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Gifts of Love

By Sandy Penny

"There is only one happiness in life, to love and be loved."

—GEORGE SAND, AUTHOR AND POET

When the season of love rolls around each year, not everyone is thrilled. The pressure to find the perfect Valentine's Day gift is too much for the faint-hearted. The risk of disappointing a loved one causes some people to pick fights just before the holiday and then show up later when they've figured out a good make-up strategy. Others pooh-pooh the day as simply a way to exploit love and guilt-trip people into spending money. How sad and cynical.

Why not use this time to lavish your loved ones with small but thoughtful treasures? Your time and attention may be the most valuable gift you can give. The first rule when choosing a gift of love is to know the recipient. Just being interested enough to ask what they want and make a note of it is an act of love. Don't fall into the trap of buying something you'd like and expecting them to be excited.

Flowers and candy may seem cliché, but many people look forward to them as loving traditions. Chocolate has long been a favorite on Valentine's Day. Now science has proved that chocolate releases endorphins into our system, much like being in

love. Just an ounce a day gives you more energy, confidence, and boosts your sense of well being. Hot or cold, chocolate provides a sensual rush that makes love that much better. Aztecs considered it an aphrodisiac.

If you're trying to think healthy, dark cocoa-rich chocolate is actually good for you. It's lower in fat and calories than milk chocolate and can be found in exotic organic varieties containing nuts, fruits, caramelized ginger, lavender, crushed rose petals, or whatever your heart desires. There are also chocolate-flavored liqueurs and wines or Champagnes that are perfect candy companions. There's a chocolate gift for every budget, but know that a few high-quality chocolates are better than a big box of commercial candy.

You can even make your own. The old Hershey's fudge recipe on the cocoa box is timeless. If you have kids, making fudge is a great family project. In recent years, feeding your loved one strawberries dipped in decadent dark chocolate syrup has become all the rage. Making ice cream sundaes with fancy topping choices can be playful. To

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avoid calories, chocolate-scented candles, soaps, bubble bath, body lotions, and face creams are available. Even the scent releases the brain's love chemicals.

Be creative when putting together a package or gift basket. Make a simple chocolate gift more personal by going online or to the library and printing some chocolate lore or a love poem on fancy paper. Roll it up like a scroll, tie it with a ribbon and include it with the candy. Add the movie or book, "Chocolat," or a CD of your favorite love songs, and voilà, you have turned a cliché into a true gift of love.

The attention you put into a gift does not

ready.

Touch is essential to the human love equation. You can give your partner a massage or purchase a gift certificate for a couples massage from a professional. A day trip to the hot springs or spa, followed by intimate time alone, equals a mini love vacation. The goal is the feeling that the two of you are sharing something special.

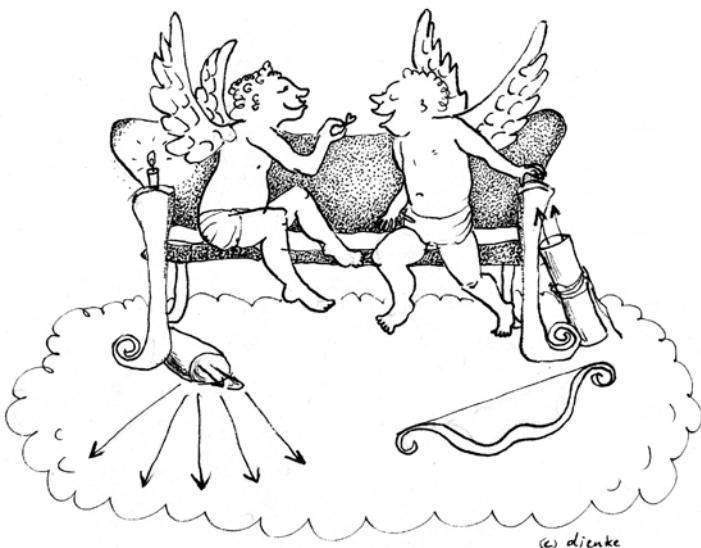
A few other ideas include gifts of comfort like soft knitted scarves, warm throws, and plush towels or bathrobes that remind your loved one of your thoughtfulness year-round. A digital camera is a gift that can capture loving moments for years to come.

Whether you cook a special meal or take your loved one out to their favorite restaurant, sharing food together is a primal bonding experience.

Love is a verb. Small spontaneous romantic gestures are powerful and should not be taken for granted. Opening a door, holding hands, listening attentively, smiling appreciatively and saying thank you throughout an evening can all contribute to a happy love bubble. It's the small things that add up to a full life. Love is essential

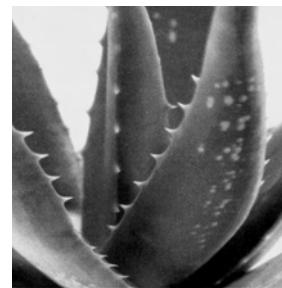
to humanity's health and well being, and the more we give, the more we receive.

This August, Taos will host the "Summer of Love," harking back to Woodstock and the sixties' philosophy of "All We Need is Love." Get a head start on your own love fest. Make a commitment to demonstrate love and appreciation to your partner, your family, your neighbors and the sacker at the grocery store every day. The world will be a better place, but you will be the biggest beneficiary.



© dizeke

go unnoticed, and the time you spend focusing on love generates warm fuzzy feelings toward your partner. The way you present a gift can appreciate or detract from its perceived value. Candlelight and romantic music can make a small gift seem like a million bucks, and who knows what the rewards may be. Create a love altar by arranging small gifts on a table to symbolize things you appreciate about your partner or relationship. Ceremoniously explain to your loved one why you selected each item and what it symbolizes, but have a box of tissues



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