

# “What Are We Doing for Christmas?”

*When one family grows into several families, who plays Santa for all the adults?*

By Cynthia Brouse

**I**t almost ruined our Thanksgiving weekend. Every few hours as my three siblings, their spouses, my parents and I prepared and ate the turkey dinner, my mother would ask, “What are we going to do about Christmas?” She meant, “What are we going to do about Christmas gifts?”

The question had arisen almost every fall since my youngest brother left home. I should confess here that my family is gift-impaired. You couldn't find a more loving bunch – so loving, in fact, that we'll turn ourselves inside out to avoid offending each other. The effect of this WASPish politeness has been to turn Christmas into a major stress-inducer.

We started out a fairly typical small-town middle-class Canadian Protestant family. When my siblings and I were still kids in the 1960s, we were showered at Christmas with Etch-A-Sketches, Barbies and skates – our parents weren't rich, but times were good and Christmas morning was a *big deal*. Visits with grandparents,

Christmas pageants, everything led up to the annual consumer orgy of shredding paper and shrieking little voices. And it grew: Christmas stockings turned into shopping bags by the time I was 10.

Eventually we all grew up and moved to the city, though most of us still make it home for Christmas. The addition of three in-laws meant not only confronting other traditions (my Catholic sister- and brother-in-law don't have the same attachment to Christmas

**Cynthia Brouse, her nephews Terence and Nicholas, and her brother Paul have fun with gift-giving.**

morning – they're used to opening presents the night before) but also buying for more people. But we'd got over the shrieking-and-shredding stage, and Christmas morning had evolved into a pleasant marathon. We took turns slowly opening one gift at a time, including stocking stuffers, while the rest



of us looked on, providing the appropriate oohs and aahs. "Under the tree" had become half the living room, and often we were still oohing and aahing well into the afternoon. To be fair, we didn't buy the sorts of pricey gifts that other families we knew gave – we're the types who exclaim proudly, "Oh, I'm so glad you like it! You'd never guess, but it was only \$1.49 at Canadian Tire!" – but we all loved our Christmas morning ritual. At least I thought we all loved it. My mother and father, however, live on a modest retirement income in a town with few stores, high prices and poor selection; for them Christmas shopping means frustration. And it leaves them broke. The year I heard my mother say, "I hate Christmas," I felt ashamed.

Were we just a bunch of overgrown spoiled brats? Probably; but for us, giving had become as much fun as getting. Nevertheless, we decided to simplify things by drawing names. It was a tough move – if each of us received only one gift, what would we do for the rest of the day? So we opted to buy a "big" gift for just one person, the name picked from a



The Brouse siblings in 1964 (LEFT TO RIGHT): Paul, Lori, Mark and Cynthia

hat in October, and to buy clever stocking stuffers for everybody else.

I liked this arrangement. It kept costs down, but I still had the pleasure of buying for everybody. It wasn't a perfect system, of course. You'd think it would be easy to put 10 adults' names (including Grandmother's) in a jar and distribute them, but you don't know my family. There were absent members whose secret choices had to be mailed to them; some people threw out their slips of paper and forgot whom they'd picked; others were sent their own names. When someone got stuck with "the hardest person to buy for" (Dad) two years in a row, we made sure that we could draw again to avoid repeats.

Of course Dad wasn't the only one

jotted down "Tupperware" as an afterthought. None of the books or CDs showed up under the tree, but I received enough plastic containers to preserve our entire turkey dinner in the freezer.

For the most part the name-drawing worked, though we did fuss over such conundrums as The Person Who Doesn't Come Home for Christmas: should they be included in the name-drawing game? Then there was the Outside Visitor. Would he or she have to accept an invitation by Thanksgiving in order to get in on the fun? Then some of us found it hard to control our spending. Gradually the gifts got larger, the stockings got bigger, the price limits were forgotten and before too long, Mother was saying,

who was hard to buy for. For a few years I was among those who drew up a list of things I wanted and passed it out, even though it made me feel like mercenary little Sally in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. One year, after I'd listed a number of books, CDs, toiletries and accessories, I



"I hate Christmas," once more.

Finally we got so tired of the Annual Christmas-Gift Discussion that we simply went back to buying gifts for everybody. But there was still no end of philosophical problems to contend with: for example, as a single person, I bought gifts for each sibling and his or her spouse and, later, each of their kids. What if they bought me just one gift among them? Should it equal the value of the gifts I bought all of them? Should I buy just one gift for each family?

The most delicate problem was income disparity. My siblings and I have variously gone through school, first jobs, raises, recessions, travel, unemployment, marriage and house-buying. There was always someone who was feeling strapped and someone who was relatively flush (none of us have struck it rich). Nobody minded not receiving a lot of gifts – but nobody liked not being able to give them.

Then children came along – three in two years. Some of us felt that only the kids should get presents – but was that fair to the two of us who were childless? (One year my grandmother had me

chasing around to stores to buy a Christmas present for her to give to my brother's cat, "because he has no kids.") The older we got, the clearer it became that focusing so much energy on the commercial aspect of Christmas was detracting from our enjoyment of what should be the best part of the holiday – being together. A few years ago we made a list of other possibilities for gift-giving.

- 1. I Got a Sock:** Only low-priced stocking stuffers are allowed.
- 2. One Size Fits All:** Each person buys one generic gift, and all take turns drawing one from a Santa box.
- 3. The Family Shopping Trip:** Each person buys a gift for himself or herself, but the shopping trip can be turned into a family excursion (perhaps on Boxing Day).
- 4. Zero-Sum Santa:** Gifts should cost nothing: recycle something you already own or make something from materials you have around the house. This could include a donation of time.
- 5. Second Hand:** Give only gifts that are purchased at yard sales or thrift shops.
- 6. A Tiny White Lie:** Since our parents had the most trouble finding gifts for their

children, one of us suggested we all draw names but sneakily ensure that Mom and Dad got each other's.

- 7. Charity Begins at Home:** Donate money to a charity together. Or draw names and make a donation in the recipient's name.
- 8. Togetherness:** To promote family harmony, spend the holiday working at a food bank, take an all-family vacation or go out to dinner together.
- 9. The Best Gifts Are Imaginary:** In those years when everybody's poor, tell each other in detail what we would have bought for them if we'd had the money.
- 10. Merry Multiculturalism:** If your family now includes an in-law from a different cultural background, try a gift-giving custom from their upbringing.

Have we adopted any of the foregoing? Not quite. But creating the list has freed us to choose our own paths. I especially like Number 4. This year I think I'll wrap up all those plastic containers and find them some new homes.

Give us your ideas on gift-giving. During the week of Nov. 8, 1999, visit our Web site at [www.canadianliving.com](http://www.canadianliving.com).

