



UNCLE MARK

2013 GIFT GUIDE & ALMANAC

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A couple of weeks ago I went out to Long Island for a day to help clean up after Superstorm Sandy. I was assigned to a damaged house near the ocean. While taking a break from ripping out ruined insulation I was approached by the homeowner, who began talking about her experience of the storm and its aftermath. She said that she was bothered by the sheer amount of “junk” (her word) that had to be removed from her waterlogged house. She summed it up this way: “Why did I buy so much stuff?”

I have been thinking about her comment ever since. Every year around this time, late autumn, I compile my suggestions for gifts to buy during the upcoming holiday season. This is the tenth annual gift guide, so I suppose I should feel some kind of celebration. But I’m not sure I do.

I’d rather not encourage anyone to buy “stuff.” I can suggest some purchases, but they’re mostly with the aim of enabling people to live with fewer things. More broadly, I think that citizens of the U.S. and other wealthy nations have to find a better way of creating, buying, and consuming material goods. Between the strain on the global economy and the environment, we’ll be forced to make this shift eventually. But it’s easier to get started early.

This past July the New Yorker published an important essay called [Why do kids rule the roost?](#). In it, Elizabeth Kolbert describes recent anthropological research of suburban American

homes and possessions, highlighting the observation that many houses are filled to excess:

The result is garages given over to old furniture and unused sports equipment, home offices given over to boxes of stuff that haven’t yet been stuck in the garage, and, in one particularly jam-packed house, a shower stall given over to storing dirty laundry.

This may be an uncomfortably familiar image for some. But there is an opportunity to make a change. We can buy fewer, but more durable and better designed, things. (They do exist!) Minimizing the stuff around us makes more space – physical, mental, emotional, spiritual – for us to breathe. In this year’s Uncle Mark guide I suggest some ways to improve life in that way – but without living through a hurricane to get there. If you would prefer a longer list of gift ideas, try last year’s Uncle Mark guide ([download PDF](#)) or this year’s excellent gift guide from The Daily ([free iPad app](#)).

Before I move on to actual products, I want to offer my pick for two of the best gifts you can give this holiday season.

One of the things I’ve repeatedly heard from people affected by Sandy – especially those who lost electricity – is that they found their personal relationships coming back to life. With the TV dead, and the iPhone and iPad off, people started spending time with each other. Families played board games by candlelight. Spouses had uninterrupted conversations. People remembered what it felt like to be together. In a strange way, life got better.

I don’t mean to romanticize the storm. It took lives, destroyed homes, and dislocated families. Many thousands of people in the New York region are still suffering from it, weeks later. But I do want to point out that in the midst of this tragedy, some layer of modern life was ripped away – for some, just for a day or two – showing the possibility of a less mediated, more meaningful life.

To get a taste of that better life, my first suggestion is to

celebrate the holidays how your great-grandparents might have done. Share a meal with family or friends. No TV, no iPhones. Really spend time together. Talk. Have everyone in the group tell a story, or read a poem. Maybe this sounds corny, or impossibly simple, but consider whether a productized, digitized, televised experience would be better.

My second suggestion is to give a gift to those who are heading into the holidays while still feeling the effects of Sandy.

- The Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City is a good place to donate funds directly to efforts helping Sandy victims. Even more targeted is the [Fund for Public Schools](#), where you can help efforts to resume normal public school activities in the city.
- Two excellent organizations getting food to people in need are [City Harvest](#) and the [Food Bank for New York City](#).
- For a more personal approach, you can sponsor a family – sending donations, and exchanging letters. Sign up through [Family-to-Family](#).

Before you read on, I'd ask that you click one of those links above and chip in.

All set? You donated, right? OK. I'll roll right into my first gadget recommendation, because it fits directly into the theme of the guide this year.

In the spirit of simplifying life, earlier this year I “cut the cord” at home: I cancelled our subscriptions to cable TV, DSL Internet, and landline telephone. I just couldn't stand dealing with our cable TV provider (Time Warner) or our DSL provider (Verizon) any more. The two companies delivered a remarkably similar customer experience: high prices, frequent service outages, and customer service that was difficult to contact and slow to help. The consistent underlying message was that they felt no pressure to work harder; after all, as a duopoly, they're comfortably protected from customer concerns. And really, what was I going to do, turn off my Internet access? Cancel my cable TV?

Yes, I said, yes. I will cancel all of those things. I finally decided that I would rather live without cable TV than reward these companies for their hostility to customers.

It wasn't much of a loss. We already didn't watch TV much. And our cell phones made the landline irrelevant. The only item I had to replace was the high-speed Internet connection. At first, Verizon or Time Warner seemed to be the only available providers.

