



# The Fab Five

**Lisa Finn Powell** unearths the true meaning of Christmas under a mound of unwanted gifts

**A**h yes, that time of year again, when we reflect, look around and ponder one of life's most puzzling questions: Why do people over buy, over spend, over eat and over do Christmas?

Enter my very own ghost of Christmas past, clad in Earth Shoes and bell bottomed jeans, peering with me through the huge bay window of my childhood home. One zillion strings of tangled lights in all shapes and sizes, my father dutifully attempting to unravel and apply said twinkling delights to branches weighed down by masses of ornaments.

Heaped in the corner awaiting their imminent placement beneath this dazzling shrine, are carefully wrapped packages, laminated with sticky tape, containing the latest in Christmas must-gives that no self respecting parent who knew their weight in pet rocks would dare to deny their voracious offspring: mood rings, lava lamps, cassette recorders, Rubik's Cubes, sea monkeys, and the Bee Gees on 8 track tape (yep, that was mine).

On the other side of the room, tucked behind the curtains, were literally dozens of industrial sized plastic buckets, each containing no less than 50 cookies baked with factory-like precision over the course of a week, then 'hidden' so that none of us children would eat them before 'the day'. Success rate: 0%. Parental concealment skills: at an all time low.

When the long-awaited morning finally dawned, our over-cooked house lay stuffed with seasonal fodder poised and ready to be consumed by the consumers. The fiscal dent untold. Enough to make one's mood ring turn decisively black.

Today Father Christmas would be laughed out of Lapland if his sleigh wasn't filled with battery operated, electronic, high-speed, hand held, high tech gadgets with touch screens all requiring a stylus and the manual dexterity of a brain surgeon to operate them. As to the cost, well we have never paid more real money for virtual fun.

Come Boxing Day, our bulging bins can be seen from space. Our kerbs are heaving with wads of wrapping paper and piles of

excessive packaging designed by a team of anti-environmental experts who pride themselves on producing air tight, impenetrable containers of 100% genuine unrecyclable parts, not actually meant to be opened by mere mortals armed with ordinary kitchen shears.

The true meaning of Christmas? Buried somewhere beneath the rubble. Whatever that answer may be to any of us, we are all certainly better off putting conscious effort into how and why we do what we do. We can show the children that happy holidays are not created on advertising treadmills.

There are so many ways to express love and appreciation and the spirit of giving. Second hand

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toys or books are perfect. After all, is there really a difference between a new or previously snapped together Lego or a pre-read story with an ending that has already been revealed to its former owner?

An all time favourite of mine is the humble hand written gift voucher, which can be beautifully and artistically designed and given to anyone. One can never go wrong with the classic promises of meals, babysitting, cleaning, massages (that about completes my wish list) and from there the creative possibilities are endless depending on recipient; car washing, loft cleaning, long Saturday morning lie ins every weekend until further notice (ahem, darling?).

Of course, the made-it-with-love list is vast: food, cards, clothes, toys, toiletries, etc. Unleash your hidden talents. If you have worked out how to make quirky dolls from corn husks, then go for it (yes, I did do that one year and I am happy to report that my little Frankencorn still lives! Evil laugh). Planning is the key. Don't wait 'til November to remember that you forgot to plant a massive organic garden so that the harvest of herbs could be dried and poured into decorative glass jars with cute little labels drawn by your children, 'Time', 'Owegano', 'Saj'...



I once had the brilliant idea of making salsa entirely from my vegetable patch, tomatoes, chili peppers, onions, to give to friends and family. Hot tip: Do not choose the hottest day of the year to boiling water bathe 36 jars in sweltering kitchen. Hot tip #2: Do not chop tons of chilli peppers with bare hands that will then sting for 24 hours and end in you wearing bright green cotton gloves from the dressing up box because you are paranoid that the oil on your fingers might transfer to breast feeding baby.

The icing on the fruit cake is in the wrapping. Our family made an accidental discovery years ago when we ran out of paper for someone's birthday. Disaster averted by raiding the deepest confines of my wardrobe and voila, the most interestingly covered presents swaddled in scarves and ties. Extreme Wrapping has become a tradition, as has scouring charity shops for the pretty and the pretty wacky.

For me, over doing at Christmas is, in a strange way, 'under' doing it. It takes a bit of time and forethought in order to spend less and mean more. With a little planning and creativity, the home-made, hand-made, reused and recycled make for one very joyful and triumphant experience for all. And to all a good night (sorry, couldn't help myself). ■