

Consumers and Shapers (sermon for 8/7/22)

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When I was in kindergarten, we started the school day by sitting in a circle. Often the teacher would begin by asking, “Who has new shoes today?” The kid with new shoes got to enjoy the whole class’s admiring attention for a few minutes before the teacher went on to read to us about Dick and Jane. Having new shoes was cool.

It’s interesting (and a little disturbing) to think about how many TV commercials I saw by the time I was ten—thousands of attempts to get my family to buy something. I remember some of the images from those ads. In one of them, the White Knight galloped past the clothesline in a woman’s backyard and zapped the laundry with his lance, turning it all a dazzling white, because she used the right detergent. In another ad, the detergent was so powerful that in the middle of the wash cycle, a muscular fist punched its way up through the agitator in the washing machine. Who knew that laundry day could be so exciting? Just buying the right detergent could open the door to a more exciting life, the ads seemed to say.

When you think about it, with all the conditioning we got from watching thousands of commercials, it’s surprising that we didn’t all grow up to be greedy

zombies, addicted to buying things. The advertisers did their best to make us into good consumers—and overall, as a nation, we are.

In the 1960s, some of the younger generation rebelled against all this materialism, and some even went back to a simpler way of life, living off the land. In her song “You Could Have Been More,” Joni Mitchell reproached somebody (maybe her father):

You could have been more
Than a name on the door
On the 31st floor
In the air;
More than a credit card,
Swimming pool in the backyard.

I was disappointed when, 20 years later, many people in that same Boomer generation—my generation—abandoned their rebellion against materialism and became at least as materialistic as their parents. Some of them even embraced the odious idea that “He who dies with the most toys, wins.” Meanwhile, in my brief college teaching career in that same period, I encountered many students who sat in class the same way they sat in front of the TV, passively waiting to be entertained. Their energy and their ambition were focused not on learning, but on getting through school so they could get a degree, get a job, and start making

money. They were well prepared to become “a name on the door on the 31st floor in the air”--and to be good consumers.

But besides consumerism, there's also another, very different element in our culture: we admire action. A conference speaker I heard some years ago summed up the American attitude by comparing two books he had seen about dealing with back pain—one by a Canadian author, and one by an American. The book by the Canadian was titled *Coping With Back Pain*. The book by the American was titled *Conquering Back Pain*. We are an aggressive, action-oriented people. Our politicians, when running for office, don't promise to sit down with other leaders to have a thoughtful conversation and work out a compromise; instead, they promise to *fight* for our rights. Theodore Roosevelt expressed it well in a speech he gave in 1910 (please pardon his male-oriented language):

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause;

who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."

Victory or defeat: to Roosevelt, life, or at least life in the public arena, was a battle.

So where does this leave you and me? How do we steer a course between a life of just buying stuff, on the one hand, and fighting a battle all our lives, on the other hand? To me, being a consumer doesn't seem like enough. But fighting a battle all my life, trying to shape the world to fit my ideals, seems arrogant. Who am I? I am one person out of eight billion. The chances that my point of view is the whole Truth (with a capital T) are slim. My perspective is sure to be incomplete, because there's only so much you can see with just one pair of eyes. I am in no position to reshape the world to fit my vision.

And yet. As wildfires rage and democracy is threatened everywhere, I can't just sit around feeling small. Yes, in the past two and a half years the pandemic has made many of us (including me) hunker down and just try to get through the day. But I can't see spending the rest of my life like that. I want to make a difference for the better, no matter how small it is.

Of course, the picture is more complicated than I've made it seem. You can be a consumer or a shaper, but there are other possibilities, too. My father, who was a historian, used to say that he had thought about whether to approach life as an observer or a doer, and he'd decided that he was basically an observer. Yet observers, such as historians, journalists, and writers, can also be shapers. They shape our perceptions of reality, and may inspire us to action—maybe even to a lifetime of action in a worthy cause. And they themselves may live a life of action as well as observation. Dr. Martin Luther King was a minister who shared his observations in many sermons, speeches, and writings. But he was also an active leader who continually risked his life for social justice. Both his observations and his actions helped to change the shape of our society.

My father lived on a much smaller scale than that, of course, and what he wrote about was Bismarck and German history from 1890 up to World War I. But in the course of his teaching career, he also encouraged thousands of students to recognize the complexities of history, to see that reality has many facets. He taught a kind of intellectual humility—something I wish we had more of now, when our country is so polarized between self-righteous extremes. Teaching humility, too, is a way of contributing something—a form of action.

A colleague of mine used to have a sign in her office that read: “Study without action is futile. Action without study is fatal.” Perhaps learning about the world and working to change it are, or should be, the left foot and right foot of the steps we take toward a better world.

And so I come down mostly on the side of being a doer. Each of us can contribute something. At every level from local to global, the world clearly needs all the help it can get. And there are many ways to take action: giving money, volunteering, writing our representatives, teaching, sharing ideas, marching in demonstrations, and more. I say choose a few causes that mean the most to you, decide how you want to participate, and dive in. It will help; it will also enrich your life. It’s way better than just having new shoes.

