanks and communicating our appreciation! Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a gift, but failing to give it.

It's astounding how much we take for granted in the ways in which we are served, attended to, and cared for by one another! What if we stopped long enough to discern the million and one ways the people around us make our lives easier, more comfortable, and convenient, and then actually took the time to tell them so? For example: Thank you for making the coffee everyday ... it's so nice to come into the office to the aroma... Thank you for your patience with my paperwork- I know it can't be easy for you to wait on me every week... Thank you for always being on time. It's really refreshing and makes me glad that I am your Employment Specialist... Thank you for setting the room up for us this morning – you helped to make this day a success... Thank you for pairing my socks – I'm losing less of them lately... Thank you for the innumerable ways you work to make the holidays special for this family. I think we can all appreciate the sentiment behind the words of Meister Eckhart when he said, “If the only prayer we ever said was “thank you”, that would be quite enough.

4. A sincere apology

This is a profound gift for someone you have offended or caused any level of hurt, embarrassment, or heartache, intentionally or unintentionally. For this to be a true gift, it is not simply wrapped in excuses or explanation that make you feel better about yourself in the situation – it is wrapped rather in acknowledgement of the other person's hurt or discomfort, extended with heartfelt humility. Think about those around you who may be waiting for an apology, or who would be totally blown away by such a gift. This is one of those gifts that can be given in the moment or years after the original offense. There is no expiry date on a good apology! This can be given through email, but preferably in person, over the phone, or written in one's own hand. In the truest spirit of the gift, however, it should be given without expectation of how it is received. The apology is gift enough.

5. Forgiveness

If you have ever been truly forgiven for a past transgression, you know that there is no way of describing the immensity of this gift. What makes it so difficult to give? Every situation is different and offers its own complexity, but when we consider that tomorrow is not promised, that today is all we can be certain about – why would we choose to hold a grudge rather than free ourselves of its burden? Holding grudges makes us small-spirited and closed-hearted. Some say, “I'll forgive, but I will not forget.” Henry Ward Beecher once said that is just another way of saying, I will not forgive. He advised, “Forgiveness ought to be like a canceled note – torn in two, and burned up, so that it never can be shown against

one again." Now that is a gift! What canceled note can you tear in two and burn, the ashes of which would represent the ultimate gift for that someone for whom you have held resentment or bitterness?

6. The benefit of the doubt

Wouldn't it be amazing if you could feel completely confident that the people with whom you live and work always assumed your best intentions, regardless of the ways in which circumstances unfold? What if there was room for you to "blow it", not having to fear that others will be thinking the worst of your intentions? What if you knew that you would be considered "innocent until proven guilty", not just in the courtroom, but in the hearts and minds of the people with whom you share your life? Wow, the benefit of the doubt, now there's a gift!

What would it take for us to defer from judging or categorizing someone based on our experience of that person from the past? What would it take to view them in their best light, assuming their best intentions? Among other things, it would take a spirit charitable enough to accept another's differences, weaknesses and shortcomings. It would require having patience with someone who has let us down, or the self-discipline and restraint from acting on the impulse to become offended when someone doesn't handle something the way we hoped. Managing our expectations with regard to how others respond in the world would also be helpful.

7. Kindness

Let me share a few beliefs about kindness that I included in a previous article; *Invoking the Way of Kindness...*

Kindness is powerful. Even the smallest act of kindness has the power to heal, transform, resurrect, empower, and comfort another person. Kindness is timeless and universal. All human beings understand the language of kindness. It crosses all borders and requires no interpreters. Kindness brings out the best in us, eliciting finest instincts and inspiring a largeness of spirit, appealing to the expansive and generous side of our nature. Kindness melts judgment and puts the gale force of compassion at our backs. It invokes empathy and provides a bridge to understanding. Kindness is rooted in the desire and conviction that we can make the world (or someone's world) a lovelier place one small act at a time.

Kindness is simple. It requires gestures no more elaborate than a simple nod, a word spoken in a warm tone of voice, or the gift of restraint when we were about to say or do something that could be hurtful to another. The ways in which kindness can be expressed and demonstrated are wide-ranging and infinite, often arising spontaneously and naturally in small, unsuspecting moments.

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Kindness has no downside. There are no strings attached. It asks nothing from us but to be given away. It has no ulterior motive. It can't be forced or stolen. It can only be given freely and it asks nothing in return. It is ruled by the larger power of cause and effect, and therefore it is not subject to interpretation, motive, or intent. It just is what it is, without pretense or posturing. The motive of kindness is kindness.

