

SPECIAL EDITION

HOW TO TAKE THE STRESS OUT OF CHRISTMAS!

**Christmas Doesn't Need To Be
Stressful, But You Need
To Know How To Relax!**

How To Take The Stress Out Of Christmas

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Christmas is supposed to be one of the most joyous times of the year. Unfortunately, for a lot of people, including myself, Christmas was always filled with stress. How to get all the shopping done when I worked full time was a chore in itself. Then there was the baking, taking kids to see Santa Claus, Christmas Eve festivities, gifts for co-workers at the office and others who helped me during the year as well as what I often referred to as the “ultimate nightmare” - yes, the Christmas dinner.

I watched way too many Christmas movies where everything turned out perfect, including the plum pudding. I wanted a Christmas like those seen in the movies and I often got one - ever see “National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation?” Yep, everything that could go wrong would go wrong. From the tree not lighting to the turkey being cooked wrong - it all happened to me. It got to the point where I started to dread the holidays. The stress that built up around Christmas time was anything but yuletide joy. I would often lament “I can’t wait for it to be over.”

Then something happened to me to make me realize that I was looking at Christmas all wrong. I remembered the work my parents and grandparents put into Christmas. My great grandmother had none of the modern conveniences that I had yet still managed to make not only a large Christmas dinner for family and extended family, but also a huge Christmas Eve dinner as well. And she never had to rush to the doctor to get tranquilizers before or after. In fact, the Christmases of my childhood are filled with good memories. I wanted my children to also enjoy those type of Christmases. True, I work full time and do not have time to bake and cook all day - but my great grandmother had no refrigerator. I think I am ahead of the game.

I decided to take the stress out of Christmas and streamline it so that my family and I could truly enjoy the spirit of the season. And I succeeded. Christmas once again became a joyous event that everyone, including me, could look forward to with anticipation. All it took was to take advantage of modern conveniences that my great-grandmother did not have and a bit of organization skills that she obviously did have. I combined the old with the new and came up with a stress free Christmas.

If I was going to change my name, I would change my middle name to “stressed” as this is one word that perfectly describes me. So if I can manage to take the stress out of Christmas and get everything done without freaking out and having to spend a few days at a sanitarium, then so can you.

So, take a deep breath, relax, and start reading on how you, too, can take the stress out of Christmas and enjoy this festive and fun holiday.

Chapter 2 - Gift Buying

My brother put me to shame in the stress department when it came to gift shopping. He would put it off to the last minute (literally) and run around like a madman on Christmas Eve to do his shopping. Bear in mind that in my family, we gave our gifts on Christmas Eve. I am an American of Italian descent. My father is Irish but he soon fell in with my mom's huge Italian family. It was our tradition that we have fish on Christmas Eve. This was a huge meal that we wolfed down as kids in order to get to our Christmas gifts from the family. The Christmas Eve gifts were token gifts for us kids as Santa Claus came on Christmas morning to give us toys. But we still anticipated the frenzied unwrapping of clothes, pajamas, slippers and other non-toy gifts.

On Christmas Day, we would have yet another huge meal, usually pasta dishes as well as a turkey. My mother managed to do all of this without resorting to liquor or pills.

Dinner was at 4:00 at my mother's house and my brother would rush in at 3:45 with a bunch of bags, some wrapping paper and rush up to my parents' bedroom where he would commence wrapping the gifts. He was even more stressed out than me. But I wasn't often much better. I would be shopping up until the last minute, forgetting something or someone on my list and having to run out and get something else.

After I had kids, I experienced the "snowball effect." This is where I was constantly thinking that I got more for one kid than the other and to compensate, got another gift for the kid who I thought was getting cheated. This led to me thinking that perhaps I was wrong and I would go out for another gift for the first kid. I kept doing this until most years, the stuff under the Christmas tree rivaled a section of "Toys R Us."

Maybe I wasn't that stressed when it came to shopping as this was and is something that I do with great pleasure. But my credit cards sure were stressed. In fact, I would be paying for Christmas gifts long after my kids had tossed them into the "garage sale" pile.

