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GUEST ESSAY

How to Buy Nothing New This Holiday Gifting Season

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Every year my husband and I set a holiday challenge for each other: Find a gift at the local thrift store, something delightful that is a reflection of our individual aesthetics or obsessions. The tradition has brought some of my favorite objects into our home.

An original poster from “2001: A Space Odyssey” now hangs in our bedroom. A shiny foil sticker on the back says that its foam-core mount was done at a frame shop on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, Calif., many years ago. It’s not just a cool poster; it’s also for a movie we saw together in ultra-large format at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, back before we had kids. My husband lived in the San Francisco Bay Area, we met in New York, and now we all live in Vermont, where the poster ended up, too. It feels like a part of our story.

Treasures like this are all around us — in thrift stores, yard sales, vintage boutiques, online resale sites and Buy Nothing groups. If you’re getting a gift from me this year, it’s probably going to be secondhand, like the terrarium I scored for my son on Facebook Marketplace and the wooden dollhouse I snagged for my daughter from a friend. I’ve been fixing it up after she goes to bed by sanding and painting it and adding wallpaper from scraps left over from a bathroom project. By the time Christmas rolls around, I’ll just have to stock up on chocolate (and this year, [Pop It!](#) toys) for stockings, and Santa has landed.

Global supply-chain problems [might cause shortages](#) of the season’s “it” toys or tech gadgets, but they do not have to ruin the holidays. Instead of rushing to the stores or filling your online shopping cart early, perhaps this is a time to question the annual marketing drive telling us that we must start spending now and keep spending through December to manifest a Christmas morning of abundance and cheer.

This is not about being a Grinch, canceling Christmas or trying to pass a minimalist purity test. It’s about breaking out of a consumer mind-set that demands we constantly buy things — things that we then must care for and eventually dispose of.

Every new purchase puts into motion a global chain of events, usually beginning with extracting oil to make the plastic that is in everything from stretchy jeans to the packaging they come in. Those materials travel from processing plant to factory to container ship, to eventually land on my front porch, and then become mine for a time. Sooner or later, they will most likely end up in a landfill.

There’s so little pleasure in those kinds of purchases, and I’m not alone in that assessment. In her book [“Consumed,”](#) Aja Barber, a sustainability and fashion industry expert, writes about the perpetual

disappointment of Black Friday shopping that ends in buying “merchandise you hadn’t seen before and didn’t especially want, but somehow felt compelled to buy because of the low, low, low cost.”

Certainly, tasking myself with finding a gift that speaks to my rich and complicated relationship with my partner, rather than simply shopping from a wish list he has shared with me, requires more thought and work. But it’s also a lot more fun.

The small town I live in has an exceptionally good secondhand infrastructure. There are two resale shops that specialize in children’s clothes and toys; a community closet filled with free clothing, books and baby gear; three Buy Nothing groups; a consignment store; two used-books stores; several vintage and antique stores; and a quirky boutique with a resale section. This culture of reuse never really went out of style in New England, and it seems to have only grown in recent years. Asking around or looking for something used before buying new is increasingly seen as the norm.

The extent to which my community embraces secondhand goods may be unusual, but according to Goodwill International, which has more than 3,300 stores across the United States and Canada, sales for the period from March through August of 2021 were up more than 11 percent from the same period in 2019. The online reseller ThredUp [cites research projecting](#) that the market for secondhand clothing in the United States will double over the next five years, hitting \$77 billion.

All of this is good news for the planet: It reduces somewhat the movement of stuff from one side of the world to the other and the extraction of natural resources required to produce new earrings and toy cars and jigsaw puzzles. It also saves some items from landfills while they can still offer some utility or joy. But I know it won’t solve our environmental crises — we need much more sweeping changes led by large companies and governments.

Nor does it get at the root of what drives consumer culture. Swapping new for used doesn’t actually reduce the drive to consume, J.B. MacKinnon, the author of “[The Day the World Stops Shopping](#): How Ending Consumerism Saves the Environment and Ourselves,” told me. “If we maintain the consumer mind-set, we will always eventually be coming back to the same problem of just consuming too much energy and too many resources, through whatever form of consumption we do, even if it’s circular or sharing,” Mr. MacKinnon said.

I love Mr. MacKinnon’s suggestion that time spent together in conversation, on a walk or preparing a meal is far more meaningful than anything you can unwrap. And I agree that the ritual handing over of purchased stuff while posing in [matching family pajamas](#) can actually get in the way of the human connection most of us are seeking over the holidays.

But realistically, I’m not sure my family will ever forgo holiday gift-giving entirely. My mom’s annual [Yankee swap exchange](#) — you might know it as a “white elephant” gift party — is a real highlight of the season. We can, however, make some changes. In his book, Mr. MacKinnon suggests that even gradually reducing our household consumption could help the environment, without bringing the global economy to a screeching halt.

For me, finding ways to replace new with used feels more like a treasure hunt than an obligation. Seeking out and sharing things reminds me that I live in a place of abundance and makes me feel connected to others. Last year in December, a local mom set up two long tables on her front porch and invited other parents to drop off small toys, books, hats, mittens — anything that might make a good

stocking stuffer. I came with a bag full of toy cars, plastic animals, board books and stickers, things that my kids had lost interest in or ignored. I left with a bag that, frankly, wasn't that different, but it was new to us and better reflected their current interests.

It saved me probably \$50, but it was a useful reminder that our stuff isn't our identity. The plastic snakes and wooden blocks I've been sweeping out from under the couch don't have to be mine to deal with forever. I have a community to share them with, one that I'm incredibly grateful to be part of.

This year, maybe I'll offer to set up the swap table myself.