

# Paper, Please

## Treasuring tokens of Christmases past

BY MAUREEN L. EGAN

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Housewares catalogs are full of silver and gold and jewel-toned glass; stores brim with the classy and crass, rustic and retro. Depending on the display's seductiveness, I could reach for my wallet and do up my house in holiday decor. Oh sure, I covet more candles, blown glass and pottery, but rather than envy them I choose to feel sorry for people whose homes look like the latest Pottery Barn spreads (really, I do), with the decorations just so. Where are the pinecone turkeys with the construction-paper necks and feathers traced from children's hands?

I might buy a bauble or two this season, but if I'm honest, the material I want around most for the holidays is plain old paper. Handwritten cards, family recipes in unmistakable script, humble handmade decorations and photographs of the people we used to be. Those are the tangible goods I swoon over. Putting my hands on them every year does me all sorts of intangible good.

Before we had children, my husband, Ed, and I hosted a fake Thanksgiving for friends the Sunday before the real event. My normally placid spouse was so giddy at the prospect of cooking our first turkey dinner and having leftovers all to ourselves that he concocted his own Pilgrim costume, squeezing into my navy pea coat, even fashioning a foil belt buckle and a construction paper hat, all to pose proudly with our frozen Butterball in the bathroom of our dull duplex — the only room that had enough light for our feeble, literally un-flashy, camera. That photograph is a slice of life as sweet as pie.

And there are the gold stars Ed cut from the tops of wedding-present boxes, the snowman and Santa colored in with felt-tip pens for our first exceedingly lame Christmas tree. He cringes every year when I pull them out and hang them on the tree, but I adore them and know they belong.

Perhaps I had children to upgrade my holiday decorations. How else was I going to acquire paper-plate angels and Santa Claus tissue box holders? Target doesn't sell green and red glittery pinecones. And the handmade ornaments that defy description, the origami stars, and cut-paper snowflakes — they haven't all survived the wear and tear of the years, but they made whatever house we were living in at the time our home — ours alone.

Last year I came upon a stash of old cards the kids had made for each other and us. The display of all-out enthusiasm, occasional wit, and the sloppy yet solemn handwriting combines to create more dimensions than paper can possibly have. Open one card and the spunky 5-year-old I used to know has something sweet to say again. Open this one and out pops the surprisingly serious 9-year-old, more substantial than any replayed video.

All this essential paperwork might be smooshed together in a box in a closet or in a drawer most of the year, but I know where to find it. Every piece is improbably infused with ourselves, our lives and love. Every year my heart winds up in my throat when I feel the warmth of what these creations were, the joy of what they are and the hope that they will ever be — proof.