There are two stressors that come into play when it comes to Christmas shopping - the first is having the time to do it and the second is the money that it takes. You can avoid both, as well as the snowball effect, by following what I learned over the years:

- 1. Make a list.** Write down what you are getting everyone on your Christmas gift list and stick to it. If you have kids, you can see in black and white that you are not cheating one of them out of a gift. Making a list is easy - even Santa Claus does this. And like Santa, make sure that you check it twice. Be sure that you did not leave anyone off the list.
- 2. Shop early, but not often.** Avoid the temptation of going out to get "just a few more things." This often snowballs into more debt. You made the list, now stick to it. Shopping early is easy to do - just set aside a day to do this. Do not be like my brother and go into a frenzied panic on Christmas Eve.
- 3. Use the internet.** I have not gone "Christmas shopping" in the stores for at least 3 years. This is one way to avoid long lines, angry people who are supposed to be in the spirit of the season and are fighting over toys and harried cashiers. You can order all of your gifts on your list online and have them delivered right to your home. There are many people who

are “afraid” of shopping online for fear of identity theft or some other nefarious practice. Yet these are the same people who will toss out credit card invitations in the trash and give their credit card to the waiter at the restaurant who then takes it in the back room. You have more of a chance of identity theft off line than you do online. There are plenty of online stores from which to choose and many of them offer free shipping if you buy everything at one time. Take advantage of this modern marvel.

4. Wrap em as you get em. Get some wrapping paper, tape and scissors and keep them in a place where they will be undisturbed. It is easier to wrap the gifts as you get them rather than waiting until the last minute, running around the house looking for tape and finding that your daughter used it all and having to use super glue as a replacement. Do you have a Dollar Store near you? You can get wrapping paper and rolls of tape there for only one dollar. You can also get those stickers that say “to” and “from” with little pictures of Santa Claus and snowmen on them. Use them.

5. Stick to your budget. This should actually be at the top of the list. Many people get into the frenzy of Christmas shopping as if they forget that they have to actually pay for the stuff. Come up with a budget and stick to it. This will eliminate the stress that can be felt in the Christmases of the future.

6. Use gift cards. Your local drugstore most likely has gift cards that you can give to people such as the mailman, the hairdresser and others who you wish to remember for the holidays. You can also use gift cards to give to office workers. Gift cards may not be the warmest of holiday greetings, but at least you are giving them something and they can use them as they like.

7. Don't get roped into sales. Many stores have sales around the holidays that are designed to get you into the store. While it is good to shop the sales, spending the night in the car the night before a store opens is not a way to enjoy the joy of the Christmas season. Stores know just how to market and have enticing items at the front of the store, near the cashiers and all over the place that are NOT ON YOUR LIST. So exercise some self control, avoid the huge crowds, sleep in your own bed and avoid “too good to be true” sales.

8. Get stocking stuffers at the drugstore. Your local drugstore has plenty of candy, slippers and other stocking stuffers that are ideal for the little gifts that you want to give to kids and loved ones. You may end up paying a few dollars more for your total purchases, but you can get in and out and save a lot of time. This means less stress.

9. Mail gifts early. Instead of waiting until the last minute and paying five or more times the amount to ship something, mail any gifts early. Better yet, if you shop online, you can have the gifts mailed directly to the recipient. Most online outlets offer wrapping as well.

10. Pay for your gifts with credit cards or use a service like Paypal. These offer a guarantee if the gift does not arrive on time or arrives broken. If you use a debit card, you do not have this protection. This can give you a little bit of assurance when you are buying gifts for Christmas and take some of the stress out of gift buying.

Those are 10 good rules for Christmas shopping without the stress. How long did it take me to do my Christmas shopping this year? 45 minutes. That was the time I spent on the computer making purchases. And it included a quick trip to the drugstore down the street. It

could have been done in about 40 minutes, but there was a price check on one of my items.

And, before I forget (and you forget) the most important rule of all: **DON'T FORGET THE BATTERIES.**

I've learned this lesson from many Christmases of the Past when I had to run to the always open convenience store to pick up batteries that cost about five times more than I could have paid at the drugstore.

Chapter 3 - Decorating

I used to put up 3 Christmas trees. A Christmas village. A Santa collection and an assortment of ornaments. It took me all day. My kids would “participate” in this holiday cheer, which I always imagined would be done to the sound of Christmas Carols along with hot cocoa and everyone in a good mood. Instead, it turned into a virtual nightmare as my kids would complain about putting up one ornament and my husband would lay on the couch and watch TV. This is one of the reasons he is an “ex” husband.

The year that the 10 foot tall artificial tree fell down after it had been decorated to perfection made me take notice of what I was doing. It was taking me an entire day to put up a bunch of decorations that I had to then take down again on New Year’s day, by which time I was sick of looking at them. I decided to streamline a bit.

