

Hoping to give for giving's sake in 2011

At the end of December, I watched a re-airing of the last Oprah's Favorite Things episode of the "Oprah Winfrey Show." When Oprah sang out, "Favorite Things!" the audience reacted with leaps, hugs, childlike screams of delight and joyful tears.

It was like a reflex for the audience members. Everyone who knows of the "Oprah Winfrey Show" knows about Oprah's Favorite Things. The billionaire gives thousands of dollars in clothes, accessories, shoes, gadgets, cookware, food, cars, bed sheets and anything else she can't live without to members of her studio audience that day. They take these things home with them. They use the things. They eat the things. They wear the things. I assume the men in her studio audience who don't want to wear dangling diamond

earrings give them to very lucky women.

As the camera panned, I figured it couldn't be more than a few hundred people in her studio audience, a tiny fraction of the people who watch her every day. An even tinier fraction of the American population as a whole.

As I saw the audience's tears, I thought, "Why am I not on that show? It's the last Oprah's Favorite Things ever, and I'm watching. Who are these people and why am I not among



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them?"

Oprah then announced that this show was for the givers and for the die-hard fans. Well, that answered my question. I haven't attempted to be a guest on the final season of the "Oprah Winfrey Show." I did skim the site when she made her announcement last season to see if there was any topic I could fit into convincingly, but I didn't find one, and I didn't take the next logical step of reserving tickets to the show. And as for the former ...

"Hey, I give!" I said to the television. But then I had to stop and think about that. When was the last time I did something for someone else without expecting anything in return?

I used to do my own little versions of Favorite Things all the time, just because, like Oprah, I could and I wanted to share. If I read a book and enjoyed it, I had Amazon send a copy to all of my friends. If I knew another

color of the fleece pullover I liked would look good on a friend, I bought it for her. Someone begging me for money for food as I walk into a restaurant? That person got lunch too.

And I gave away my time for free. Any way that I thought I was capable of serving — teaching, driving, serving food, writing, performing, setting up tables — I did it, and not even for the sake of karma.

These days, I put any thought of volunteerism into a complicated exchange rate calculator. It takes into account time available, gasoline and parking money required, my enthusiasm for the cause and my enthusiasm for whatever I probably would rather be doing. Then I have to factor in the necessity of whatever I'm putting aside in favor of giving and the grace I can expect at some point in the future.

Or maybe it's the grace I should expect. I'm not sure which is appropri-

ate. We've just ended the season of telling children to be good under threat of a gift-less or coal-filled "or else," and we have the saying "What goes around comes around." All of this means that at some point, we are taught that good boomerangs, which is not the same as teaching that good is simply right.

Excuses as to why I can't make people as happy as Oprah made her audience filled my head: I have to make a living. Freelancing requires a lot of time. When I'm in a better position to help others, I will; I always did when I could.

And perhaps hoping that I'll be able to again one day is enough. I hope that comes in 2011; I miss altruism. ♣

Mariam Williams is a Louisville native. More of her thoughts and stories can be found at RedboneAfro-puff.com.