Kindness is limitless. There is an inexhaustible supply of kindness from which we may draw each and every day. Kindness begets kindness, so there's no fear of ever using it up, running out, or coming up short. Kindness is and always will be available to us in direct proportion to our inclination, desire, and capacity to express it. The gift that keeps on giving.

Splendid to Receive?

I entitled this article *Seven Simple Gifts: Not Easy to Give, Splendid to Receive*. I think it's pretty obvious what makes these gifts simple, and yet not necessarily easy to bestow. But how about the splendid part? I ask you, dear reader, to assess for yourself, what it is like to be on the receiving end of these gifts. Please take a moment and consider what it felt like the last time you received the following:

- Someone making you feel seen and heard in a situation in which you felt invisible;
- A heartfelt compliment that came from someone with no agenda;
- Genuine thanks and appreciation for something you do every day;
- A sincere apology that helped heal a hurt, heartache, or a misunderstanding;
- Forgiveness which freed you from the burden of guilt, blame or shame;
- The benefit of the doubt in a situation where you appreciated not being unfairly judged or criticized;
- A kindness from someone that touched you deeply.

It is my fondest hope that recollections of having received each of these gifts from someone at some time in our lives will inspire the giving of these same gifts with wholehearted, wide-ranging, no holds barred generosity on our parts. In the words of Sam Levinson, "The tender loving care of fellow human beings will never become obsolete because people, even more than things, have to be restored, renewed, revived, reclaimed and redeemed. We do this for one another through the gifts of the human spirit."

From my heart and home to yours – many blessings!

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POETIC REFLECTION 

A Yuletide Toast

By Denise Bissonnette

To greetings handwritten, good cause to be smitten,
Warm pockets for hands that lost the stray mitten.
To cold winter's night, a magical sight,
Solstice lanterns aglow with soft colored light.
To cedar and pine, aromas divine,
Peppermint, cocoa, and spiced mulled wine.
To holiday baking, and much merry making,
A conspiracy of joy and festive partaking.
To hot buttered rum, a jingle bell hum,
And small drums beating a rumpa pum pum.
To striped candy canes, red and green paper chains,
The root toot tooting of little toy trains.
To angels on high, and reindeer that fly,
The star like a beacon that lights up the sky.
To mistletoe kisses, and whimsical wishes,
And skaters that circle with swift swishing swishes.
To snowfalls that please, among glistening trees,
The cheery chirp chirping of small chickadees.
To Yule logs burning, young hearts yearning,
Sweet dreams being dreamt while round earth's turning.
To a season so rare, the season to care,
"May these sensibilities last" – the heartfelt prayer.
To letting of go the stress, letting Love be the guest,
'Tis the time for all to bless and be blessed.
A cup of good cheer, a toast most sincere,
Clink-clink, one and all, to a splendid New Year!

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THOUGHTS TO CONSIDER



“Your most precious and valued possessions
and your greatest powers are invisible and intangible.
No one can take them from you.
You, and you alone, can give them.
You will receive abundance for your giving.”

- The Dalai Lama

“However many holy words you read,
however many you speak,
what good will they be if you do not act upon them?”

- Buddha

“Giving credit where credit is due is a very rewarding habit to form.
Its rewards are inestimable.”

- Loretta Young

“Tolerance is giving to every other human being
every right that you claim for yourself.”

- Robert Green Ingersoll

“Forgiveness is the giving, and so the receiving, of life.”

- George MacDonald

“Each person has inside a basic decency of goodness.
If he listens to it and acts on it,
he is giving a great deal of what the world needs most.
It is not complicated but it takes courage
for a person to listen to his own goodness and act upon it.”

- Pablo Casals

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

1. Each of the seven gifts could be considered their own “practice”, undertaken daily, weekly, or on an on-going, spontaneous basis. What makes them a true gift, however, is the spirit and intentionality behind the gesture. For each of the seven gifts, you may wish to devote some time and attention as to whom you wish to extend them, when and how:

Making someone feel “seen and heard” in a situation in which they feel invisible;

A heartfelt compliment

Genuine thanks and appreciation for something they do every day;

A sincere apology to help heal a hurt or a misunderstanding;

Forgiveness, freeing the person from the burden of guilt, blame or shame;

The benefit of the doubt in a situation where someone will appreciate not being unfairly judged or criticized;

A kindness in the form of a gesture or a deed.

2. Share this article in a class or group-setting. Have people share experiences of having given or received any of the seven gifts. Alternatively, assign everyone the task of extending any or all of these gifts within a certain time period. Come back together and have students or group members share their experiences.