I got rid of the Santa collection as the figures on eBay. I kept the village and streamlined it. I kept the tree that was the Christmas tree my parents bought for my first Christmas. I kept one box of lights. I kept the Nativity that was also from my first Christmas and one Santa that used to light up and so “ho, ho, ho.” This was also from my first Christmas and scared the living daylights out of me then. It no longer works, but it is a keepsake.

I kept the ornaments and Christmas decorations that actually meant something to me and my children and got rid of the stuff that I picked up at numerous craft shows. I got some plastic boxes to put everything in and it all fits nicely into a storage closet at my condominium, as opposed to taking up half the basement in my old house.

Through the years, I managed to learn that it does not matter if the tree is “perfect.” We have a cat who is going to climb up the tree no matter what we say and it will no longer be perfect. It does not matter if one of the village houses doesn’t light. Someday, I will get around to buying a bulb. What matters is that my children and I love these decorations and that they all mean something to us.

I have a friend who stresses every year about putting up her village and her trees. The lights on the tree have to be perfect. She spends hours weaving them in and out of the branches. I think she gets it up before Christmas Eve and takes it down by July. She has not put her village up in five years because she does not have the “perfect” place in which to put it and she is missing a piece. She has all the pieces of the village that we both collected. I let my kids play with it when they were little. They had a lot of fun. Some of the people are missing a head, but so what? Hers is perfect, but no one enjoyed it.

So here are some tips on decorating your house in a stress free way for the holidays:

1. Nothing is perfect. There is that old saying about the “best laid plans,” that you’ve heard, right? They always go awry. Do not strive for perfection - you will never get it. Strive for joy. Decorating should be fun and the decorations have some sort of meaning. Unless your house is in some sort of Christmas walk where people are going to come and inspect it, you do not have to worry about anyone but family and friends. And even if my house was in a Christmas Walk, I would still put up my old tree with my kids’ homemade ornaments.

2. Set aside an hour for one day that the family can help you decorate. It shouldn't take you that long to decorate your house for Christmas. You do not have to use "vintage" like me. You can use pre-lit trees and pre-lit garland and have it done in a lot less time.
3. Get one of those extension outlets that have room for a lot of plugs and use it for a village or your tree. I pack mine with the village so that I am not running around looking for it. I have the roll up "snow" that is used under the village (to give the impression of real snow) and I pack my figures, trees and little ornaments in this snow at the end of the season. I just roll them all up in it and pack them away every year. I haven't broken anything yet. I have the boxes that the village buildings came in and just put them in there and then pack everything into the same box it has been in for 5 years. My son is finally old enough to carry it down to the storage closet where it remains throughout the year. I have 9 pieces in my Christmas village. I place them on top of my dresser that I use as a buffet in my kitchen. This year, it took me 15 minutes to set up the entire village. I set out the buildings, arranged them and then arranged all the little people. One house still does not light but one of these days I'll get a light. It doesn't matter - my children played with this when they were kids. It means something to me. It isn't perfect, but what is?
4. Check the lights before you put them on the tree. I do remember my father swearing under his breath as he tried to get masses of untangled lights onto the tree, only to find that half of them wouldn't light. One unlit bulb is not the end of the world. If you do not have a pre-lit tree, use those big bulbs that are used outdoors for your tree. It will give you tons of light and your tree will look very colorful. If you have a pre-lit tree, check the lights before assembling the tree.
5. Put up the garland using two people. My son and I decorated our tree in 5 minutes this year. It doesn't look like a five minute tree because we had a system - he stood on one end and I on the other and we passed the lights and garland back and forth. My tree is 48 years old. It is missing quite a bit of fake foliage. But with enough lights and garland, it looks great. We put an angel at the top and it was all set, except for the ornaments, which should go on last.
6. Invest in hooks. For years I fashioned hooks out of ribbon and other things around the house because I was always stressed. I finally invested in a package of about 200 hooks for a whopping 50 cents a few years back and still have them. Any ornament that doesn't have a hook, put one on. My daughter did manage to put on a few ornaments this year, but this year it was fun. It didn't take too much of their precious time away from their friends and we go the tree up and lit. The hooks made it easier.
7. Invest in plastic boxes. I know which box has the lights and ornaments. Which has the manger and which has the village. By knowing where everything goes, you can place it in the room that is being decorated with the items. The plastic boxes will hold up through the years as well.
8. When in doubt, add tinsel. Tinsel is that old fashioned ornament that now goes by the name of "icicles" It is long, streaming bits of magnetic garland, usually gold or silver. It is best on real trees as it does not come off easily. As a matter of fact, it does not come off at all. But as you are going to be putting up the same tree next year, what the heck. The tinsel will give it the finishing touch and cover up any gaps that your cat makes when she tries to climb the tree to knock off ornaments.

