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12-23-2009

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WMU ScholarWorks Citation

Haenicke, Diether, "Right after Thanksgiving, Americans get serious about Christmas." (2009). *WMU President Diether Haenicke*. 15.

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Right after Thanksgiving, Americans get serious about Christmas.

*By Diether Haenicke
December 23, 2009*

Friday following Thanksgiving is called Black Friday, the day of economic salvation for any retailer and the day when the great fiscal miracle happens and red numbers on the balance sheet turn into black ones. The heavens of prosperity open up, spreading the good news that ever-increasing consumption of ever more goods is bringing glorious benefits for the multitudes.

Customers crowd into the shopping malls to admire the wonderful sight of worldly goods spread out before them, ready to be wrapped, not in swaddling clothes, but in silver- and gold-lined Christmas paper. Thrown wide open are the doors to the cathedrals of consumption, where one can flock to adore fancy fashion items, costly jewelry, mechanical toys and the latest electronic gadgets. Christmas is coming and mankind is willing to make sacrifices. Men and women alike are ready to load up their credit cards.

The spirit of Christmas has overcome them, and they are willing to carry the heavy cross of debt on their shoulders for months to come.

I am right among the shoppers, spending money, money, money, buying gifts for all those I love and also for those I expect will give me a gift and who expect a gift in return. That makes it a long list. Careful calculations must be made as to how much to spend for each one of them. Will Bob compare my gift for him with the one I make to Mary? And will he think I was more generous to her than to him? I certainly don't want to hurt Bob's feelings, especially not by giving him too small a Christmas present as compared to Mary's. Decisions, decisions!

While I am shopping, I realize that the next great rush to the malls will be right after Christmas, when many gifts are brought back to the stores to be exchanged for different

wares, for a credit, or even a refund. Should I therefore leave the receipt, price removed, in the gift box?

I harbor thoughts of simpler times each year when Christmas comes around. Things once seemed to be so plain indeed. This year, I keep remembering the year I made candleholders for Christmas. I cut little stars out of scraps of wood with a fretsaw and then sawed a hole in the middle to hold a candle. Afterward, I painted them in bright colors, placed candles into them and presented them proudly to my parents and favorite aunts and uncles. When my mother died, my brother told me that she had kept all my candle holders and still used some of them at Christmas. That was 35 years later.

It took me time and effort to make these stars. I designed them in different sizes and carefully selected the colors of the candle holders and chose the right color candles for them. My good friend Eckart, whose father was a carpenter, gave me small scraps of wood from which I crafted the stars. Since Eckart was much better with tools than I, he helped me with sawing the center holes which were hard to do. While he worked on the holes, I sat in another corner of his father's shop and corrected Eckart's homework from school.

Last summer, over a beer back in my little hometown, he reminded me jovially of my poor skills in wood crafting. I smiled. He had completely forgotten his own very significant shortcomings in writing German compositions. Charity forbade me from mentioning this fact. Still, recalling our making Christmas gifts together as teenage boys created a warm memory for both of us.

What once took me many afternoons of sawing and painting and candle making, now only takes one well-planned, strategic sweep through a major mall. Today I step to a counter, point to expensive items, have them wrapped, and present my credit card. All is done in a few hours. Much money changes hands; much, much more than what I once spent on wood, fretsaw blades, colors and candles. And still I can't help thinking that my boyhood presents were true Christmas gifts and worth a lot more than anything I buy today.

*This column was first published Dec. 20, 2006 in the Kalamazoo Gazette
mlive.com/kalamazoo*