“The Magi...were wise men—wonderfully wise men—who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger.”

—O. Henry, “The Gift of the Magi”

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According to Matthew 2:1-12, the Magi were travelers from the east of Judea (possibly Persia, Babylonia, or Yemen). They came in search of the newborn Christ child, believing him to be the king of the Jews. The word “magi” is a Latin term that referred to the class of priests in the Zoroastrian religion, which carried a focus on astrology. Also known as the “Three Wise Men,” the Magi began their journey upon the appearance of a star, which they followed until they came to Bethlehem. In Bethlehem, they found the baby Jesus and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

A Christian tradition holds the Magi were three kings who visited Jesus at His birth, while He was still in a stable, with his mother Mary, his earthly father Joseph, shepherds, and angels. However, in Matthew, the Magi are neither numbered nor called kings, the location is not a stable but a house, and only Mary is with Jesus, indicating the visit happened long after the birth. The notion there were three Magi may stem from the number of gifts they brought. The idea the Magi were kings is likely linked to Psalm 72:11: “All kings will bow down to him....” (NIV)

As mentioned above, the gifts of the Magi were gold, frankincense, and myrrh. At least two interpretations of the gifts have arisen. On one hand, the gifts can be seen for their worldly meaning, as all three were gifts fit for a king—gold as a treasure, frankincense as a perfume, and myrrh as an anointing oil. On the other hand, the gifts can be seen for their spiritual meaning, as they symbolize the life of the Christ—gold as a symbol of kingship, frankincense (an incense) as a symbol of godhood, and myrrh (an embalming oil) as a symbol of Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross.

With the above as background, writing at Christmas 1905, O. Henry uses the title “The Gift of the Magi” to encourage his readers to view his short story as a Christian parable.
One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies. Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent accusation of penny-pinching that such close dealing implied. Three times Della counted it. (2) One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas.

There was clearly nothing to do but flop down on the shabby little couch and howl. So Della did it. Which brings the moral reflection that life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles—but mostly sniffles. (3)

(2) O. Henry was the pen name of Will Porter. And Della was based on Will’s wife, Athol Estes Porter. Years ago, in Austin TX, they had met at a social dance, sang together in the choir at the Southern Presbyterian Church, and were married by its pastor Reverend L.K. Smoot on July 1, 1887. As Will confided in a friend years later, Athol was the only woman he ever truly loved.

She was the one with long brown hair, which Della has. She was the one who said “little silent prayers,” as Della does. And she was the one who gave a gift at great sacrifice one Christmas, as we shall see.

(3) Three is a recurring number in the story. For example, Della counts her money three times, life is made up of three things (“sobs, sniffles, and smiles”), three people speak in the story (Della, Madame Sofronie, and Jim), three biblical figures are cited (the Magi, King Solomon, and the Queen of Sheba), among many other uses of three. Of course, the theme of three recalls the Three Wise Men of Christian tradition.
While the mistress of the home is gradually subsiding from the first stage to the second, take a look at the home. A furnished flat at $8 per week. It did not exactly beggar description, but you could say it was on the lookout for the cops who arrest beggars. (4)

In the lobby below was a letter-box into which no letter would go, and a doorbell from which no mortal finger could coax a ring. Underneath the box was a card bearing the name “Mr. James Dillingham Young.”

The “Dillingham” had been included during a former period of prosperity when its possessor was being paid $30 per week. Now, when the income was shrunk to $20, the letters of “Dillingham” looked blurred, as though they were thinking seriously of contracting to a modest “D.”

But whenever Mr. James Dillingham Young came home and reached his flat above, he was called “Jim” and greatly hugged by Mrs. James Dillingham Young, already introduced to you as Della. Which is all very good. (5)

(4) Here, O. Henry shows his good sense of humor, but he also had a heart for the poor. Even when he was a successful writer living in New York, he never had money himself because he gave it away to anyone who needed it more than he did. According to Richard O’Connor, writing in *O. Henry* (1970), in addition to cash handouts, O. Henry also paid the medical bills of those in need of a doctor who couldn’t afford it. This sensitivity for the poor and sick was born from events that took place earlier in his life, as related below.

