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Opinion | Why not give others presents on your birthday?

A columnist tests whether it's better to give than to receive.

8 min 451

By Daniel Pink
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Earlier this summer, I marked what some call a “milestone birthday” — the kind where your odometer flips two digits, not just one, and the second digit is a plump and menacing zero.

My approach to birthdays is usually twofold: dread them in advance and endure them in the moment.

But this year, facing a number that seemed like a celestial clerical error, I decided to confront my birthday directly instead of tolerating it awkwardly. Rather than wait to receive a few cards and gifts from friends and family, why not celebrate my birthday by giving presents to others?

Maybe turning tradition upside down would balm my existential discomfort. Maybe redirecting the birthday arrow toward generosity would replenish my soul with gratitude. Maybe a project would divert me from counting gray hairs.

The Why Not? Project

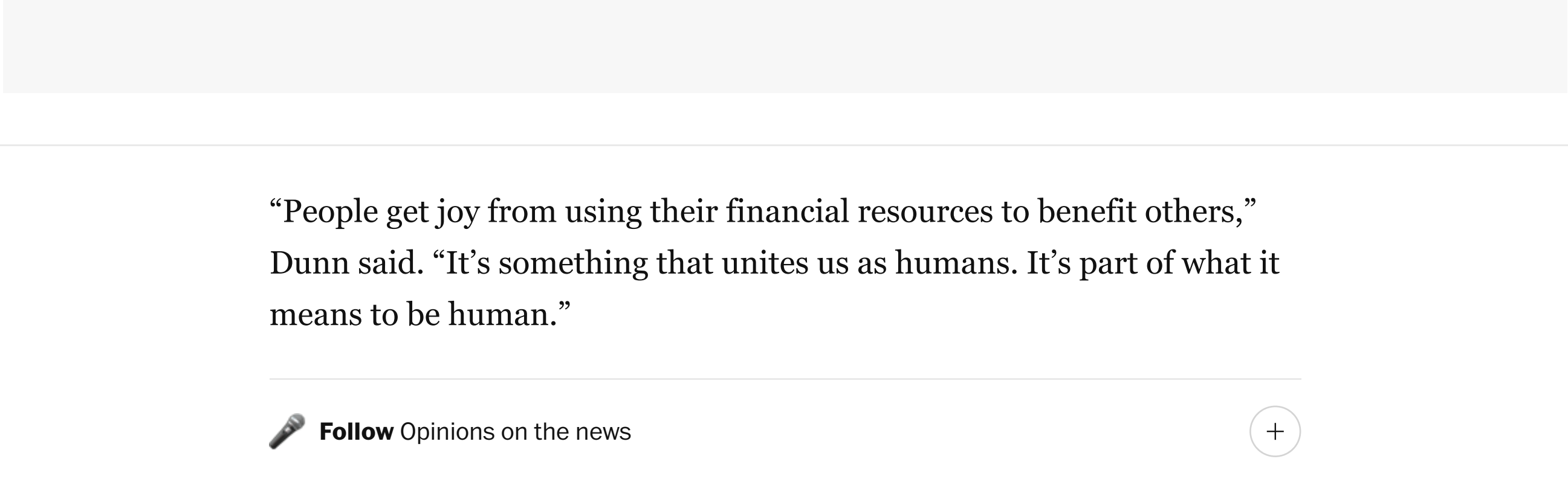
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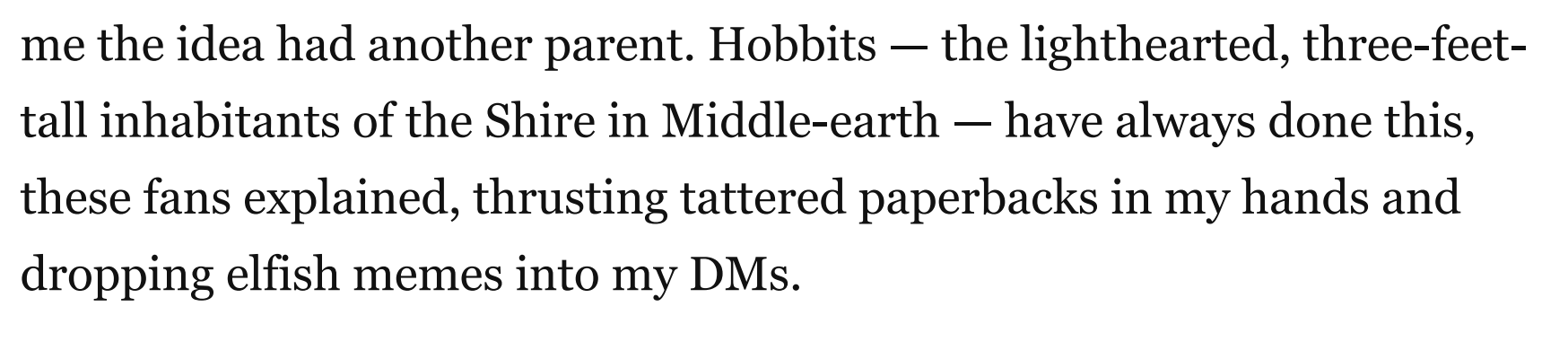
The logic

