

The calendar said it was the 24th of December, but Tom's mood had made it into just another day – and maybe even into a bad day – instead of a day of anticipation. The weather was cold, wet, and as overcast as his mental state. Earlier, he had gone shopping with the hope of finding presents he could afford. In his mind's eye he saw people opening their presents with delight. The vision lifted his spirits. He returned with gifts and a chagrin at having to have bought cheap stock to fit his budget.

"Well, they may not be as wonderful as I had hoped to give," he told himself as he returned home, "but I have that gold wrap I saved so they will look nice anyway." He left the presents in the trunk and headed inside. He opened the door and was greeted by the warmth of his home, the smell of dinner cooking, the scent of the Christmas tree, and the delighted squeals of his little girl announcing his arrival.

As he stood with her nestled in the crook of his arm, her arms around his neck, he spotted a box under the tree wrapped in the fancy gold paper he thought had been hidden away. "Who wrapped the gold present under the tree?" he asked toward the kitchen. "Oh I did, Daddy," his daughter replied. "I wanted the prettiest paper I could find."

He could tell by her tone that she was very proud of her accomplishment but that did not temper the anger that started within as he felt himself fray further. The words that followed - spoken in a timbre of a distraught and harried parent who chose to allow their emotions to be directed most strongly to those closest - need not be repeated here to be understood. Later on Tom would rail against himself as he recalled his words but at the moment his bitterness was too complete. He scolded her for using something that was not hers without permission and sent her to bed early. Disappointment and confusion registered in her face but she did as she was told.

Christmas morning was as bright as the sun breaking through the clouds and bouncing off the snow that now blanketed the neighborhood. There were not as many gifts but the joy and giggles were just as plentiful. And soon Tom found himself with a box wrapped in gold paper hovering before his face. "It's for you, Daddy!" squeaked a voice barely able to contain the anticipated joy of heartfelt giving. Tom smiled as he opened the box but his countenance of the night before quickly returned. The box was empty. "How dare you waste paper on this. This box is empty!" The words were quick and stern.

"But there are things in there, Daddy," she said urgently. "I did it myself. I blew kisses into the box until it was really, really full and couldn't take another one." She peered at him with great longing. "They are all for you."

Tom was crushed. Emotions and release swept through him as he hugged his daughter with tearful apologies against her neck.

That gold box stayed next to Tom's bedside for the next many years. Whenever the world became a little too rough; when there wasn't quite enough to manifest the dreams he'd yearned for; when there seemed nowhere to turn, that box and the kisses inside would bring him back to where he needed to be. And isn't that as it should be? Whether wrapped in gold or brown paper from a grocery bag, the desire for someone to have the best in life and to give that expectation with love is something far more valuable than a purchase. It is the greatest gift, of all we can give; unconditional love. Look at the giving. Not at the present. May such a gift be yours this holiday season. Merry Christmas.