

untitled

By Ruth Ostrow

A friend has just had an altercation with another friend over a gift. Karen spent time getting a special Christmas cake hand-made for her friend Sally, who is a health freak. The cake was gluten-free, sugar-free, and made with fresh fruit.

Karen gave Sally the cake, but Sally simply said: "I don't eat cake. Please take the cake back." The argument that ensued became the proverbial dilemma of this time of year.

How do you tell someone that you don't like the gift they've given you without offending them? But how do you stop people continuing to give you things you don't want if you don't tell them the truth?

And who wants to be left with a whole pile of the unusable: fake Rolex watches, another toaster, a Mickey Mouse nightgown, or bad music?

"I was horrified!" Karen said. "She should have just kept the cake and given it away to someone else. The real gift was in the time and love I put into choosing the cake. Sally took away the pleasure of giving by reacting so rudely."

"I was shocked!" Sally said. "How many years has Karen known me, and still she doesn't get that I'm very fussy with what I eat. I never eat cake. I never eat sweets. I found it very offensive that she doesn't know me by now. Plus, if I hadn't said something, I'd end up with another cake next year!"

Whoever is in the right, the truth is we do get offended when we're given inappropriate gifts because we want people who love us to know us - to know, for instance, that we don't listen to John Denver's Greatest Hits. Gifts are a validation of our identity.

One friend of mine ended up leaving her partner after he gave her a garish diamond bracelet for Christmas. He was trying to make up for neglecting her. But the bracelet compounded the offence, given she is a naturalist who hates jewellery and excessive spending.

"It made me sad. I felt so depressed because he meant well, but it proved that he just didn't get me at all!" she said.

If there's a Christmas lesson here, it's this: really think about the person you are giving a gift to. Laziness or a lack of creativity does offend. When engaged in the gentle art of gift-giving, it is always better to spend less money but more time getting it right.

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