

The best gift this year? Giving—and here’s how to make it count

By William MacAskill

WHAT WAS THE BEST GIFT I EVER received? Well, I’m a music lover, so I’d have to say it was either a Spotify subscription or my top-of-the-range Sony MDR-7506 headphones. Together they’ve provided me with countless hours of high-quality audio accompaniment. Growing up in a loving, well-off family in one of the richest countries in the world, what more could I want?

Giving gifts to loved ones is great: it’s a rewarding way to spread joy and strengthen friendships and family ties. But (at the risk of sounding like Bob Geldof) at this time of year I’m always reminded of how many people not only get no presents but also lack the basics to allow them to live healthy lives. For me, luxury headphones were the perfect gift;



MacAskill is a philosopher at Oxford and a co-founder of the effective-altruism movement

for the world’s poorest, it would be nutritious food, clean water and health care.

The poorest 10% of the world’s population, some 700 million people, live on less than \$1.90 per day. And that’s adjusting for local purchasing power: they live on what \$1.90 would buy in the U.S. Faced with this kind of budget, and often geographically isolated, they are forced to eat whatever they can find and drink and wash in unsafe water. They can only pray that they don’t succumb to malnutrition, malaria or any number of other diseases that, while perfectly curable in rich countries, frequently ruin or end lives in the developing world.

I don’t seek to make anyone feel guilty for exchanging luxury goods with the people they love. But it seems to me that there’s another type of giving that is, if anything, even more profound: giving the basics of life to those most in need. Sure, you might not get a thank-you letter (who does these days?), but you’ll have done something extraordinary.



From the heart

Actors, comedians and other influencers share the gifts that have meant the most, from thoughtful meals cooked by their kids to an annual closet cleanout turned clothing giveaway

KARL ROVE

‘When I was 5 or 6, my father was a hard-rock geologist, and he didn’t get a Christmas bonus that year. So he convinced a friend of his, who flew a helicopter, to put on a Santa suit and land in our backyard outside of Arvada, Colo., which was just a field, and he got out of the helicopter and gave us little 25¢ toys, and it was the greatest Christmas of my life: the year Santa came to our house in a helicopter.’

Rove is the author of *The Triumph of William McKinley*

CATE BLANCHETT

‘I gave my husband a voucher three Christmases ago which said, “You can redeem anytime, anywhere, for a two-hour deep-tissue massage which I will give you.” For three years he has said, “Tonight?”’

Blanchett stars in Carol



MARGARET CHO

‘One thousand rolls of toilet paper from Charmin to help my homeless outreach #BeRobin, a charity founded to celebrate the philanthropic life of Robin Williams. They brought it in a truck. I wept. It was truly beautiful.’

Cho’s stand-up special PsyCHO airs on Showtime this month



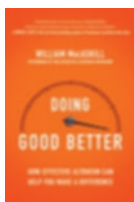
However, I'm not just interested in people giving more to charity (although that is important). I'm also passionate about people giving smarter, because where you give can make a huge difference on the impact you'll have.

What do I mean by that? Well, to start with, there's a reason I've been talking about the developing world. Even average earners in the West are incredibly rich compared with the global poor, so a sum of money considered moderate for some could make a huge difference in the poorest countries.

That's not to say that all developing-world poverty-relief charities are good at making a difference—that's certainly not the case. Plenty of money donated in good faith is lost to local corruption, poor administration or programs of intervention that sound great in theory but don't achieve much in practice. As a result, it's crucial to look at the effectiveness of the work a charity does before committing your money. How much good does it achieve for each dollar donated? Is there robust evidence for the impact of its programs?

It's not always easy for people to find the answers, but they are vital questions to ask. That's why there are now organizations devoted to finding and promoting the best charities. As part of the effective-altruism movement, they are dedicated to helping people make the biggest possible difference with their donations.

I love my music, and I love my headphones. But this year, the best gift I could get is to see as many people as possible giving generously to the most effective charities in the world.



MacAskill is the author of *Doing Good Better* and a co-founder of the charity *Giving What We Can*



ROONEY MARA

'I have such a huge family that the holidays give me a lot of stress and anxiety, because I just feel that it's so wasteful and we don't need anything—it's just like you're trying to find a present for someone. Last year, me and my siblings and even my parents were like, "No, I do not want a gift. I'm not getting you a gift. We're going to donate." Now I give everyone Oxfam—I get everyone goats and pigs and cows.'

Mara stars in *Carol*



KRYSTEN RITTER

'I always appreciate practical gifts. I'm a minimalist—I'm not into tchotchkes. I'm always trying to get rid of stuff. Every so often I'll invite my friends over to go through my closet and take my clothes. So I guess my favorite gifts are basic things like a wallet I'll use forever or a great pair of jeans.'

Ritter is the star of *Jessica Jones*, on Netflix

RICK ROSS

'I'm pretty sure it'd be the Christmas dinner my son and daughter threw me two years ago. They just made all kinds of food. I went over there and they sprayed [Silly String] in my face. They recorded it and put it online.'

Ross releases a new album, *Black Market*, this month



NORMAN LEAR

'The best gift I've ever gotten, I've gotten every day of my life, and that's waking up. I love waking up. I'm a morning, afternoon and evening person. There are two small words that are the most important words in the English language: over and next. If there were a hammock in the middle between over and next, that would be living in the moment. Waking up in the morning is the next moment. The next moment to me is the taste of coffee.'

Lear is a television producer