Science was on my side. Studies have found that spending money on others makes us happier than spending money on ourselves. “We observe this all over the world, even in places where people are struggling to meet their own basic needs,” Elizabeth Dunn, a University of British Columbia psychology professor who pioneered much of this research, told me.

When Jesus said: “It is more blessed to give than to receive,” he was revealing a neuroscientific truth. Several studies have demonstrated that charitable contributions and other acts of beneficence, especially when they have a social component, activate the same reward centers of our brain that spark for more obviously alluring delights like music, sex and cheese.



“People get joy from using their financial resources to benefit others,” Dunn said. “It’s something that unites us as humans. It’s part of what it means to be human.”



Meanwhile, I discovered another, unexpected, ally in my quest. I might be the only person on the planet who has never read a J.R.R. Tolkien novel or seen any of the Lord of the Rings movies. But once I began mentioning my brilliant birthday brainchild, several people informed me the idea had another parent. Hobbits — the lighthearted, three-foot-tall inhabitants of the Shire in Middle-earth — have always done this, these fans explained, thrusting tattered paperbacks in my hands and dropping elfish memes into my DMs.

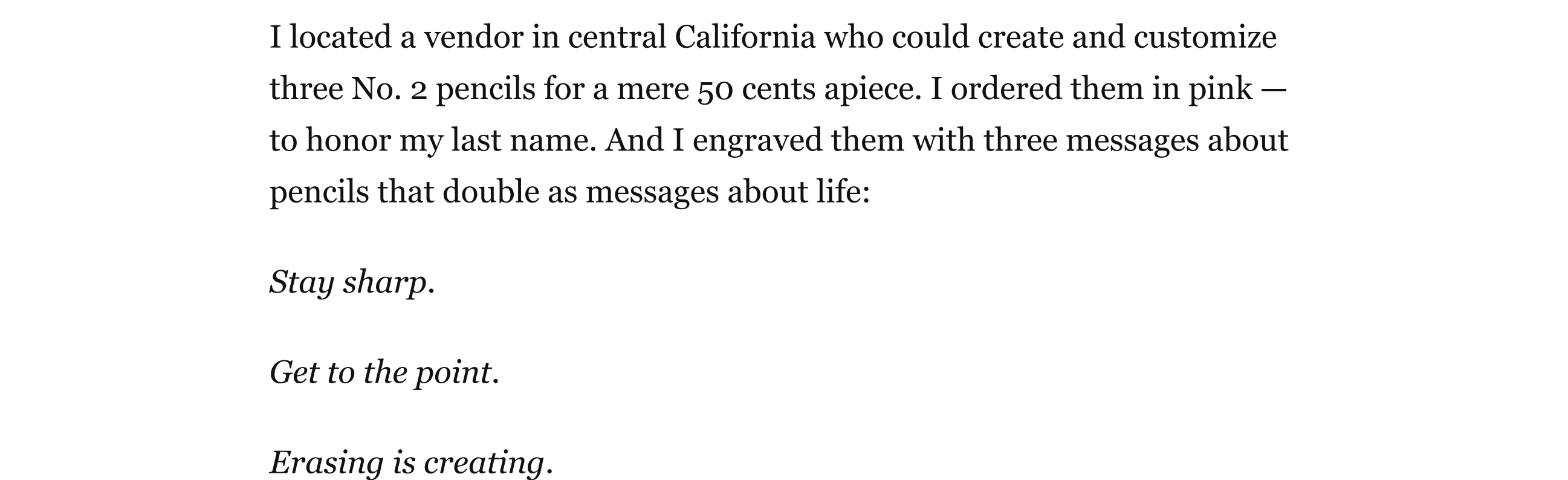
“It’s exactly like our birthday tradition, but delightfully subverted,” Corey Olsen, a scholar of medieval literature known online as the Tolkien Professor, later told me. “To celebrate your life means to celebrate the people who have formed, shaped and touched your life. And you mark that by giving presents.”

