



# One Very Personal Gift

By Karl Zinsmeister

*An intimate Christmas present produced a beloved morality tale*

This is a philanthropic Christmas story. A true one. Which illustrates how far the charitable impulse can stretch, and how important personal connections often are in expressing it.

The story begins with a man named Michael Brown. He was a Broadway lyricist—a boom-and-bust profession where you might go years at a time without a substantial success, then suddenly strike gold. The year 1956 was a good one for Brown; he had a new hit musical under his belt.

As a result, he and his wife and their two boys were enjoying an unanticipated burst of prosperity. So the Browns decided to share their good fortune that Christmas. They invited a friend living nearby to join their family celebration. She was a young starving artist—a writer who was passing the holiday far from her home in the South.

Toward the end of their gift exchange, the Browns told their guest to retrieve an envelope off the tree. Inside was a note that read very simply: “You

have one year off from your job to write whatever you please. Merry Christmas.”

The writer’s name was Harper Lee.

You may recall that Harper Lee was from small-town Alabama. She grew up loving storytelling and literature, and when she decided she wanted to try to make it as a novelist, she relocated to the center of the publishing universe, New York City. After arriving, though, she found she was so preoccupied with paying her rent—in her case by working at an airline office and bookstore—that she had little time left over to focus on her literary craft. She wasn’t making any progress on her writing, and was deeply frustrated.

The Browns were kind people, and they noticed this. They could see that Harper had talents she was not able to realize. And through some very personal philanthropy, they changed the course of U.S. literature.

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Gregory Peck plays Atticus Finch in a courtroom scene from the movie version of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Lee agonized over whether she should accept this remarkably generous, extremely personal, gift. In the end, she decided she would do her best to live up to it. So with the Browns’ donation in hand, she quit her retail jobs at the bookstore and the airline office, and focused full time on her writing.

And it was during that gift year that Harper Lee perfected her craft and created her most indelible story and characters. Her novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1961. It became one of the most influential American books of all time.

Some of you may wonder, “Is that really philanthropy?” I would say yes. Admittedly, it’s an unusual and extraordinarily intimate style of philanthropy. But it fits the classic definition—reaching out to a fellow human who isn’t meeting her God-given potential, someone who is in danger of being passed over by life, and helping that person flourish. That’s charity at its best.

In this instance, as with many other cases of well-timed and well-placed personal philanthropy, it wasn’t just the money that made the difference. It was the human touch, the clear statement that someone else cares, believes in you, and wants to help you become your best self. Charitable acts that lift up people in this way can have surprisingly powerful results. And they happen by the millions every day. Most don’t lead to great novels, but triumphs of other sorts are common.

In preventing Harper Lee’s talent from being suffocated by the expensive hubbub of New York City, the Brown family didn’t just boost her. Their generosity benefited us all. Unleashing her special qualities of imagination allowed millions of Americans to absorb piercing perspectives on childhood, rural life, Southern society, small-town intimacies, and human morality.

It was a wonderful gift. In a very small envelope.

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