



EXPERIENCE IS EVERYTHING

In celebration of a recent milestone birthday, my daughters asked what I would like as a gift. Clothing? Jewellery? Something for the house?

Given my year-long travel adventure with only carry-on luggage, you'll appreciate that accumulating loads more stuff isn't high on my list of priorities. So I replied that I'd really prefer a weekend away with a very few of my favourite people – including them, of course. And thus began the planning, which is always half the fun.

Where to go? When to go? What to do? We settled on Wellington, where Number Two Daughter has lived for almost ten years. It's a city I also once lived in, with fond memories. We agreed on WOW, the World of Wearable Arts show that has been on our bucket lists forever, and other adventures missed on previous trips to the capital.

Over three days, under the kind of blue skies that only Wellington can deliver, we walked, talked, laughed, ate and made new memories. Exactly the kind of birthday celebration I wanted.

A sunny drive out to West Wind to walk the coast beneath giant wind turbines, gazing north to Mana and Kapiti Islands, and west to Arapawa Island and the entry to Queen Charlotte Sound. Our sweaty efforts rewarded with massive ice creams from the cheery bloke at the Makara Beach Café.

Lunch at Days Bay, followed by a ferry ride across Wellington Harbour, arriving at the wharf just in time to wander into the TSB Arena for our WOW matinee show. Surely the easiest way to avoid traffic and arrive unflustered. Afterwards a hot chocolate and the ferry back, somewhat bouncier as the earlier northerly wind had turned southerly. Distracting seasick tummies by sharing the standout moments and costumes of the spectacular WOW show. 'What was that skeleton costume made of? How did they manage to walk in those heels? And the acrobats? And the choreography!'

Bonds of family and friendship strengthened through shared experiences.

Flying home on Monday morning, our conversation turned to Christmas. Admittedly it felt a bit obscene to be discussing festivities in October, but distance, blended and extended families make early planning necessary.

For the past couple of years, we have done the Secret Santa thing, with each person drawing the name of one family member and buying only for them. The dollar limit is \$50. It's far less than it would cost to buy for everyone. The idea is that each person makes a wish list and the giver chooses from that. The outcome is that we all receive something we want, rather than a bunch of stuff that sits in the cupboard forever or quietly gets re-gifted.

My family suggestion this year is that our gifts get more creative, perhaps exploring experiences rather than stuff. At first glance, that sounds expensive, but it ain't necessarily so and I'll come back to that in a minute.

So, why not just buy stuff? It's certainly easier. At this end of the year the shops are bulging with ways to separate you from your hard-earned cash. When we buy, we are looking to exchange money for happiness. It's a temporary thrill, as anyone who has experienced buyer's remorse will attest. That awful sinking feeling after you take the new gadget/dress/shoes home. The excitement of the purchase turns into a 'what was I thinking?' moment when you realise that: A. It blew the credit card balance you've been working hard to reduce and B. It's highly likely to join the other amazing gadget/dress/shoes-you've-only-used-once, in the back of the cupboard.

I've done them all - especially the kitchen ones. The pasta maker. The egg cooker. The bread maker. All designed to make my life better, apparently. All ended up as silent rebukes on the shelf, and stayed with me for years.

Buying stuff is a temporary thrill. We see ourselves living different lives, more interesting and exciting than our current daily grind. The pasta maker, for example. I imagined that as a stay-at-home Mum with a new firstborn, I'd have loads of time to do the whole earth-mother bit, making ribbons of spinach fettucine that we would feast on. Hmmm, yet another shattered myth of motherhood. Actually I only used the beastly machine twice. Even now the memory of metres of stretchy green pasta strung to dry over the backs of chairs and laundry racks, brings shudders. Once the newborn arrived, all bets were off.

It's even worse when unexpected gifts arrive. 'Darling, look what I bought you! I just know you will love this.' Really? What were you thinking! Call me ungrateful perhaps, but have you never received an ill-thought gift?



The point is that sooner or later, the shine wears off stuff. The psychologists call it hedonic adaptation, the idea that each of us has a set point for happiness and no matter the highs or lows, we always return to that level. So rather than 'this will change my life and make me happy forever,' it's only going to alter your state for now. Once the first glow has gone and what is new is now old, we look for other ways to get high. For many that is called Shopping.

Money spent on stuff only buys us happiness up to a certain point. After that? Experience is often the winner.

If we buy something that turns out to be a terrible waste of money, the response is to hide it away and pretend it never happened. Somehow none of us want to be judged for making such poor choices. Listening to people talk about their stuff is boring, but if an experience turns out to be a disaster, there's a story we can dine out on for ever!

