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THANK YOU, UNCLE ARTHUR

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ONE OF THE NICE THINGS ABOUT HAVING GROWN Children is that I don't have to bug them about writing **thank you** notes anymore. When my three children were tiny, I voiced their gratitude for the gifts they received in family letters. By the time they were three, they could draw a picture of their present and dictate a **thank-you** note that I would include with the drawing. But once they were in school, they wrote their own **thank-yous**--with much prodding.

In the days following Christmas, I would frequently ask, "Have **you** written to **thank** Grandy for the book yet?" or "What did **you** say to Aunt Dorothy about that sweater?"

I would be met with mumbles and shrugs, clear indications that the notes had not been written. I grew weary of nagging. The children grew increasingly mother-deaf. It would have been easier to write the notes myself, I often thought.

One Christmas, overwhelmed by frustration, I declared that no one would be allowed to read a new book, play with a new toy, or wear a new outfit until the **thank-you** note for it had been mailed. But still the children procrastinated and grumbled.

"It takes too long," groaned Eleanor.

Something snapped.

"Okay," I said. "Everyone into the car."

"Where are we going?" Sarah asked in bewilderment.

"To buy a Christmas present," I said tersely.

"But it's after Christmas," she protested, putting on her coat.

"No arguing," I said in a tone of voice that the children knew meant exactly that.

As Eleanor, Sarah, and Drew piled into the car, I told them, "**You're** going to see just how much time those who care about **you** spend when they give **you** a present."

"We know," grumbled Drew, slumped in the backseat.

"**You** don't know," I said, handing him a pad of paper and a pencil. "Please mark down the time we left home."

When we reached the village, Drew noted our arrival time. The children helped me select birthday presents for my sisters at the Smart Shoppe. Then we turned around and drove home.

BURSTING FREE FROM THE CONFINES OF THE car, the children headed for the sleds they'd left at the top of the hill. "Not so fast," I said.

"We are not finished yet."

"But we bought the presents," Eleanor said, her hands on her hips.

"We've got to wrap them," I said beckoning the children inside. They slouched through the door and waited while I got out the gift-wrap box.

"Drew," I asked. "Did **you** jot down the time we got home?" He held up the pad and nodded. "Okay, please time the girls while they wrap the presents."

I made the children some cocoa while they wrapped Ellen's and Beth's scarves.

Drew cut the ribbon and timed his sisters.

After they had finished tying up the bows, they looked at me expectantly. "Now what?" asked Sarah.

"How long did this all take?" I asked Drew.

He considered his notes and said, "It took us 28 minutes to get to town and 15 minutes to buy the presents. Then it was 38 minutes I to get back home 'cause we had to buy gas."

"And how long did it take us to wrap the boxes?" Eleanor asked.

"Each of **you** did one present in two minutes," Drew said, looking at his watch.

"And how many minutes will it take us to mail these presents?" I asked.

"Fifty-six minutes, round trip," Drew figured. "If we don't need gas."

"But **you** forgot standing-in-line time," said Sarah, who had often been the one to help me mail our packages.

"Yes," I agreed. "And at Christmas that can be a long time." Our post office can only hold about to people Twelve if two or three are children. Between Thanksgiving and Christmas, sometimes those at the end of the line shiver outside in the cold.

"Okay," Drew said, refiguring his sum. "We probably need to add about 15 minutes for mailing."

"So," I said, "what's the total time we would spend to give someone a present?"

Drew added up his figures. "Two hours and 28 minutes," he answered, tapping his pencil on the pad.

I laid a piece of stationery, an envelope, and a pen beside everyone's cocoa cup.

"Now," I said, "please write a **thank-you** note and be sure to mention the present by name and tell what fun **you** will have using it."

The children rolled their eyes. Silence reigned as they gathered their thoughts; soft pen scratchings and cocoa sipping followed.

"Done," said Eleanor, licking her envelope and pressing it closed.

"Me, too," echoed Sarah, handing me her note.

"That took us three minutes," Drew said, sealing his letter.

"Is three minutes really too much to ask of **you** to **thank** someone for a thoughtful gift that may have taken them two and a half hours to choose and send to **you**?" I asked.

The children looked down at the table and shook their heads.

"IT'S A GOOD IDEA TO GET IN THE habit now," I said. "In time **you'll** want to write **thank-you** notes for many things."

Drew groaned, "Like for what?"

"Like for dinners or lunches," I said. "Or weekends at someone's home or the time someone takes to give **you** advice or help on college applications or careers."

"Careers?!" Drew gasped. His first career as the family lawn-mowing man was currently on seasonal hold.

"So," Eleanor asked, "what happens if **you** don't write someone a **thank-you**?"

"Practically speaking, they'll never know if the present arrived," I said. "But mostly, they might decide that **you** are thoughtless and ungrateful."

"And rude?" Eleanor added.

"And rude," I agreed. I looked at the children seriously. "And if **you** don't have three minutes to spend on them, they might decide they don't have time to spend on **you**."