But then I found [CLEAR](#), which offers Internet access through a wireless connection. You buy their modem, plug it in, and assuming you have a line-of-sight connection to a nearby tower, the modem provides a high-speed wifi connection throughout your house – with no Verizon or Time Warner involved. And CLEAR is cheaper, around \$50 a month. The downside is that bandwidth is occasionally slow, and sometimes affected by weather. But the company seems to value its customers. That is a welcome change. We are happy that we cut the cord.

We also cancelled our TiVO account. Unfortunately, the company made it very difficult to exit the service. I've heard from friends who had similar experiences. So after several years of recommending TiVO, I now am recommending against it. (Anyway, DVRs are irrelevant without cable TV.)

Cut the cord! There's still plenty to watch. Use an Apple TV or other device (Roku, recent DVD player, or video game console) to get Netflix, YouTube, and other video content onto the TV via a wifi connection. Then search this site – [CanIStream.It](#) – to see whether Netflix, Amazon, iTunes, or another service has a given movie or TV show for rent, purchase, or included in a monthly subscription.

Speaking of movies, [The Queen of Versailles](#) is the best documentary I've seen recently, and it's available for online rental. Watch it to see what consumer excess looks like – and what happens when the crash finally comes.

BIKE AND SODASTREAM

Two items that will last and that will enable a simpler life.

I bought a folding bike earlier this year: the Dahon Mu P8, shown in the photo below, costs under eight hundred dollars. I also sprang for the special shoulder bag so that I could more easily carry the bike onto the New York City subway.

Friends and strangers on the street have asked me what I think about the bike. It's good enough. At about 25 pounds it's just light enough to be considered portable, though it starts to feel heavy if I carry it more than a couple blocks. And the ride, while not luxurious, is adequate for getting around. The eight gears make it reasonably easy to get up hills or gain speed on a straightaway.



Super-cyclists will surely have different picks for bikes, folding or otherwise, but if you're looking for a "good enough" option I would recommend the Dahon.

(My one complaint is that the bike, when folded up, needs to be carried. Here you are with two perfectly good wheels, and you're using brute strength to carry the thing down the street. I know other folding bikes exist that can roll when folded up, but I couldn't find them for sale.)

My kitchen appliance suggestion this year is the Sodastream, which allows you to make soda, or seltzer, at home. If you think about it, buying seltzer at the store makes little sense: most of what you're buying is water, which is available in your home already, and the plastic bottle and cap need to be recycled after use.



Enter the Sodastream, which carbonates water in a reusable bottle with the push of a button. The compressed-CO₂ cartridge occasionally must be replaced, but that is also recyclable and not much trouble to manage. (There are also flavor packets for the soda, but we've never used those.)

The downside is cost. At \$80 for the initial unit and \$15 for CO₂ refills, you need to drink a lot of seltzer for it to be cheaper than store-bought stuff. Even so, I like the principle of the product: you don't buy disposable plastic, and you don't buy, then transport, water that you already have at home.

THE ALMANAC*A few final thoughts.*

A few final thoughts, ideas, and pointers.

- **Shaving tip:** I just figured out this year that you can use conditioner as a replacement to shaving cream. (Did everyone else know this already?) Anyway, one less bottle of stuff to purchase, store, travel with, replace, and recycle.
- **Buying cables:** If you have to buy a replacement USB cable for a hard drive, or an HDMI cable for a TV, don't buy it from a store like Radio Shack or the Apple store. The prices tend to be much lower at monoprice.com. I've bought there several times and have saved a lot.
- Once again this year I recommend **an easy way to get free books:** go to the library. It's one of the best deals running. Seriously, they should change the slogan to "like Amazon, but free." Many libraries now allow you to reserve the book online, and then email you when it's available. (And yes, it's important to show support. I donate to the New York Public Library.)
- **How to manage your email:** An overloaded inbox creates stress and anxiety; here's how to solve the problem permanently. Delete anything you don't need again (like old lunch invites or spam), store or archive anything you might need again but which doesn't need an action, and put the remaining action items on a todo list **outside** the inbox. One good option is my own tool, GoodTodo.com. Now the inbox is empty, and you can focus just on the items on your todo list. This works. Try it. (More details in my free ebook "[Bit Literacy](#).")
- **Umbrella storage system:** Here's how to ensure you always have an umbrella on hand when it's raining. Buy two umbrellas, and keep one at home and the other at work or school. (Perhaps store another in the car.) Then grab an umbrella whenever it's raining, and – this is the only hard part – remember to put the umbrella back in its place afterward.

Keep in touch:

Email me with comments, corrections, or suggestions for future guides. I'm at mark@creativegood.com.

You might also like...

- My free email newsletter – [subscribe here](#).
- My Twitter feed: [@markhurst](https://twitter.com/markhurst)
- If your company wants to create a better customer experience, consider hiring my team at [Creative Good](#), or join our [Councils](#).
- I am hoping to bring back my Gel conference this April (2013). Read the [newsletter](#) to get the announcement.

Have a great 2013!

- Uncle Mark

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