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I WANT THAT!
How we all became shoppers
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INTRODUCTION
What Makes People Shop?

Shopping, I have found, is a subject that makes people nervous. When the subject comes up, they giggle uneasily, as if something deeply intimate and vaguely illicit has come to the surface. In a sense, that's not surprising. Shopping is at once an exploration of desires and a fulfillment of responsibility. It elicits guilt and pride. It can be burdensome or joyous. Our shopping tells us things about ourselves we might prefer not to know.

Indeed, shopping has a lot in common with sex: Just about everybody does it. Some people brag about how well they do it. Some keep it a secret. Most people worry, at least a little, about whether they do it right. And both sex and shopping provide ample opportunities to make really foolish choices. Some shopping is, like sex, an effort to fulfill fundamental biological needs. But shopping, like sex, is often playful, though the play is very serious. In sexual relationships we learn about ourselves in relationship to another person. In shopping, we define ourselves through our relationships to things and to the meanings that our society attributes to them. We try things on, and as we do so, we try on identities. A genera-

tion ago, salesladies used to clinch a sale by telling the shopper, "That's you!" Today, we browse through the glossy fashion magazines and rummage through the bargain bins and look, as if into a lover's eyes, and wonder, "Is that me?"

Unlike sex, shopping hasn't been around forever. Some say it's only about two hundred years old, though I put the age at closer to five hundred, which is still but a blip in the million years or so of human evolution. Yet, the acquisition and use of objects, while not unique to our species, is one of our defining characteristics. It is primordial.

It used to be thought that adapting objects as tools is uniquely human, though we now know that's not true. Nevertheless, *Homo sapiens* is the only species that knows it needs something to wear. In the Bible, this insight comes at the same moment as the knowledge of mortality, pain, sex, and the loss of Eden. Part of the terrible knowledge that Adam and Eve gained was that they would need to labor, and still always desire something more.

Shopping is the contemporary expression of our complex relationship to things. Objects are useful. They are repositories of magic. They carry meanings that are more powerful than words because they can embody the paradoxes of life.

For most of human existence, only a few people have had the power to possess large numbers of objects, to manipulate the world, to create images for themselves and their families that the world would recognize. For the billions who live in today's world of abundant consumer goods, this power is commonplace magic. But it is magic nevertheless, and few are willing to give up the power of choosing and owning desirable objects.

Shopping is not inherently good or bad, but it is deeply human. It is the way in which contemporary people address perennial questions: What will we feed our families? How will they be clothed? What tools are needed to survive and prosper? How should we present ourselves to the world? How should we express our deepest beliefs?

All of these questions concern the duties and obligations that tie

people together as families and as societies. But within this framework of responsibility, there is plenty of room for choice. Shopping is not the most exalted expression of human freedom. It is, rather, a commonplace freedom that is valuable precisely because it can be exercised every day. This sense of always available possibility is what makes shopping a modern phenomenon. At some times in humanity's past, people may have seen themselves as buffeted by forces beyond their control. At other times, we thought we played a fixed role in an orderly universe. Today, we embrace the dream of self-creation, in an environment of constant flux. We need things to help us survive and prevail in this changing world. We buy them at Wal-Mart, online, at flea markets, supermarkets, Sears, and Saks.

Like other deeply human acts, shopping has some bad aspects. We expend time and money buying goods we might be better off without. We let the incessant dissatisfaction of shopping distract us from pursuits that could be more rewarding. We frequently allow our lives to be measured only in terms of the material possessions we amass. The thrill of immediate gratification can distract us from planning and saving for the future. We participate in a culture of wastefulness that may shadow the lives of generations yet to come.

Yet, despite these psychological quandaries and moral dilemmas, just about everybody shops. It is the aspect of modern living that people in newly developing areas embrace first and most enthusiastically. There are millions of people on earth who live in circumstances where they cannot shop, but most of them would do so if they could. Shopping offers great satisfactions, most of which have little to do with the accusations of self-indulgence to which shoppers are often subjected.

People giggle at shopping, perhaps, because of the absurdity of humanity's fate—looking for a bargain in an indifferent universe. Shopping is ridiculous because what our spirits need is so vastly out of proportion to the goods we settle for. Like the prizes bestowed by the Wizard of Oz, the treasures we cart home don't begin to satisfy the longings that sent us on our journeys.

Several years ago, at a flea market, I purchased a mail-order catalogue from the mid-1950s. Its pulsating pastel illustrations of swooping, jet-age products had caught my eye, but this dog-eared volume proved more profound than I had expected. It offered a view of the passions that come into play when people shop. It offered insights on fantasy and necessity, generosity and greed, thrift and indulgence, identity and possibility. It was an expression of freedom, responsibility, and love.