9. Skip the “cutting down the tree” thing. A whole day, driving out to the wilderness in the ice cold to cut down a tree like Daniel Boone. If you want a real tree, buy it from a lot. Make sure you water it every day, though, or it will dry out by Christmas. Through the years, we have also had real trees. They made a mess on the rug, it took until summer to get the needles out of the carpeting and it was usually too much of a fire hazard to light by Christmas. You can save yourself time, stress and money by getting an artificial, pre-lit Christmas tree.

Of course, if your family enjoys hunting for the tree in the sub zero weather and chopping it down, roping it to the car and hauling it into the house, then by all means, go for it. But only if the entire family enjoys it. Otherwise, you are going to be disappointed when they start complaining of the cold, the needles and how they want to get home to watch TV. This will make you stressed as you, like the character played by Chevy Chase in “National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation” will be disappointed that your family does not share your zest for this outdoor adventure.

10. Light a few Christmas candles to make the place seem more festive. My father used to light pine incense that came out of a log cabin incense burner. No, he wasn’t smoking dope and trying to cover the smell - he just enjoyed the pine scent. Whenever I smell this scent, it reminds me of Christmas as a child. You can do the same for your family with a scented candle from Glade.

Decorating your house should be fun. Ideally, I would like us all to be sitting around, sipping cocoa and singing “Silent Night” as we deck the halls. But I learned long ago that my dreams are not necessarily that of my children. They enjoyed making the ornaments in school and still like seeing them on the tree. My son is proud that he can put the angel on top of the tree without a ladder. My daughter remembers playing with the village (and I think she still does when I’m not looking).

Decorating your house does not have to be perfect. Try to lose some of the unattainable goals that you have set for the “perfect decorating experience” and settle into what is real. The important thing is not that all the lights light or that the village is complete, it is the memories that they evoke during Christmas Present. And will evoke in the Christmases Yet To Come.

Chapter 4 - Christmas Activities

Pick one that the entire family likes and make plans to do it. In our town, we have many Christmas events going on. When my children were little, I took them to the parade to see Santa Claus. I took them to the mall to see Santa Claus. I took them on Christmas Walks to see Santa Claus. I took them to the school Christmas Event to see Santa Claus. Finally, when they were 15 and 18, they had enough. Okay, they were really 10 and 7. But still, I was running from place to place, afraid to miss some Christmas event as we had to take it all

in.

As the years went on, I wanted to still do the same type of events. Okay, they didn't want to sit on the bearded elf's lap any longer, but I still felt compelled to make every weekend a "Christmas Event." It began to get less fun and more stressful.

So I relinquished this control of Christmas and let them decide on their own fun things to do that related to Christmas. One year, we went sledding. They still remember this. I used to take them sledding all of the time, but this year the snow fell a few days before Christmas and the park was lit up. We went sledding in the dark. It was fun for them and is something that maybe I would have not chosen as a Christmas activity, but one that they still remember.

I only have one bit of advice in this chapter on Christmas activities. When your children are young, enjoy activities that will instill in them the spirit of joy. But recognize that as they get older, they will want to form their own memories. Still, this should not dampen your spirit. Choose an activity that you like - whether it is making a craft at home, participating in caroling or going to a fair and enjoy it. Make sure that you enjoy the Christmas activities as you get older and allow your children to start to grow and make their own memories.

You cannot participate in everything. You do not have to go to every parade and every event offered. Choose those that are fun, not obligatory, and have fun doing it. This is the season to be merry, not stressed.

Chapter 5 - Baking Cookies

My grandmother, rest her soul, would labor for hours making an Italian treat known as Pizzelles. These are waffle shaped flat cookies with anise that has a licorice taste to it. Okay, she would also add a bit of anisette, a licorice tasting spirit to the batter. It took her an entire day to make these using a pizzelle iron.

When she was too old to do this, my mother took over the task. My mother also baked mince cookies and other treats from her youth. My parents moved to Florida, the destination of all retirees in the United States, and still sends boxes of pizzelles and mince cookies. And do you know what? I never eat them. I never liked these cookies. I preferred chocolate chips. And so do my kids.