In one of my recent workshops about reinventing work in the second half of life, we were discussing Bucket Lists. You might recall the movie of the same name, with Jack Nicholson and Morgan Friedman as two older men, each with lives limited through illness, who head around the world to tick places off their Bucket Lists. It's an unlikely tale – few of us would have the wherewithal to do so, let alone send our dying partners off with a stranger to take on such adventures. But the underlying theme is not to leave the things you most want to do until it's too late. And that bit I agree with wholeheartedly.

Australian palliative care nurse, Bronnie Ware, wrote a powerful memoir of caring for terminally ill patients, called *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying*. The number one regret she heard was the wish that 'I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.'

Other regrets on the list include:

- **I wish I hadn't worked so hard**
- **I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings**
- **I wish I'd stayed in touch with my friends**
- **I wish I'd let myself be happier.**

Regrets are more often about what we didn't do, than what we did. You will note that the list doesn't include a desire to have spent more time at the office, nor does it reflect the wish to have accumulated more stuff.

Bucket lists, or Life Lists, as I prefer to call them, are invariably about experiences, often places to visit. Perhaps a dream to walk on the Great Wall of China or trek the Camino de Santiago. Or maybe to travel by icebreaker to Antarctica, or to see the Northern Lights. You might want to drive a Ferrari, but not necessarily to own one. I hear those insurance premiums are crippling.

If you have your own list, then think more widely about what you want to create; to find; to know; to say; to feel; to hear and to give. It's not just what you want to do before you die, rather what do you want to fill your life with?

Not all experiences are created equal though, so what makes them worth remembering?

Firstly, make it an experience that is really meaningful to you. In my twenties, a friend suggested that we go on a road trip south. She really fancied a bloke who lived in Dunedin and wanted an excuse to see him. You know, the old 'I happen to be in town next week and thought we could catch up' trick. From the outset, our travel agenda was different. I envisaged a meandering trip through the country with plenty of stops and photo ops and she wanted to make a beeline for Dunedin. Her car, her rules. She was a woman on a mission, so we zipped along main highways with nary a loo-pause. The trip of my imagination faded into wistful glimpses of signposts. We got to Dunedin, she saw the bloke and found out he had just got engaged. Too heartbroken for sightseeing, she drove home alternating between sobs and silence. A memorable experience for all the wrong reasons.

Best experiences have the Wow factor. Have you had those 'pinch-me' moments? My year of travel provided many such experiences, but one that stands out is the memory of watching the sun set over the Mekong River in Luang Prabang, Laos. After many years of hearing about this extraordinary river, there I was and it took my breath away.

The best experiences are shared. Whether or not you have the experience on your own, sharing it with others heightens the thrill and reinforces the memory. We re-live our best and worst moments through stories that recreate, and often embellish, what really happened.

It's often harder to make choices about stuff than it is about experiences. Perhaps that has to do with the number of options available. We aren't always clear about our criteria for choosing stuff. What phone will you buy? What features do you want or need? And making decisions about what other people might want takes time and insight. Do they really want that fancy tea towel you just bought? Or did you choose it because you love it?



What, then, might be a new strategy for the upcoming gift-giving season?

Author, Dr Gary Chapman, offered an alternative in his book *The Five Love Languages*. Based on observations of relationships that thrive and those that don't, he suggests that we each have a primary and secondary way of feeling loved and appreciated. And isn't that what gift-giving should really be about?

His five ways include: words of affirmation, tangible gifts, acts of service, quality time and physical touch. Interestingly, we often show our own preference in the way we express love to others. Are you a hugger? Physical touch. Do you value undivided attention in listening and

conversation? Quality time. Are you always looking to offer a helping hand? Acts of service. Do you love to shop and find special things for special people? Tangible gifts. Do you offer encouragement and thanks through spoken or written words? Words of affirmation.

Chapman's work is a wonderful reminder that stuff is only one way to show people how much you care. If, like me, you have a close group of people to share the love with, understanding what will bring them most joy is the best gift of all.

And that's where cost comes in. While it's easy to spend money to solve the gift question, spending time is a far better investment. The right gift doesn't need to have a hefty price tag. It may be as simple as a card that offers an afternoon of garden weeding or an evening's babysitting. The promise of morning tea and a beach walk with great conversation. If physical touch matters, then what about a voucher for a hot stone massage? Get creative and think about what they would appreciate.

It's a regular trope to hear that we spend too much, and waste too much, on useless stuff. This is your chance to change that. Start a revolution!



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Jenny Magee works with Boomers to make the most of the second half of their lives. Her latest book **A Bold Life – How Boomer Women are Reinventing Life Beyond Fifty** is available at good bookstores or from www.jennymagee.com If you are looking to make significant changes, contact Jenny via email to jenny@jennymagee.com