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Unplug the Christmas Machine: Enjoy An Old Fashioned Christmas

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The excitement of Christmas is in the air and our offices at the historic Moses Gamble House (circa 1892) are decorated in Victorian fashion for the season. In the midst of contemporary holiday madness, it is a comforting reminder of simpler, less complicated Christmases past.

In the late 1800's, freshly cut trees were traditionally decorated with handmade ornaments, crystals, Christmas postcards, and garland made from cranberries or popcorn. Only a few simple gifts, usually handmade, were exchanged between adults. Called "holiday notions", these tokens included such items as pipe tobacco, books, a packet of pins, or hand-embroidered handkerchiefs. Children typically received one or two toys or garments (often handmade) and a stocking filled with fruit, nuts and peppermint sticks. On Christmas morning, after the children emptied their stockings and holiday notions were exchanged among the adults, the family enjoyed a church service followed by several days of visiting, playing games, singing and dancing. Gift giving was always of minor importance, secondary to time spent with family and friends.

At the turn of the century, however, things began to change. In the early 1900's, newspaper ads began appearing a full month before Christmas and went beyond simply touting product features. Advertising became decidedly more aggressive, encouraging more extravagant gift-giving by proposing to buyers that the value of a gift was a measure of the giver's affection or devotion to the recipient. While conducting research for their book, *Unplug the Christmas Machine*, Jo Robinson and Jean Coppok Staeneli discovered an ad in the December 15th 1919 edition of The New York Times that read: "Don't give your family and friends frivolous gifts that are sure to disappoint, but give them worthy gifts that will let them know how much you care." This is a snapshot of a significant turning point in the history of Christmas gift giving. As advertising became a campaign and the season focus shifted, department store inventories enjoyed an incredible 50 percent increase between 1919 and 1920. These numbers have grown exponentially to this day as the holidays have become increasingly costly, pressured and frenetic. Many are afraid to step off of the Christmas treadmill for fear they will be perceived as less loving or devoted to family and friends.

At a recent social gathering, a grandmother ruefully recounted her surprise while helping her daughter load items in the car to be given to a local nonprofit charity. She discovered that the rather pricey Christmas gifts she had carefully purchased for her grandchildren the previous year were already among the discarded items. In a time when children are endlessly yearning for the latest and greatest stuff, this is not an uncommon occurrence. With countless toys, games and other forms of entertainment at their disposal, children tend to be easily bored and unfamiliar with simpler, more creative pursuits such as a blank sheet of paper and a box of crayons. Tragically missing is the ability to be introspective and

entertained by their own thoughts, ideas, and dreams—all of which are very important to creativity, development of identity, and positive self-image.

Somehow through the years something very precious has been lost. For many, the peace and true enjoyment of the holidays is overshadowed by elaborate preparation and the search for just the right gift, leaving many stressed, exhausted, and financially overextended. The spirit of Christmas often evaporates in the process of being acting manager of Santa's fulfillment center.

But take heart--there is good news. You can do something different this year. Unplug the “Christmas machine”, reset priorities and try an old fashioned Christmas. Leave the store ads at home and spend more time with friends and family. Focus on “holiday notions” rather than expensive gifts. Call or spend time with someone who will be alone for the holidays or volunteer to assist local charities helping those in need. Enlist your children in the process, giving them the opportunity to experience something truly different. And most importantly, embrace the holidays as a time for spiritual renewal and remembrance of the greatest gift of all time.