There are about 9,000 different recipes online for Christmas cookies. If you feel compelled to bake, follow those that you like. I make gingerbread cookies once in a while. I make chocolate chips and sprinkle them with red and green sprinkles to give them the Christmas look. You do not have to labor for hours making dozens of different Christmas cookies that no one likes. You can still have the aroma of fresh baked cookies in your house with one or two recipes. You can even cheat a little.

Here are some tips on how to give your home the Christmas cheer of baking:

1. Use refrigerated dough and put them on a baking sheet. Voila! You have Christmas cookies. Sprinkle them with red and green sprinkles and you are all set.
2. Melt chocolate in the microwave and dip in mini pretzels. Put them on waxed paper and, yes, sprinkle them with red and green sprinkles. These are a tasty treat and easy to bake.
3. Get baked gingerbread men at the bakery and decorate them using pre-made icing that you get at the grocery store. You can even personalize them. Light a gingerbread candle - no one will ever know the difference.
4. Use refrigerated cookie dough and flatten each piece. Insert a maraschino cherry in the center and fold up the sides. Bake them in the oven as directed. Then, of course, sprinkle them with red and green sprinkles.
5. Get graham crackers, some candy and a can of white frosting. Make "gingerbread houses" with the kids. They will enjoy doing this and the "gingerbread" will not fall apart. It is an easy way to make these houses.

The point is that you do not have to knock yourself out to bake cookies for Christmas. You can just make one or two things and your family will enjoy them. If you make a special cookie each year, then make that and, if possible, participate in a cookie exchange with the neighbors. This is where everyone brings over a few dozen of their favorite cookies and everyone takes a few of each home - making it possible for everyone to have an array of different Christmas cookies.

The last year that I did this, I was stressed, as usual. I decided to cheat and go to the local grocery store to get sugar cookie refrigerated dough which I would, naturally, sprinkle with red

and green sprinkles. They were out of the dough. I had to make refrigerated chocolate chip cookies instead. Wouldn't you know it - most of the girls had brought red and green sugar cookies!

If all else fails, go to the grocery store and get a tray of cookies. This can save you time and aggravation. And no one will really care. Remember, I loved my grandmother anyway - regardless of whether or not she made the pizzelles.

Chapter 6 - Christmas Dinner

One year, I wanted to have what I called a “Victorian Christmas.” I watched “A Christmas Carol” once too often and decided I wanted to replicate the goose, the plum pudding and the whole bit. I invited not only my family, but my husband’s family to dinner.

In our area, we had turkeys at the stores so I had to go to a butcher for the goose. I ordered it beforehand and on Christmas eve I picked it up. He gave me explicit instructions on how to cook it, which I promptly forgot the minute I walked out of his store.

I also purchased plum pudding in a can and hard sauce to go with it. Being an American, I had no idea what plum pudding was or that it had to be cooked. I envisioned myself with a fully cooked goose, all the trimmings and last but not least, bringing out a flaming plum pudding with the holly stuck in it for all to gasp in awe.

This was my first Christmas cooking as a bride. My parents and grandmother came over to help. I insisted that the goose only needed 20 minutes to cook. My grandmother said this was impossible, but hey, what did she know? She had only been cooking for 60 years. I made an orange sauce that came out of a recipe book that my mother had to keep stirring. I made stuffing. I made potatoes and vegetables. I had egg nog and even caviar and imported cheeses. It was sort of an upscale Victorian Christmas.

I also had plenty of liquor and the egg nog was spiked. And it was a good thing, too. Because when dinner was finally announced (at the dining room that had been immaculately set) that goose was raw. I had a house full of people and no main course.

Fortunately, they all had plenty to drink beforehand and no one noticed as I tossed the raw goose into the trash. Victorian Christmas was still coming, though. After we ate our vegetarian Christmas dinner, I rose to get the plum pudding. I didn’t realize that I had to cook it and had no idea how to do this. So that went in the trash, too. Fortunately, someone brought over a pie. When it was all over, my in laws stumbled out the door and we actually laughed about this.

Over the years, I have learned to cook poultry and have made some splendid Christmas dinners. I even replicated the “Victorian Christmas” the next year, but my in-laws begged off. The goose was cooked this time, but I didn’t care for it - it was too greasy. The plum pudding was like fruitcake and not to my liking at all. I stopped the idea of the “perfect” Christmas and cooked stuff that my family liked.

