



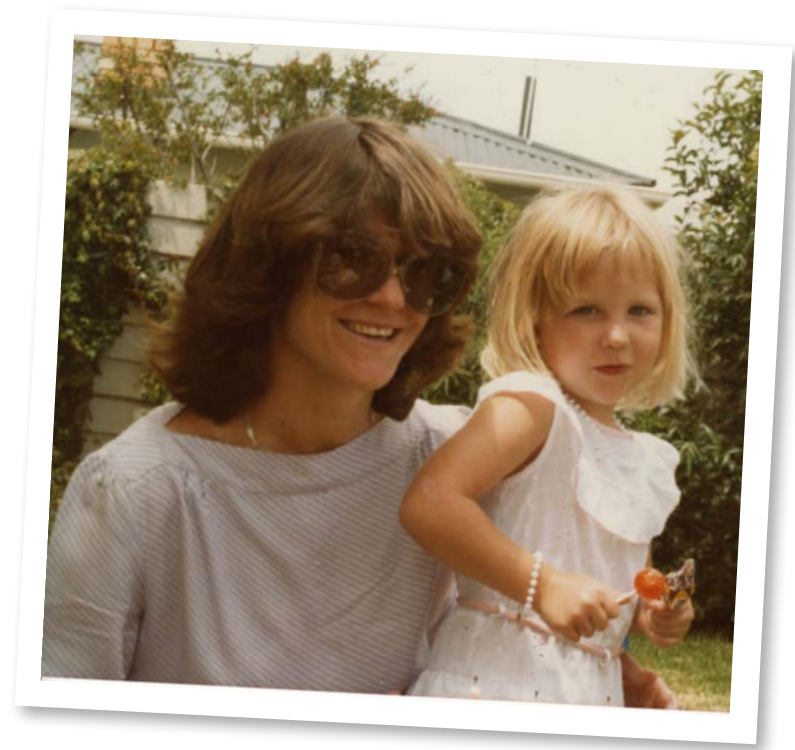
What happens when you forego traditional Christmas gifts and ask your parents to tell you about their lives instead?

secret history



Christmas! A time of love and togetherness, for Christians and agnostics alike. Of sharing and caring and goodwill, friends and family. A time of rampant credit card abuse, standing in long, soul-crushing queues in shopping malls, eating until you're fit to explode, and agonising over what presents to buy your loved ones (and who, exactly, fits into this category). The festive season is both an opportunity to kick back and spend quality time with those dearest to

you and an invitation (obligation?) to cripple yourself financially by purchasing presents for the aforementioned dearest. The expression of glee on your child's face when unwrapping Thomas the Tank Engine or Bratz Action Heroez may well be worth the several hundred rand you shelled out for them, but as they get older, it can become increasingly difficult to combat the sense of meaninglessness that accompanies the frenzy of consumerism we're encouraged to participate in each year. Neither my brother nor I have kids yet, and a few years ago we – my parents, brother etc. – agreed to stop giving each other birthday presents, and I suspected that Christmas was headed in a similar direction. It wasn't that we were lazy or didn't care enough to pick a suitable



present; it was that the gift-giving process had become an afterthought. The phone call or visit was far more meaningful than the present, which was often given more out of a sense of obligation than a genuine desire to delight. We took more pleasure in each other's company, the sound of 'I love you' over the phone, than in what had become an empty gift-giving ritual. Last year, I decided to do something different. I decided to ask my parents to fill in a questionnaire about their lives; in particular, their lives before I was born. You see, I had recently had one of those profound, priority-shuffling realisations about life: namely, that my parents weren't going to be around forever. Of course, I knew that from a young age. We all do. But we're able to go through a large portion of our lives with the prospect feeling so remote as to seem unreal. It's a shock to realise that 'one day' isn't as far off as we thought. Of course, this realisation has a number of knock-on effects: I became more acutely aware of my own mortality, and with this awareness, a sudden desire to procreate. To have a family. To build a bridge

