

## Can you imagine?

**The perfect gift is not a battery-eating destroyer, but time with mom and dad.**

By Dean Poeth

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With Christmas only a few weeks away, I recently went to the local Stuff Mart looking for a holiday gift for my kids. If you are like me and haven't walked the toy aisles recently, you may be in for a surprise.

The sheer quantity of violent toys seems to have reached a new high. As just one example, I'm sure many parents won't be able to resist getting junior an Incredible Hulk action figure, complete with "steel pipe weapon" in celebration of the birth of Christ.

Mostly I saw shelf after shelf of instant gratification packaged in cardboard boxes. Emotional and intellectual candy for children. Surprisingly few toys required or encouraged the synthesis of a single new idea.

Naively, I thought I'd be able to find a toy that was more than just a collection of noisy, battery-eating plastic. Perhaps, I thought to myself, I could find a gift that would grow and inspire a young mind. Perhaps even a gift that would help them learn craftsmanship, integrity or perseverance. Needless to say, I left the store somewhat disappointed.

As I drove home, I thought of some of our families' past Christmas toy experiences. Several years ago, my mom thought she had found the perfect gift for my son. It was a Tickle Me Elmo. The first time we turned it on, the loud, obnoxious voice scared him. Eventually he got used to it, but I didn't. It talked constantly and its extroverted "personality" was driving my wife and me crazy. I began to have nefarious thoughts about how Elmo could accidentally meet his demise.

After consulting with my wife, we opted for a more humane solution: Elmo would have late-night surgery in daddy's workshop. One night after the kids went to bed, Elmo went under the knife. I soldered a resistor in series with the speaker and voila! A quieter, humbler Elmo. Sanity returned to the house.

### **ALMOST PERFECT**

Prior to another Christmas, I carefully perused the Sunday newspaper ads looking for the perfect gift. When Black Friday came, I was ready. I went to a toy store in the Rotterdam Square and got the last one: a monster radio-controlled truck that looked similar to our own pickup. As I patiently waited for 45 minutes in the checkout line, the lady in front of me complimented me on my selection. "Any little boy would just love getting that truck for Christmas," she said. Surely this was the perfect gift.

He played with it twice.

I came to find the perfect gift purely by accident. I needed to install a water softener, and after a weekend of soldering copper pipe, the job was done. Then came the question, what should I do with the huge cardboard box? My wife suggested I bring it up to the living room so the kids could play with it until recycling day.

They played with that box for over nine months. Each time I tried to throw it out they protested. That box became a fort, a house, a boat, a cave, a racetrack, a spaceship.... What's more, they were constantly nagging my wife and me to play with them too. What a pain!

### **MORE THAN A TOY**

Then it hit me. That box was more than any toy. It was a place to pretend. It allowed them to create and imagine, to build, and a way for my son and daughter to play together. More than that, it was a way for them to spend time with Mom and Dad. In fact, as time went on I learned that they seemed more interested in playing with Mom and Dad than playing with the box itself.

I'm an engineer, not a child psychologist, but that box gave me an idea. At that time my son was into robots, so I asked him if he'd like to build a five-foot-tall cardboard robot with me. A week later it was finished, complete with working lights and switches.

You'd have thought I'd bought him a Ferrari. He loved it.

How ironic. We take our hard-earned money and sacrifice it to the god of consumerism, when what the kids really want is to spend time with Mom and Dad!

### **TAKING, GIVING TIME**

Yet that cardboard robot wasn't free. In fact, it was more expensive than any department store toy. It cost me my time. Time that I could have spent at the office, watching football, or reading the newspaper. In retrospect, though, it was priceless.

Time doesn't run, it flies. Soon these opportunities will be past and will never come again. So right now there's nothing I'd rather do than play with my son and daughter. And after all, who's ever heard an elderly person in a nursing home say, "I wish I hadn't spent so much time with the kids."

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