Here are some tips on how I de-stressed Christmas dinner through the years:

1. Get a turkey with a pop up timer. It will pop up when done. Cook it 20 minutes to the pound at 325 in the oven. It is the easiest thing in the world to make. Be sure to remove the giblets, neck and heart. They are in bags, usually. Cook it in the morning, wrap it in foil leaving it on the carcass until you are ready to slice it and it will not be dry. Baste it often.
2. Use pre-made stuffing and a tube of breakfast sage sausage. Mix it together and stuff it in the bird. It makes an excellent stuffing with the home made touch.

3. Make some greens, some corn and plenty of mashed potatoes. I also make roasted potatoes. My father is Irish and my kids are $\frac{3}{4}$ Irish. We like our potatoes.
4. Buy the pies from the grocery store. One year I made a pumpkin pie from the pumpkin. Okay, it was good. But not good enough to pass up the convenience of the store bought pie. Quit stressing. Pie is pie and the grocery store makes good ones.
5. Buy egg nog. I made egg nog from scratch one year and it was very thin. We all preferred the store bought variety.
6. Skip the caviar. No one but me ate it every year and even I was choking it down. Get shrimp rings instead.
7. Have plenty of liquor on hand. No one will notice the food, especially if you are inviting my ex in-laws as guests.
8. Order the meal from the grocery store. Many stores will give you a fully cooked meal for what it would cost to make it. I did this one year and everyone loved it.
9. Start your own weird tradition. After watching "A Christmas Story" I decided it would be fun to have Chinese food for Christmas. So we had that for two years in a row. My kids still remember this strange occurrence and it sure saved me time.
10. Use the heat and serve rolls. Every year, I always forget the rolls. So I started using the heat and serve rolls to make up for this constant lapse of memory.

Christmas dinner is about being with your family. Give thanks that you are all together for this Christmas Present. Wish for more Christmases yet to come. Be happy that you are all inside a warm home and enjoying your time together, even if you have no main course.

Chapter 7 - How To Have A Merry (And Non-Stressed) Christmas

You can learn to have a Merry Christmas if you start to realize about the reason for the holiday. Even if you are not a religious person, you can still appreciate the fact that you are with family, that everyone is together for this day and that even if the food is not the greatest, you have something to eat.

Christmas has nothing to do with decorating. It doesn't matter if your tree is perfect if no one gets to enjoy it. Better to have an imperfect tree than is loved.

Christmas is not about gifts. The best gifts you give are always from the heart and are unexpected. Yes, you are expected to give gifts, but do not allow the quest for gifts stress you out and destroy the holiday magic.

Christmas is not about how much you can pack in to the season to make it perfect, but about those with whom you share these experiences.

Christmas is not about holding on to old traditions, but making new traditions that will continue to grow through the years.

The best Christmases that I can remember are the following:

- Those of my childhood (when I had nothing to do;
- Those when my grandparents were alive and well;
- The Christmas that I announced that I was expecting my first child;
- The Victorian Christmas with the raw goose (a funny memory today);
- The Christmas we went sledding in the dark.

The best cookies we ever made were those gingerbread houses we put together with graham crackers and frosting.

My most prized decorations are those that meant something to me as a child and mean something to my children and will, hopefully, mean something to their children. The tree. The manger. The old Santa and the village.

The best present I ever gave were two used books that my mother had wanted and were out of print. This was long before the internet and I was able to find them, through a miracle, at a used book store on the day before Christmas eve. They cost me 50 cents each, but meant more to her than the watch I had also given her.

The best Christmas event I remember was the year we decided to go to midnight service at our church. We are not big churchgoers, but we decided to go anyway. We all got candles and sang Christmas hymns by candlelight.

The Christmas Eves of long ago where we ate fish and waited eagerly for presents to be opened are gone. That tradition has made way for other traditions. My children celebrate

this evening with their father now and his family. I have spend many Christmas Eves alone, as my parents are far away and my siblings have their own traditions.

But this Christmas, as I have my shopping done, my decorations up and am no longer stressed about the holidays, I plan on starting my own Christmas Eve tradition. I am volunteering my time at a shelter where I hope to bring some Christmas cheer to those who are truly in need.

This book is filled with true stories of many events that took place throughout my years. Unlike other internet books, it is not trying to sell anything - except the idea of how to have a non-stressed Christmas. Remember that nothing is perfect, that you can live without a main course, that you can do your shopping online but the best gifts are those that come from the heart. And above all, that this is a season of joy. Do not lose sight of what it is that you are celebrating this Christmas. Enjoy old traditions but be open to new ones as well.

And above all, have yourself a Merry Christmas. And Happy New Year.