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Always prepared, Nana bought this Christmas gift four months before she died. (Eric Clayton)



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December 18, 2021
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In my grandparents' basement, there were many things: an old red tricycle that belonged to my mom; a plaque engraved with my grandfather's name, given to him on the occasion of his retirement; an array of the best board games the 1970s had to offer; and a well-stocked bar from their days of hosting soirees long before I was born.

But more than any of these things, I remember the shelves in the backroom: rows and rows of canned beans and jars of tomato sauce and boxes of pasta and anything else you could find on sale and store indefinitely. You'd think there was a post-apocalyptic dinner party on the horizon and your invitation was just lost in the mail.

My grandparents were always prepared. And my grandmother, always sure to stock the freezer with meat and ice cream just in case someone dropped by, made sure that preparation manifested itself in love and hospitality.

So, I guess I shouldn't have been surprised to learn that Nana had bought my youngest daughter's Christmas present more than four months in advance.

"I just feel like I didn't get her enough when she was born," Nana confessed.

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It's worth noting: The girl was only 4 months old at the time, my grandparents had just moved out of their home and into a new apartment in a different state and we were all muddling through a global pandemic.

But the gift was purchased nonetheless – a September gift for a December holiday – and stored away in a drawer for safekeeping.

"It's just a little thing," she told me: one of those soft books for babies, the kind you can chew on and squeak and shake. It was "Beauty and the Beast"-themed – Nana's

absolute favorite.

I think back on this inordinately early Christmas purchase and those rows and rows of cans in the back room of the basement in their old house. A manifestation of what it means to *prepare*, to be sure. For what? For whom? It didn't matter. In the case of those cans, they'd be ready to show hospitality, to hunker down during a storm, or — as it turned out — to weather a pandemic.

But in the case of that "Beauty and the Beast" book, the preparation was for something else entirely. Nana's foresight — that love that transcends space and time — meant that my youngest daughter opened that gift two months after a stroke would see her great-grandmother slowly slip away into the next life.

Advent is about preparation. But we're not just preparing in the abstract. We're preparing for the manifestation of love – the Incarnation. And we're tasked with manifesting that same love and hospitality in our own lives.

That silly little Disney book was Nana's last gift — *literal* gift, at least — to anyone in this life. The last thing she chose and bought and put away in anticipation of the day it would be unwrapped. I look at it frequently — stuffed in a drawer, cast about the living room floor, buried in the sheets, wherever the girls have deposited it on any given day — and I think of her.

I think of how much she loved the story and the music of "Beauty and the Beast." She'd given us her copy of the Broadway soundtrack shortly after moving into the new apartment, only to take it back when she learned we had no way of playing a CD in our home. "I don't understand what you mean – *Spotify*." All pursed lips and raised eyebrows and love.

But mostly, I think of how that desire to prepare, to not waste any time, meant that my daughter received this *one last gift*. That silly and seemingly inconsequential as it is, this gift was one more, *I love you — remember me*, that we otherwise wouldn't have gotten.

> Are we flailing about, buying everything within reach, brushing by the people in our lives, barely taking time to be present?
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As we scurry about in these final days of Advent, are we putting such thought into our own preparations? What if the gifts we purchase, the decorations we hang, the conversations we have are our last, the last manifestation of love we'll show to a person? Are we being intentional, plotting a breadcrumb path that will lead our loved ones back to us?

Or, are we flailing about, buying everything within reach, brushing by the people in our lives, barely taking time to be present?

Our Advent preparation is only as good as the fruits it bears – and bears throughout the year. A basement full of canned beans is no use to anyone if you don’t put those beans on the stove when a grandson pops by unannounced.

And a desire to show love – whether through a kind word, a quick embrace or a piece of Disney paraphernalia — only matters if we allow that love to break out from the quiet of our hearts and into the shared experience of our communal lives.

When all the presents are unwrapped, the food put away and the decorations taken down, will you have made Christ's love known to those around you? If not, you might reconsider just what you're preparing for.