(5) As a young couple, like Della and Jim in the story, Athol and Will (O. Henry) had known what it was like to be poor in finances but rich in love. Early in their marriage, Will made $25 a week as a teller at the First Nation Bank of Austin. Will’s $25 a week was likely why Jim’s $30 a week was considered a “period of prosperity”—and why Jim’s $20 a week meant “the income was shrunk.” Yet, it was these early years that would prove to be the happiest for Athol and Will.
Della finished her cry and attended to her cheeks with the powder rag. She stood by the window and looked out dully at a gray cat walking a gray fence in a gray backyard. Tomorrow would be Christmas Day, and she had only $1.87 with which to buy Jim a present. She had been saving every penny she could for months, with this result.

Twenty dollars a week doesn't go far. Expenses had been greater than she had calculated. They always are. Only $1.87 to buy a present for Jim. Her Jim. Many a happy hour she had spent planning for something nice for him. Something fine and rare and sterling—something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honor of being owned by Jim.

There was a pier-glass between the windows of the room. Perhaps you have seen a pier-glass in an $8 flat. A very thin and very agile person may, by observing his reflection in a rapid sequence of longitudinal strips, obtain a fairly accurate conception of his looks. Della, being slender, had mastered the art.

Suddenly, she whirled from the window and stood before the glass. Her eyes were shining brilliantly, but her face had lost its color within twenty seconds. Rapidly she pulled down her hair and let it fall to its full length.

(6) The world outside is dreary—"a gray cat walking a gray fence in a gray backyard." By contrast, inside their home, the love Della and Jim share fills their lives with happiness. This was the kind of home that Athol wanted for Will.

In the summer of 1893, the opportunity arose for Athol to travel to Chicago to see the World’s Fair. Although money was tight, Will believed the trip would be a benefit to her health; by that time, the tuberculosis which had claimed Athol’s father years earlier had begun to show signs in her. Will scraped together the cash and gave it to Athol. However, just before she booked her trip, Athol had a change of heart, not wanting to spend the money on herself alone. When Will arrived home from his job at the bank that evening, he found two rocking chairs on the front porch, curtains in the windows, and matting on the floors of their humble little home.

(7) According to critic Kevin Fallon, this is the sentence that best captures what it means to love like Della loves Jim. Writing for The Atlantic (12/10/10), Fallon states, “She had one holiday desire, and that’s to be able to buy ‘something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honor of being owned by Jim.’ It’s in that line that the magnitude of their love is conveyed, to be filled with so much admiration for someone, to hold them to such high regard that things must be worthy.”
Now, there were two possessions of the James Dillingham Youngs in which they both took a mighty pride. One was Jim’s gold watch that had been his father’s and his grandfather’s. The other was Della’s hair. (8)

Had the Queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the airshaft, Della would have let her hair hang out the window some day to dry just to depreciate Her Majesty’s jewels and gifts. Had King Solomon been the janitor, with all his treasures piled up in the basement, Jim would have pulled out his watch every time he passed, just to see him pluck at his beard from envy. (9)

So now Della’s beautiful hair fell about her rippling and shining like a cascade of brown waters. It reached below her knee and made itself almost a garment for her. And then she did it up again nervously and quickly. Once she faltered for a minute and stood still while a tear or two splashed on the worn red carpet.

On went her old brown jacket; on went her old brown hat. With a whirl of skirts and with the brilliant sparkle still in her eyes, she fluttered out the door and down the stairs to the street.

(8) Although Jim’s watch and Della’s hair are their greatest possessions, these are objects of sentimental value belonging to people of meager means. Likewise, Will and Athol may have had lots of love, but it was clear to everyone that they had little else. So, it was certainly a shock when, in the fall of 1894, a federal bank examiner named F.B. Gray accused Will of embezzling funds from the First National Bank. It was true that Will’s accounting books had come up short. However, those people familiar with the lax practices at the bank—which allowed favored customers to take money without leaving a receipt—said Will was innocent. Nevertheless, Gray pushed for a grand jury to consider the evidence. They did—and refused to charge Will with embezzling. But this would not be the last of the matter.

