‘To injure no man, but to bless all mankind’

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Homefront: With gusto and guitarróns, young Mexican-Americans embrace mariachi music and make it a surprise hit north of the border.
It’s better to give — but how?

You'd think it would be easy to give away things you don't want or need, but that's not necessarily so.

I'm sitting here looking at two glass pitchers that I no longer have room for. Neither has sentimental attachments, so this would be a good opportunity to find them a new home.

But where? Goodwill doesn't pick up donations, and it's difficult for me to take my things to them. The Salvation Army accepts only clothes and furniture. That excludes pitchers — and crystal goblets, brass sconces, vases, garden tools, assorted knickknacks, and a waffle iron.

So I seem to have four choices:

Find a charity that can use my castoffs, locate individuals who want them, wait until spring and give up some weekends to take the things to a suburban flea market, or toss them out.

The usual solution — a garage sale — isn't easy when you live in an 1880s urban row house. (No yard, no garage, not even a driveway.)

I've been toying with the idea of offering some things on eBay, the online auction site, but my experience with selling a dozen books through Amazon.com has shown me the pitfalls. You have to agree to mail the books quickly once they're sold, and you must come up with shipping boxes that are the right size. (No problem at first, not so easy after the seventh volume.)

Also, the items have to be worth more than the postage and aggravation it takes to get rid of them.

The simplest solution would be the trash can. But then my conscience whispers that "Waste not, want not" admonition that's been drilled into me since childhood.

Surely there's a solution that's mutually beneficial to me and others. I hope I find it soon.

— E-mail the Homefront at home@csps.com.

OLD MUSIC finds NEW VOICES

Mexico's traditional mariachi music is a hit again — with Hispanic youngsters in the US. It connects them to their roots.

Turning tumultuous transitions to tidiness
Susan Toshu helps people manage the paperwork of life changes — sometimes by storing it in the freezer.

Chicken soup spooned up as an edible heirloom
One grandmother's recipes offer carrots and comfort, and a taste of the past.

MUSIC FROM THE HEART: Fernando Miguel of Houston is one of many young Mexican-Americans who are fascinated with mariachi. He won an award at the Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza in San Antonio recently.

By Kyle Armstrong
Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

SAN ANTONIO — Virginia Stille can’t decide on the right shade of lipstick. She doesn’t want anything too garish, but the color must be bright enough to show up on stage.

"What about this one, Mom?" she calls from the makeup artist's chair.

Mom approves, and the stick of burnt sienna sweeps her lips. Just as she’s about to surrender the chair, one of the stylists asks for a sample of her upcoming performance.

Now that’s something Virginia is not reflective about.

She begins slowly: "Rebosan, Rebosan," and then she builds: "De Santa Maria." Her voice is sophisticated for such a young girl, and she doesn’t falter in the a cappella version of "Aire de Mayab," a tribute to the Mayan Indian culture.

At 13 years old, Virginia has just won best of show at the seventh annual Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza in San Antonio, a town that knows its mariachi music.

She competed against hundreds of young people to win the title and is now preparing for an evening concert.

"I hope to keep on singing and one day do it professionally," Virginia says, smoothing her delicately embroidered dress. "I want to make it big."

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Mariachi makes a comeback

Make it big singing mariachi? On this side of the border?
While it may be hard to imagine a mariachi minstrel giving Britney Spears a run for her money, this traditional music of Mexico is growing in popularity in the United States.
And it’s happening among the most unlikely group of listeners.
No longer is mariachi music simply for first-generation Hispanics longing for memories of their homeland. Mariachi is hip with the youngsters here - in contrast to Mexican adolescents’ feelings about the music.
As this music, born a century ago in the pueblos around Guanajuato, becomes old-fashioned and uncool among youngsters in its country of origin, Mexican-American teens are embracing it and moving it forward.
Many Mexican-American teens are attempting careers in this challenging genre. US colleges are beginning to offer courses - and even considering degrees - in mariachi music. And competitions, such as the one in San Antonio, are spreading across the country as more and more young Hispanics reach for their roots.

Mariachi explained

To make the music of country people, mariachi was never meant to be mere idle singing, according to “Mexico: The Meeting of Two Cultures.”
Rather, it drives a foot-stomping, foot-splintering dance technique called the zapatear, in which dancers pound their boot heels into the floor in a loud, clipped rhythm stressing the song’s weak beats.
A complete mariachi group includes six to eight vihuelas, a guitar, and two trumpets, along with Mexican variations on the instrument: a round-backed guitar for catchy rhythm, a deep-voiced guitar for bass, and a Mexican folk harp for both bass and melody.
The contrast in sounds combines with a shifting beat and syncopation: to keep music and a twist, driving pace.

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story. “There are sad songs, and happy songs, and love songs—all different kinds of stories to tell,” says hip hop artist, Mia Ruiz, who combines traditional mariachi music with modern rhythms.

She began her career in the 1980s, performing under the pseudonym "Chocolate," and has since become one of the leading figures in the modern mariachi movement. "I like to tell stories, and when I'm singing, it's like I'm telling a story," she says.

Dr. Nevin is working hard to offer the nation’s first mariachi degree at Southwestern. A growing number of colleges offer mariachi programs, though not degree granting. And many predominantly Hispanic school districts offer mariachi programs in addition to band and choir programs.

"This musical genre is absolutely not dying, it's experiencing a renaissance," he says. "That’s evident in the surge of mariachi programs in high schools all over the United States.

Indeed, many high school students at the San Antonio competition say they are planning their college careers around universities with strong mariachi programs, such as Texas Pan American in Edinburg or Texas A&M International University in Laredo.

Abel Himonas says he hopes to attend A&M International, because of its outstanding mariachi program.

Currently a junior at Roma High School in south Texas, Abel began learning to play the harp in the sixth grade—along with most of the members of his mariachi band.

While he’s not planning to make a career out of playing mariachi, Abel says the music is in his blood, and he doubts he will give it up.

A fellow mariachi performer, Jorge Perez, was not so culturally motivated when he first started playing the guitar—"I had to learn to like the music," he says, donning his felt hat, grabbing his instrument, and heading for the stage. "My grandpa used to play the guitar and sing, and when he found out I was playing in a mariachi band, he surprised him a lot.

"Don’t ask me why, but when I’m playing, I feel a lot closer to my Mexican roots."

MARIACHI IN THE CLASSROOM

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