

Making Ripples

Ways to Make a Difference this Holiday Season

by Amanda Bancroft

Do you have a favorite holiday commercial rerun? Some commercials have been playing for nostalgic audiences for decades. Some things are worth repeating, such as “I love you,” and “make a difference in any way you can.” Here are some repeat (and new) ideas on how to get hopping this holiday season.

If you are among the lucky few with time, it can be fun and rewarding to volunteer, give a homemade gift, spend time with someone in need, or get some wildlife projects done while the ticks and chiggers are dormant (thanks, winter!). Hug someone. Craft a thoughtful gift or sew a quilt for a loved one. Give something homemade to a charity that helps people in need. Play an instrument for a local nursing home or hospital to give residents an enjoyable concert, whether you're into jazz or caroling or piano show tunes. Serve a meal at a soup kitchen (but ask first: during holidays, more people volunteering to feed the hungry has in the past created chaos at volunteer stations, while after the holidays there are volunteer shortages in some places).

If you are among the lucky few with extra cash, even a little bit extra can do some incredible things to make ripples. Donate toys to tots, or food to a pantry, or toiletries to a shelter (shampoo, diapers and body care products are rarely donated and in high demand). Give the wildlife some extra special seeds or hanging ornament edible feeders. You could provide a microloan through a trusted non-profit you research. Or donate whatever you can to a local charity. Effective altruist charities are renowned for their measurable results. For options, visit GiveWell.org, an exhaustive charity evaluator featured on CNN, in The New York Times, and more.

There are so many ideas listed here that it's easy to get overwhelmed and do nothing, but that would be the worst idea of them all. If all sounds equal and the choices daunting, try the effective altruist route – it'll provide the greatest ripple in the world and is proven scientifically to give good results, unlike that homemade gift for so-and-so (will they like it, or feed it to their dog?). In the end, though, with a healthy helping of critical thinking, compassion is what counts, and generally leads to efforts that leave the world better than before. Just approaching your day with love can brighten the lives around you.

Whatever you decide to do, be aware! Moral licensing studies show that people who do something good are more likely to follow that action with inaction or doing something dishonest, so, guard against that by planning ahead for future good deeds. Do not be the charitable racecar that gets parked after ripping up the track for a day.

Amanda Bancroft is a writer, artist, and naturalist building an off-grid cottage for land conservation on Mt. Kessler. She and her husband Ryan blog about their adventures and offer a solar-hosted online educational center on how to make a difference with everyday choices at: www.RipplesBlog.org