Sarah thought for a minute and said, "And **you** won't get any more presents!" Her eyes grew wide with horror at the thought.

"Did **you** have to write **thank-yous** when **you** were a kid?" Drew asked.

"Absolutely."

"What did **you** say?" he asked. I could tell he was formulating the rest of his **thank-you** notes.

"I really don't recall," I answered. "It was a long time ago."

THEN I REMEMBERED **UNCLE ARTHUR**.

Uncle Arthur was my great-grandfather's youngest brother. I had never met him, yet every year he sent me a Christmas gift. He was blind and lived in New England next door to his niece Becca. Each Christmas she sat down with him and wrote out a \$5 check to each of his dozens of great- and great-great-grandnieces and -nephews. I always wrote and told him what I had spent his check on.

When I went to school in Massachusetts, I finally had the chance to visit **Uncle Arthur** in his old house near Salem's harbor. I was fascinated by his ability to find his way around his warren of little rooms. Some had ceilings so low that he came close to bumping his head. He fixed us tea and, as we chatted, he told me that he had always enjoyed my notes.

"**You** remember them?" I asked in surprise. "**You** must get so many."

"Yes," he replied. "But I've saved some of my favorites." He waved toward a highboy by the window. "Would **you** get the packet of letters out of the top drawer?" he asked. "It's wrapped in ribbon."

FOUND THE LETTERS AND BROUGHT them to him. He laughed, "Could **you** find yours and read it to me, please? I can't, **you** know."

I had almost forgotten his blindness and was glad he could not see my red face.

I quickly found my handwriting on one of the faded envelopes. Taking out the old letter I read, "Dear **Uncle Arthur**, I am writing this to **you** as I sit under the hair dryer at the beauty salon. Tonight is the Holiday Ball at the high school and I am spending your Christmas check having my hair done for the party. **Thank you** so very much. I know I'll have a wonderful time, in part because of your thoughtful gift. Love, Faith."

"And did **you**?" asked **Uncle Arthur**.

"Have a good time?" I asked.

He nodded.

I thought back to that wonderful evening so many years ago. "Definitely," I replied with a smile that I wished **Uncle Arthur** could see.

SARAH'S TUG AT MY SLEEVE PULLED me back to the present, "What are **you** smiling at?" she asked.

I told the children about **Uncle Arthur's** gifts and my surprise and pleasure that he had kept my note. I told them I was glad I had written a note each year; they obviously meant a lot to him.

"And did **you** look beautiful?" asked Sarah.

"My date said he thought I did," I laughed.

"Who did **you** go to the ball with? What did **you** wear?" asked Eleanor, no doubt visions of Cinderella filling her head.

"I think I have a picture of that evening," I said, going over to the bookshelves and pulling down a rather-battered scrapbook. I opened it to a picture of me standing in front of my parents' fireplace. I'm wearing a strapless, black velvet evening dress and my hair is arranged in an elaborate French twist held firm with plenty of hair spray. Beside me a handsome young man beams as he hands me a corsage.

"But that's Daddy!" Eleanor said, looking at the picture with surprise.

I nodded and smiled.

"**You** looked pretty," Sarah said.

"**Thank you**," I replied. "That's what Daddy said."

As the children settled down to finish the rest of their notes, I stroked the faded petals of the dried gardenia pasted next to the photograph.

This Christmas Bob and I celebrated our 35th wedding anniversary. **Thank you, Uncle Arthur.**

Pictures Speak Louder than Words

CHILDREN ARE NEVER TOO YOUNG TO learn the art of writing a **thank-you** note. When they are small, **you** can take a picture of them enjoying their Hanukkah or Christmas or birthday gift and, when it is developed, say, "Here **you** are with the present that grandmother sent **you**. What would **you** like to tell her about it?" Let your little one dictate to **you** his or her thoughts and **thank-yous**, which **you** can jot down on the back of the photograph. Or glue the photograph to some construction paper and write the "note" below it.

By the time children are around three, they can have fun drawing pictures of presents or of themselves enjoying presents. They can dictate a story about the picture to **you**. Be prepared for some interesting **thank-you** messages. One friend told me that her four-year-old drew a picture of a tall door with a small square beneath it. "Dear Nanny," he said. "**Thank you** for the toy box. I am going to push it in front of my bedroom door so that Matthew will not come in and get into my stuff."

By first grade, **thank-you** notes become a wonderful way for children to practice their handwriting. My mother saved all of my children's efforts and it is fun to see how their childish printing evolved into adult script.

A **thank-you** note should, of course, include mention of the present itself. But encourage your children to be particular in the description of the present, such as what they plan to do with it or where they will wear it or why it is such fun. They should also include a sentence or two about what else was special about the day. Such phrases as "I hope **you** had a happy Hanukkah, too" or "I wish **you** could have been at my party" make a note special.

Every year my children would inevitably ask, "Can't we just call and **thank** them on the phone?" The answer was always "No." But, then again, I suppose it would be better than nothing!

--F.A.B.

ILLUSTRATION (COLOR)

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