

Some gifts offer effervescent delights, lasting no longer than the bubbles in a glass of champagne. Others—a cashmere sweater, a handbag—provide pleasure for a season or two. More durable gifts, like jewelry, are an everlasting reminder of friendship and love. And then there are those rare gifts that alter the courses of our lives. They transform the way we see ourselves, leading us to pursue dreams, ambitions and daily happiness in radically new ways.

Here, 10 people share the gifts that changed their lives.

Emily Wise Miller

*Dallas, Texas
Live Happy web editor*

GIFT: BICYCLE

Two years ago, surgeons cracked open my sternum and stopped my heart for four hours while they removed a faulty aortic valve and installed a mechanical one. Before this surgery, I'd been pretty active: running, doing yoga, training with weights. After, I felt like I'd been hit by a truck; I couldn't cook, I couldn't drive, I couldn't even reach for a bottle of milk on a high shelf. After a couple of months, I felt well enough to go on walks and short, easy hikes. It would be another six months before I could do yoga and a year before I returned to running and weights.

Even then, a deep sense of fatigue persisted. I could barely go half a day without napping. Plus, in February 2014, after years of working freelance, I joined *Live Happy* as the web editor. I was thrilled, but the added stress of starting a new job gave me less time for exercise. I gained weight and developed lower back pain and even high blood pressure.

I knew something had to change. Once I started seeing a personal trainer, I began daydreaming about the years my husband and I lived in Florence and traveled everywhere by bicycle. There is nothing like the feeling of riding across the Piazza della Signoria at night, almost empty except for the towering replica of Michelangelo's David. My husband and I would look at each other on our one-speeds thinking, "We'll never see or feel anything like this again."

For my birthday last March, my mom bought me a bicycle—a silver hybrid Trek small enough for my 5-foot frame. It was cute, cool and sporty. I was ecstatic! At first I just rode around the neighborhood with my 10-year-old son and 7-year-old daughter. Then I moved on to nearby trails. Soon I was riding seven miles, then 10 and 15. I was hooked on the feeling of being on a bike. It's both meditative and fun, a kind of energetic flow state that leaves you feeling vibrantly alive. I began pushing myself in ways that I never had, even before surgery.

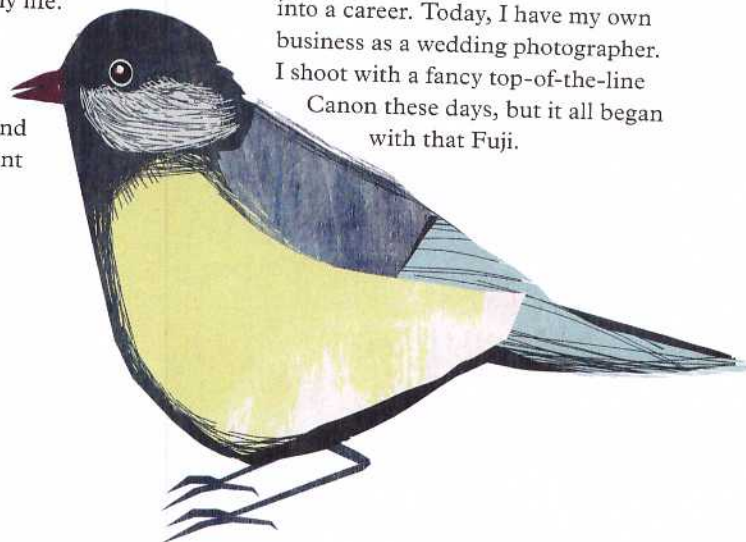
Now, two or three mornings a week, at 6:30 a.m., I go for 20-mile rides on my own. Traversing the urban creeks and forests of Dallas while the city is still half-asleep, I pedal fast, feel the wind on my face, and I just go. The gift of a bicycle pulled me out of my rut. It changed me from someone who felt like she was falling into a negative spiral to experiencing myself as an athlete for the first time in my life. When I get back from a 20- or 30-mile ride, I feel competent and strong, independent and free.