Someone else had long since pored over these pages, annotating them, ever so faintly, in pencil. Throughout the catalogue, which offered items for every setting from the barn to the boudoir, items had been earmarked for particular people. The handwriting was girlish, but the choices seemed well considered. There were enough erasures throughout the book to indicate that the girl was giving her selections at least a second thought.

The sheer number of contemplated purchases—close to 150—suggested that her generosity was vicarious. But that made it no less real. Surely, she would have bought all these products if she could have, and felt good about bestowing them on each of her carefully selected recipients. She was doing what we all try to do when choosing a gift: connecting a person and the feelings we have toward that person with an item that, in some way, completes, transforms, or at least pleases the recipient.

In some cases, the gifts selected met a practical need. This seemed particularly true of the items marked for Papa: work boots, rugged trousers, a warm coat, a selection of tools. These seemed to suggest that her father lived a life of hard physical labor, probably on a farm. The most grimly useful product selected, however, was probably the new sump pump chosen for Uncle Al.

More often though, the gifts she marked seemed to reflect a desire to transform the recipients by giving them things that they would never buy for themselves. The elaborate slips and brassieres earmarked for Ma, Agnes, and Aunt Lucille probably fell into that category. There were also a lot of pretty clothes reserved for a young girl named Jane, and as I leafed through the catalogue, I

began to think that Jane herself was the annotator of this volume. The exercise of being generous to others often leads us to be even more generous to ourselves.

Like many gift-givers, the girl with the catalogue—Jane?—seemed to want to leaven necessity with a touch of luxury. Among the other items earmarked for Ma were an electric range, a steam iron, a supply of pink plastic clothespins, a fine leather handbag, and a dinner dress with sequins. (What would Papa wear when she wore that?)

Even the flannel shirt chosen for Uncle Al in the then-fashionable coral-and-charcoal color combination indicates that his niece wanted him to have something nice to wear. He was more than just a wet basement to her.

The catalogue told Jane about the moment in which she was living. It showed her what colors were new, what appliances people wanted, and what girls her age were wearing, at least in the Midwestern, small-town world reflected in the catalogue. Its compilers were guided by an understanding of what its recipients would really buy. And because people more often buy in order to fit in with their neighbors rather than to compete with them, the catalogue provided Jane and others like her with a guide to belonging in her time and place. In contemporary jargon, the catalogue helped create a virtual community.

As she paged through the catalogue, Jane learned not only about the world, but also about herself. The catalogue contained dozens of dresses and skirts and blouses she might covet, but she selected only a couple of each. In doing so, she was in effect, defining her identity, refining the image of Jane that she presented both to herself and to the world.

A century and more ago, when mail-order catalogues afforded those who lived outside of the big cities their only convenient glimpse of a growing new world of consumer goods, people began to call them dream books. Now, though the dream books have gone, we have almost infinite dream worlds available on the Internet, and huge but cozy communities of consumers accessible

through television home-shopping networks. "Just looking" constitutes much of the traffic on the World Wide Web, as it does in the malls and on Main Street.

Still, it's wrong to equate "just looking" with "just dreaming," even if an afternoon at Home Depot or an evening of QVC viewing consists of looking at things that will never be bought. "Just looking" may be more properly understood as a form of domestic due diligence. It is a process of acquiring information, making comparisons, and forming judgments about how to best make use of the resources available.

If this young woman's scrutiny of the catalogue were simply an exercise in vicarious greed, the items she chose would consist solely of pretty things for herself and would, therefore, be far less interesting. What made the annotations fascinating was Jane's effort to be responsible by balancing needs and desires. Being a good consumer is an important part of being a grown-up in contemporary society, especially for women. In another time, Jane might have been expected to learn to spin or to sew, but by the 1950s, it was most important for her to learn how to shop.

And as she marked up the catalogue, she did what all shoppers do. She defined the needs of several individuals she knew well. She imagined how possessions could make her life, and the lives of people she loved, just a little bit different. She confronted a whole world of material possibilities and made thoughtful choices for each person in her life. Deciding how to make the best use of the resources available is not a trivial act. Your future can depend on it. Marking up the catalogue may have been a pastime on a long rainy afternoon, but it was also practice for an important task she could expect to be doing all her life. Learning to shop is a rite of passage to contemporary adulthood. Making material choices is a privilege, a responsibility, and an essential activity of modern life.