(9) In 1 Kings 10:1-13, King Solomon is visited in Jerusalem by the Queen of Sheba (possibly from southwestern Arabia, around 1,500 miles distant). The Queen has come to question Solomon, and she discovers the King is really as wealthy and as wise as she had heard. In fact, both of these biblical figures were famous for their fortunes. By citing the riches of Solomon and the Queen, the story underscores that Jim’s watch and Della’s hair are treasures. Yet, there is an obvious difference between the royal wealth and the modest belongings. The items held by Jim and Della were made valuable by love—which leads the reader to reflect on what it means to be truly rich.
Where she stopped the sign read: “Madame Sofronie. Hair Goods of All Kinds.” One flight up Della ran, and collected herself, panting. Madame, large, too white, chilly, hardly looked the “Sofronie.”

“Will you buy my hair?” asked Della.

“I buy hair,” said Madame. “Take yer hat off and let’s have a sight at the looks of it.”

Down rippled the brown cascade.

“Twenty dollars,” said Madame, lifting the mass with a practiced hand.

“Give it to me quick,” said Della.

Matthew 2:1 (NIV)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem

A cheap gift doesn’t mean much. When we give to someone with little cost to ourselves, not only does the gift not matter much to us, it often doesn’t matter much to the person we are giving to. In the Bible, the Magi made sacrifices to give to Jesus. They travelled a long distance, possibly two thousand miles. They dedicated a lot of time, perhaps two years. They spent a lot of money, likely a small fortune. In a similar spirit, in “The Gift of the Magi,” Della sold her hair, which she thought made her beautiful, to buy the chain for Jim’s watch. And Jim sold his watch, which was a cherished family heirloom, to buy the combs for Della’s hair. In your life, whether you are giving to God or to another person, one way to judge the value of the gift is by how much you sacrifice to give it.

Why does sacrifice increase the value of a gift?

When have you sacrificed to give a gift?

When have you received a gift that another sacrificed for?

How were the gifts you gave or received worth the sacrifice?
Discussion Section II
Give with Thought

Oh, and the next two hours tripped by on rosy wings. Forget the hashed metaphor. She was ransacking the stores for Jim’s present. She found it at last. It surely had been made for Jim and no one else. There was no other like it in any of the stores, and she had turned all of them inside out.

It was a platinum chain simple in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by ornamentation—as all good things should do. It was even worthy of The Watch. As soon as she saw it, she knew that it must be Jim’s. It was like him. Quietness and value—the description applied to both. Twenty-one dollars they took from her for it, and she hurried home with the 87 cents. With that chain on his watch Jim might be properly anxious about the time in any company. Grand as the watch was, he sometimes looked at it on the sly, on account of the old leather strap that he used in place of a chain.

Matthew 2:2 (NIV)

and [the Magi] asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

“It’s the thought that counts.” Sometimes, people say this because a gift is lacking in some way. By this, they mean the thought behind the gift matters more than the gift itself. Indeed, thought should be put into the selection of a gift. A thoughtful gift is a way of recognizing and appreciating the person receiving it. In the Bible, the Magi recognized and appreciated the infant Christ. They recognized Him as the king of the Jews, and they showed their appreciation by their worship of Him. The gifts the Magi brought—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—reflected their thoughts and feelings for Jesus (see Note 1 on page 3). Likewise, in “The Gift of the Magi,” Della selected a gift that she believed would be “worthy” of Jim, and Jim did the same for Della. When you give to a church, or a person, or a cause, give thoughtfully, so your recognition and appreciation are obvious.

How can a thoughtful gift show recognition and appreciation?

What gifts have you received that meant the most to you?

What is a thoughtful gift that you have given?

How was the thoughtful gift received?