

12-18-09 It's A Cost-Benefit Ratio Christmas

For months now, something has given me cause to smile each morning on my way to work. As I drive through Plympton center I see people walking on the sidewalk. Any place else, that would be so pedestrian, if you'll excuse the pun, that it would go unnoticed. For us, it's a brand new experience. We received that sidewalk on the westerly side of route 58 as part of the road's reconstruction last year. I'd like to thank the person responsible for saying, "Hey, while we're at it, let's add a sidewalk. We don't have one at all now. It will make the center safer and it will be easier to access the few businesses, the church, library, town house, fire and police stations." That one sidewalk has accomplished that and a whole lot more.

At first I enjoyed my hopes coming alive and my wish coming true as I saw people walking on the new paved path at the side of the road. There's one walker in particular, though, who brings me joy each day. A man walks his German shepherd every morning. They walk calmly and in unison. It's a well-trained dog. As hunting season arrived, the man donned an orange coat. That might not be necessary in the city but this is Plympton, after all and, that, too, makes me smile. As the weather finally chilled, a furry hat with ear flaps was added. And they walk.

This daily sight stirred up my thinking. Small investment. Great return. It might be a business concept but it's a great philosophy for life, too. It is especially inspirational for guiding us at Christmas time. You know, that time when stress, guilt, competition and excess are so often the mantras, even if only on a subconscious level.

As a mother, it has required great effort for me to step away from the equation of "more stuff equals proof of love". For several years now, in an effort to give to others in ways more friendly to the environment and reduce unnecessary stuff, including wrapping, I've tried to come up with themes for Christmas exemplifying fun, and love, aging hippie that I am. I make an iron-on tee shirt with the theme written on it and have fun watching my grown children's and growing grandchildren's faces as they wonder what it means. One year my shirt said, "Let's get cookin'." And everyone received a family cookbook with photos and funny stories. Another year, my shirt said, "It's in the bag." And everyone received lunch bags, tool totes and knock-off designer pocketbooks.

It's been fun and challenging keeping to the goal of more meaning with less stuff and I still struggle with the old habits and ways that insisted on proving something to somebody with more stuff and big piles.

Being so busy with the greatest challenge facing public health in a very long time, responding to the H1N1 pandemic has kept me away from gift giving inspirations, let me tell you. Being alive and keeping others alive has been motivation and work enough. So, all the more wonderful it was to see the walkers in Plympton center each morning on my way to work, for they remind me of what really counts. And they remind me that sometimes we really can receive that great return from the small investment.

So, what's in store for my Christmas this year? With my house on the market, money scarce and the future uncertain, everything takes on a different light. As long as there is joy and meaning in the gift, the cost, or lack of, does not determine the value. So, the man walking the German shepherd each morning has inspired me to name this Christmas, 2009, as the Cost-Benefit Ratio Christmas. According to *BusinessDictionary.com*, the definition of cost-benefit ratio is, "Comparison of the present value of an investment decision or project with its initial cost. A ratio of greater than one indicates that the project is a viable one."

My children and grandchildren will all receive some Plympton pine trees. The grandchildren all talk about "Grammy who lives in the woods" and they love learning the trails to the bog and the sandpit, the chickens and the horses. Digging up baby pines costs nothing. The trees and the stories last a lifetime.

Oh, there'll be few other things but not much. Somebody will get a turntable with a usb port so that all year long we can enjoy the hunt of yard sale and thrift shop record collections. A small investment with a big return equals a ratio of greater than one, equals a viable project, and that equals a fun and memorable Christmas!

All that thanks to a sidewalk and a man walking his dog.

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