Chandra Yarter
*San Antonio, Texas
Wedding photographer*

GIFT: CAMERA

My grandpa has always been the unofficial family photographer, and every week from the time I was 6 or 7 until my grandfather passed away when I was 16, I'd go with him to the local Kodak store to get his film developed. When I was 8, my grandparents bought me a camera—a small, wind-up Fuji. From the moment I got it, that camera was strapped to my hip. I'd take it to school, to the grocery store, to the playground. I'd take pictures of everything: my dog, my two sisters—we're identical triplets—coke bottles. I got pretty good at taking photos, and when people started offering to pay for my services, I began thinking that maybe I could turn something I love into a career. Today, I have my own business as a wedding photographer. I shoot with a fancy top-of-the-line Canon these days, but it all began with that Fuji.





Heather Rae Johnson
Oakland, California
Journalist

GIFT: RED VELVET CHAIR

On September 6, 1995, my boyfriend, John, fell to his death down a freight elevator shaft. That Christmas our friends got together in the apartment that John and Warren, his roommate, had shared. There were about 12 of us. We had gotten each other silly inexpensive gifts, like art deco ashtrays and beer mugs. Since there were so many gifts, we decided that each person would sit in the middle of the living room, blindfolded, while we piled the gifts around them. Then, they'd take off the blindfold and open them all.

My friend Blair and I did a lot of antique store shopping that year. One afternoon I came across a gorgeous red velvet chair. It was \$125. I passed it by because I had gifts to buy for others. The next week Blair said, "I went to that same store and your chair was gone." Sadly, it wasn't to be.

At the party, it was my turn in the hot seat. When Warren took off the blindfold, there in front of me was a single gift: my pretty red chair! Everyone had pitched in, and Blair had gotten it for me. I cried. After going through something so terrible, losing someone I cared about so much, that little red chair reminded me, and still does, of the value of friendship and how good friends can come together and help each other through the absolute worst.

Judith Viorst

Washington
Author of, among many other books, *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* and *Wait for Me*, a new volume of poetry

GIFT: FRENCH LANGUAGE LESSONS

Back in the late 1960s my husband, Milton, who speaks flawless French, gave me the very expensive gift of a week of total immersion at Berlitz. He was determined to spur me—who spoke zero French, flawless or otherwise—to share his knowledge of this beautiful language. As I recall it, the course involved five days of private, intensive lessons all day and all in French, with the hope that it would give me a jump-start in learning French, after which I would continue to study in more conventional ways.

During that total immersion week I worked harder than I'd ever worked in my life...but, alas, got nowhere. At the end of the course I was called into the Berlitz office. And there I was told, more in sorrow than in anger: "Madame Viorst, you have remarkable stamina. But...long pause followed by a sigh...no talent for languages."

Freed by this verdict from my husband's nagging and from ever having to study French again, I decided that I would concentrate on English, in which I now have written 43 books.



Tom Broecker

New York
Emmy-winning costume designer for *Saturday Night Live*

GIFT: MY BOOK ABOUT ME BY ME, MYSELF (with some help from my friends Dr. Seuss and Roy McKie)

I was 6 years old when my father gave me *My Book About Me* as a Christmas present. I was already drawing a lot, and this book gave me focus. I'd go through the pages and with a bright orange crayon I followed the directions to do things like trace my hands and my feet. I'd pay close paid attention to myself, noticing things like which foot was bigger. There were also pages where you'd write about yourself.

I wrote, 'I am 6. I'm right-handed. I have straight blond hair and a long nose.' I also kept a list of things I wanted to be when I grew up. My list included plumber, fireman, chef, astronaut and fashion designer.

I was growing up in small-town Indiana with three brothers, a father who was a corporate lawyer and a mom who was a nurse. There weren't many kids in Carmel, Indiana, who wanted to be a fashion designer, but that book helped me claim my own identity and my own ambitions.

I went on to study costume design at the Yale School of Drama. I've been the costume designer at *Saturday Night Live* since it began in 1975. I've also been the