For better and worse, it is impossible today to imagine a world without shopping. We live much of our lives in a realm I call the buyosphere. This is, at once, a set of physical and virtual places and

a state of mind. The buyosphere is a series of windows through which we are eager to glimpse all sorts of possibilities.

Our contemporary buyosphere consists of a variety of venues—businesslike districts and arty ones, tourist traps and showrooms for people in the trade. It encompasses shopping malls and "power centers," boutiques and big boxes, department stores, outlets, hypermarkets, flea markets, Web sites. It also includes fashion magazines, television programs, newspaper advertisements, music videos, all of the media that prepare us to be shoppers. The most essential part of the buyosphere, though, consists of us, the shoppers. We come into the buyosphere with a mixture of attitudes and emotions. We are serious and lighthearted, sensitive and greedy, thrifty and competitive. The buyosphere is not a civic space, but it is our chief arena for expression, the place where we learn most about who we are, both as a people and as individuals.

During the last decade, the Internet seemed to promise a revolution in shopping. Billions of dollars in losses later, we realize that many people who sought to reinvent shopping never understood it. Just because nearly everybody does it doesn't mean that it's not complicated.

Like a bee in a field of flowers, the shopper in our selling-saturated world is constantly being stimulated, yet always in danger of exhaustion. The economy cannot afford to allow the shopper to become worn out. We live in a global consumer economy in which prosperity depends on the willingness of shoppers to seek out what's new and exciting and different. A collapse of consumer demand—a shortage of shoppers—prolonged the Great Depression of the 1930s, just as it prevented Japan from climbing out of its economic torpor in the 1990s. Consumer confidence is always at risk. It may appear to be a mighty edifice, but if there's a bad enough shock it can disintegrate in an instant. Often in the past, people have transformed themselves from optimistic spenders to timorous savers in a moment, and then required many years of forgetfulness before they were willing to buy into their aspirations. Shoppers navigate through a universe of possibilities, but the most

important and least understood choice they make is whether or not to shop.

When times are good and stores are crowded, we say terrible things about shoppers—that they are superficial, and self-indulgent, and wasteful. And those criticisms are sometimes just. Perhaps that's why people stop shopping when they fear for their future. Shopping is an affirmation that there is a future, and that it will be better than today. When people stop shopping, not only are the results economically ruinous, but the culture is signaling that it doubts its ability to succeed.

This book is about the passions that make people shoppers, and how these impulses have changed the world, from prehistoric times to the age of the Internet. It begins not with buying and selling, but rather with using and desiring, which are still at the heart of contemporary shopping. Its aim is to illuminate what's strange about what seems familiar, to seek out the unlikely origins of the routine, and to elucidate the complexity of the apparently simple. The focus is not on the retailer or the marketer. Rather, it is an exploration of the evolving experiences, desires, needs, and anxieties of the shopper.

While it is obvious that shopping is an economically significant activity, it is equally interesting, and less understood, as a part of all our lives. Some call it the world's most popular leisure activity, though much of it really isn't leisure at all. Most people in developed societies spend large percentages of their waking hours shopping, preparing to shop, or being urged to do so. Does all this activity serve to better our lives, or simply to waste our time? My hope is that this book can help us all—as shoppers—to understand ourselves.

The book's approach is to combine an exploration of the passions that animate contemporary shopping with a historical overview of how people understand, desire, and acquire objects. Each of the nine chapters takes as its theme a force that drives shoppers. These are:

Power—the use of objects to assert authority and prove your worth

Responsibility—shopping as a nurturing activity, especially for women

Discovery—going among strangers to trade and learn

Self-Expression—the role of objects in a world where individuals' identities aren't fixed

Insecurity—the conspiracy of shoppers and sellers that conjures the illusion of scarcity and creates fashion to enhance the eventfulness of life

Attention—the craving to have one's desires recognized but not judged

Belonging—the use of objects to forge communities of taste and to rebel against mainstream thinking

Celebration—the ways in which shopping helps give meaning to Christmas

Convenience—the integration and entanglement of shopping with the rest of life

Each of the chapters' themes relates to modern-day shopping, and continues a historical narrative that begins with prehistory and early historical time in chapters 1 and 2, marketplaces in chapter 3, the blossoming of the buyosphere in chapter 4, the development of urban shopping and the evolution of salesmanship in chapters 5 through 7, holiday shopping in chapter 8, and twentieth-century incursions of the buyosphere into every phase of life in chapter 9.

In some ways, this multiple perspective replicates the experience of shopping. The skill of the shopper is, after all, to be broadly attentive. The shopper searches for what is needed, keeps an eye out for what is forgotten, and is open to surprises. I invite you to do the same.