The gift

Armed with deep research and inspired by high fantasy, I began planning my experiment. The gift couldn’t be what Olsen said Tolkien called a “mathom” — a meaningless small item that’s neither appreciated nor used, but the recipient feels too guilty to throw away. The item had to be cheap enough to purchase in bulk, small enough to mail in an envelope, and meaningful enough to touch hearts.

I decided on pencils.

I love pencils — significantly more than most people love pencils and disturbingly more than I love most things. I covet Blackwing 602s the way car aficionados covet Ferrari F40s.



I located a vendor in central California who could create and customize three No. 2 pencils for a mere 50 cents apiece. I ordered them in pink — to honor my last name. And I engraved them with three messages about pencils that double as messages about life:

Stay sharp.

Get to the point.

Erasing is creating.

I drafted a short cover note for the present, explaining how I hoped to use this big birthday to thank people for being part of my life. Then I cracked open my contact manager and reviewed the names one by one to determine who met the criteria and merited a gift. Some people were obvious — my kids, my siblings, my closest friends. Others not so much. My first discovery: I have a few people in my life I don’t even like. No pencils for you!

My second discovery: I have gobs more people I’m grateful are part of my life — folks I’ve worked with, hung out with, navigated life’s up and downs with. When I paused and reflected, something I rarely do, I recognized something I scarcely knew — how many people, even in small ways, genuinely matter to me.

With my wife — let’s call her Mrs. Why Not — I converted our kitchen table into a fulfillment center. We printed labels and postage, slid three pencils into a sleeve and each sleeve into an envelope. Then, in two ceremonial walks to our neighborhood post office, we dispatched 98 gifts out to the world.

The exercise achieved what scientists, Jesus and Hobbits said it would, at least in the short term. It lifted my gaze from my navel and deepened my sense of gratitude and connection. For a few moments, I forgot I was turning — okay, I’ll say the number now — 60.

The response

How did it land with others?

Generosity may be part of our wiring, but selecting good gifts is not one of our strengths. We sometimes impose what economists call a “dead weight loss.” (Example: You paid \$25 for that USB coffee mug warmer you gave me, but it’s worth only \$5 to me and thus \$20 of value has evaporated.) We focus too much on vowing recipients during the moment they open the gift. (Suggestion: Concentrate instead on the present’s lifetime usefulness.) We believe it’s better to surprise others with their holiday or anniversary gift rather than to ask them what they want. (Reality: People prefer gifts they request.)

But Julian Givi, a West Virginia University professor who studies gift-giving, suggested that my endeavor might steer around these potholes. For instance, low expectations — or, in this case, no expectations — worked to my advantage. “When you give people a gift they’re not expecting, that can make them very happy,” he told me. Gifts related to one’s own hobbies and interests, his research has found, can also create a bond. And “recipients like sentimental gifts more than gives anticipate,” said Givi, whose surname apparently predestined his academic specialty.

The University of British Columbia’s Dunn predicted I’d benefit simply from a large sample size. “If you hit 100 people with pencils, one of them’s going to be really excited.”

The responses, which arrived days and weeks later, mostly by text and email, fell short of full-fledged excitement. One of my favorites came from a guy to whom I was talking one afternoon about a topic unrelated to birthdays or writing implements. “Oh,” he interrupted anyway through our conversation, “we got your pencils.” And that was it. Package received, mission accomplished.



But I did hear from about three-fourths of the recipients — and their responses were uniformly positive. (No surprise. It’s unlikely someone receiving the present would email to say, “What the hell are you doing? This is stupid.” Even if that’s what they were thinking.) Several people sent photos of their new pink pencils along with thanks or birthday wishes. A few told me how touched they were that I thought of them. One person merely texted: 🎁🔥💖👉!!👉🎁.

Nobody would adopt this birthday practice themselves and transform my small experiment into a new American tradition. But two people did something that surprised me: They gave their pencils away.

Had I created a mathom — that useless and intrusive item that Hobbits regift like an unwanted fruitcake?

I chose a more affirming interpretation. Both people — one a friend, the other a relative — were sending off their first child to college this fall and wanted their teenagers to have the pencils as they opened a new chapter of their lives. Perhaps these parents thought the messages, starting back from a dorm room desk, might inspire the youngsters. Perhaps they hoped to leave a piece of themselves with their soon-to-be-gone kid. Perhaps they just liked free office supplies.

Perhaps the motive doesn’t matter.

“It’s emotionally satisfying to think about how the little things we do can ripple outward and create effects we never experience directly but that are somehow shaping other people’s days,” Dunn told me.

As they say in the pencil business, she has a point.

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