



A Radically Simple Wish

A father explains his unorthodox Christmas list. | DANIEL DE ROULET

DEAR FAMILY,

You all have been particularly patient this year during my latest episode of procrastination over making a Christmas wish list. I don't know what's at the heart of it, really. Maybe I have been working too hard and have lost track of my hobbies. Maybe my advancing middle age encourages me to wish for things that I can't really get back, despite what the television tells me—like hair. Perhaps I've lived long enough that the thought of getting more things for Christmas has lost some of its splendor. I'm running out of room: just look at the garage.

So, after considering at some length my Christmas wishes, I am requesting the following:

Wish List

- 1) That we all enjoy a good year to come.
- 2) That Bedford Falls gets the new library it deserves.
- 3) That Illinois gets a governor who does not go to jail.
- 4) That I get a chance to run a professional baseball team.
- 5) That I get to write another book.

Unfortunately, none of these involves monetary sums of reasonable amounts or even easily wrapped items. I could ask for time, but I have that, and it's really my responsibility to make good use of it to write—so much for number 5.

In terms of a good year, I could ask for family warmth, but I already have that—thank you. And I could ask for enjoyment abounding, but that is an issue both in and out of my control—mostly “in” if you read St. Paul's comments about learning to be content in all things, or mostly “out” if an asteroid smacks into the earth, like in all those disaster movies—so that takes care of number 1.

I grew up in New Jersey watching the Yankees and the Mets when they were both really bad, so I have a desire to rescue a team from mediocrity and give them just one good year. I won't name names of potential candidates. I know this wish is a financial stretch beyond our reach, but you asked, and I think it would bring me amazing personal fulfillment.

I realize we're swimming against the tide with number 3, but time will tell.

And I have *It's a Wonderful Life* on DVD; given that Bedford Falls didn't end up being

Pottersville, I still have hope for that library in the Bedford Falls that lives on in my imagination.

Okay, I sense your impatience. So, here are a few more reasonable items I could use:

Reality List

- 1) Matching socks—this seems to be a continuing (about fifty-year) problem for me. Please buy me twenty pairs of two kinds of socks and hide all the others.
- 2) A new wallet—one that stays flat and thin in my back pocket no matter how much I pack into it.
- 3) A nice pen set—with some sort of GPS device attached.
- 4) Comfy clothes for around the house. One can never have too many comfy clothes.
- 5) That I be given my own reserved spot on the couch that takes priority over the one that belongs to the cats.
- 6) Permission to wander aimlessly in a home improvement store for as long as I'd like, and a gift card that would actually allow me to buy something there.
- 7) That I become involved in something spiritually significant this year.

About number 7: this has been a growing concern for me, even though we have a wonderful church about which I feel genuinely fortunate. Our church has good messages, good music, well-meaning people, and you all like attending as well. Many families don't have that, so please don't think I'm pushing my luck and asking us to change churches. Been there, done that—and I know that you get what you take with you.

The problem is that I feel as if my skin is stretching thin—yes, yes, this is a physical reality of middle age, and the younger ones among you have no idea that this one day will happen to you. I'm talking, however, about how my spirit feels, as if it wants to grow and something is holding it back but not very well—like an over-inflated helium balloon on the edge of bursting, or my inability to properly use plastic wrap to seal leftovers.

You see, a few years ago I read a book called *Desire of the Everlasting Hills*, by Thomas Cahill. I didn't like all of it, but I stuck with it and found a chapter near the end that may address number 7 on my reality list, which has stayed with me like one of Scrooge's ghosts. I don't want to shake it, but I can't seem to do anything about it either.

We once read *A Christmas Carol* aloud as a family, and you all know that I'll watch just about any version of it that comes on television this time

of year. But I don't know how far you get through the movie before you quietly and politely walk out of the room and leave me to my seasonal viewings. One of the most frightening ghosts that visit Scrooge drags chains and objects “wrought in steel” attached to those chains. These represent all the good deeds in life that he could have done but did not do.

The chapter near the end of Cahill's book describes a fellowship that, in contrast to Ebenezer Scrooge, does not ignore human need. It was formed in Rome about four decades ago. It was radically simple. A group of people got together in the evenings, read the words of Jesus in the Gospels, and tried to put them into practice.

The results were transformational, and they seem to be continuing today, not just in the group that still operates in Rome, but among others related to it that have sprung up around the world. Members give their time and talents to the people in their community. Accountants help people figure out their taxes and finances. Others care for the sick, or tutor children, or distribute bags of groceries to the hungry. They invite the homeless in for sit-down, dignified dinners served in church. Every year they participate with Jews in the area in a march to commemorate the Holocaust. They offer their resources, and they spur each other on and come back to Jesus's words to inspire them because they know about the powers of habit and entropy. They do good works, trusting that as they let their light shine before other people, these people will see it and remember God and wonder if Jesus wasn't onto something after all.

So, dear family, I want number 7 on the list this year for Christmas. I need some help finding it, and getting ideas on how to find like-minded people so that we can encourage each other, and I might just need your gentle prodding so that I can gather the courage to get a group started.

I want to be able to walk into a Christmas Eve service next year, and not just get swept up in it because I am a believer, or because for that evening my heart is gladly participating in the carols and the readings and the message and the Christmas pageant. I want to walk into the service joyfully because, staying with the Scrooge analogy, I will have found a way to keep Christmas in my heart every day of the year. ■

Daniel de Roulet celebrates Christmas in California with his family and his immovable cats. A member of the faculty at Vanguard University, he is working on a new book, tentatively called *We Can't Talk: Losing Evangelism in a Society That Has Lost Civil Discourse*.