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between my past, and the time before I was born, and my future, even after I've passed on. I began to fantasise about having children of my own, and I'd day-dream (still do) about the questions they might ask me one day, and how I'd answer. Apart from the basics, like 'What do feet taste like?' and 'Why is dad's face so spiky?', I found myself fretting that, when older, he/she/they might start asking me questions like: 'Where did grandma grow up?' (Eeek! Here and there; a few places. Zimbabwe for a while. Joburg for a while. I don't know!) 'Did grandpa like school?' (Not sure.) 'How did grandma and grandpa meet?' (I think... No, I don't actually know.) I realised there was a LOT I didn't know about my parents' lives before I was born, and more than wanting to be able to provide this information to my kids one day, I developed a

deeper desire to know for myself. It simply hadn't occurred to me to ask before, and now I was seized by the urge to learn as much about them as possible, lest I think of something I want to ask and they aren't around to answer. So I compiled a list of about 30 questions and sent them to my parents in October last year, not realising that what I would receive in return would be one of the most cherished gifts I will ever receive: a deeper understanding of the people who raised me, a deeper understanding of the context of my own life, and a document that will bring my parents alive in the minds of future generations after they're gone. I took my time compiling the questions, trying to cover all the bases, as it were. Not all of them were about their past. Some were pretty random (What was your favourite music growing up?), some personal (Do you have any regrets? Prejudices? What was your parents' relationship like?), some practical ('If you cannot live independently one day, would you like to live with me or in a home?') My mom, an artist and illustrator, presented her responses wrapped in a bow and prefaced with a copy of Pablo Picasso's *Deux Femmes Avec Colombe Et Soleil*; she decorated the pages with images of my grandparents and herself, me and my brother and my dad. My father, a retired managing director and talented amateur artist, presented his responses with a cover of Jan van Eyck's *Baldwin of Lannoy*.

In those pages, I learned things that surprised me...

Q: What jobs did your parents have when they were young?

Mom: [After explaining that my grandfather had started his own personnel agency.] He once interviewed a young Winnie Mandela and thought she was very intelligent, but couldn't employ her because of the political situation.

There were also responses that warm my heart every time I read them...

Q: What's the best gift I've ever given you?

Dad: Getting through school and graduating from varsity. It's the best gift a kid can give their parents. [Frankly, I think I got the better end of the deal!]

Q: What is it you've most wanted in life but haven't gotten?

Mom: Nothing. My life has far exceeded my expectations.

Q: Is there any advice you'd like to share with me?

Mom: Keep doing what you're doing; it's working.

Those that sober me...

Q: Did you ever wish you didn't have children? (I won't judge you.)

Mom: No, but when you were both teenagers I thought life must be very easy for people without children.

Those that make me laugh...

Q: What's your worst habit? (Don't say smoking, Dad.)

Dad: Smoking!!

I won't share more out of respect for my parents' privacy, and because, out of context, the responses probably wouldn't mean much to you. But they meant a lot to me, more than I anticipated, and I am determined

7 meaningful CHRISTMAS GIFT IDEAS

One

Write a letter, by hand, telling the person how much you love them, and why. Read it out loud to them on Christmas Day. I met a woman once who told me that her entire family started doing this as soon as her young children began to write, and now they have a collection of these letters going back 10 years. Kleenex anyone?

Four

Write a poem, and present it beautifully. This may seem sappy, but receiving a poem written from the heart, no matter how bad it is (and it won't be nearly as bad as you think), from someone you care about, is one of the best things ever.

Two

Give the gift of your time: a spa day, a cooking course, a night at the opera, a weekend away fly-fishing, a day of gaming or go-carting... Just the two of you. Use your imagination.

Five

Make gift 'coupons' which can be redeemed throughout the year, such as a homemade meal, walking the dog, babysitting, mowing the lawn, washing the dishes...

Three

A photo album of all your favourite moments with that person.

Six

A personalised mix CD, comprised of songs that remind you of the way you feel about that person or some aspect of their character. I promise they will feel warm and squishy every time they listen to it.

Seven

Reach back in time. Perhaps you loved watching *The Simpsons* together as a family when you were young? (Or *The Golden Girls*...? You get the idea.) Why not buy the box set and relive the memories?

to make the ritual of Christmas as meaningful and connecting as possible in future. So this year, I've asked my parents to each paint a picture for me, of whatever they like. I suspect they're going to get really annoyed soon and request that we go back to giving shop-bought presents!

I love receiving gifts of perfume

and jewellery and kitchen goodies and what have you as much as the next person, but they lose their personal value pretty quickly. Why not give a gift that will foster all the good feelings the festive season is supposed to be about – love, connectedness, gratitude, appreciation – and that become more precious over time?

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