

MINDFUL BUYING

Aware of the damage and suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I resolve to be aware of how what I purchase or consume affects people, animals, plants and my planet.

Imagine living just before the industrial revolution really got going. Imagine you were a man, a regular guy. Now, check in your imaginary closet: how many hats do you have? It would not be hard to imagine that you only have two. One of your hats would be your everyday, go outside and go to work hat. The other hat would be your special chapeau, worn only on special occasions, like going to church on Sunday or for formal events. You didn't need more than two hats, so you only had two hats. Now, imagine the pre-industrial you checking out your modern closet: how many hats do you own today?

Once the industrial revolution started to change society, with rising incomes and cheaper prices, we could suddenly afford more than what we needed, we could afford what we wanted as well. Until the 1800s fulfilling wants was something only the elite, royalty, the very well-off were able to afford.

Being able to afford what we wanted gave rise to a new society, the consumer society. Now, the consumer was king. And whatever kings want, they get - and when they get everything they want, are they satisfied, are they happy? Ah, no not really; it seems when people get what they want, they only seem to increase their wants and start to want more. If the fulfilling of wants, of desires, was the key to happiness, our society would be the happiest society ever found on earth.

By the end of the 18th century, an illusion had crept over Western society and a new mythos took hold. This new myth taught that buying things was the key to fulfillment. The more things we acquire, the more successful and happy we will all be. We just need more. And more.

In 1925 the USA President Calvin Coolidge said, "The chief business of the American people is business." He went on to observe that, "The man who builds a factory, builds a temple. The man who works there worships there."

What a change! Prior to this new mythos, people found their joy and their spiritual fulfillment within the family, the community or their temple or church. Today, we are told that we must look to commerce to fulfill our deepest needs and longings.

The Mythos of Our Economy

Let's re-examine the myth more carefully. We have briefly looked at this in the section called Mindful Consuming: now we take a closer look. We are told often and loudly that our economy must be strong. Fair enough. Let's look closer and ask, "why do we need a strong economy?" The answer, "so that we can buy everything we want." Now that seems like a reasonable statement.

Our economy must be strong so that we can buy everything we want.

Let's look even closer and ask the next question, "Why do we need to buy everything we want?" The not surprising answer, but never spoken, is "So that the economy will be strong." Here we see the circular illogic of the myth fully exposed.

We need to be able to buy everything we want so that the economy will be strong.

The only reason we need a strong economy is so we can fulfill every desire, even though wise people know fulfilling desires will not lead to happiness. If fulfilling desires doesn't lead to happiness, why do we need to desire so much? We need desire so that our economy will be strong.

When looked at from outside this cycle, the illogic of this approach is obvious - but it is only obvious to those who have "woken up". To those trapped in the cycle, this seems very reasonable.

It does seem unbelievable that we could have deliberately created a society that pretends that consumption is the key to happiness. But we did. Here is a quotation from a retailing analyst in the 1950s, Victor Lebow.

Our enormously productive economy ... demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption ... We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing rate.
Journal of Retailing, Spring 1955

If you buy into the logic of the economy/desire myth, then it make sense to use up resources and throw things away so that you can use up more resources...and since desires are unquenchable, we need to do this faster and faster. If you sit outside the myth and see the illogic in this approach to life, you can easily see that, given a finite amount of resources on our planet, the disposable society cannot last long.

In Buddhist mythology there are poor creatures called pretas, or hungry ghosts. These wretched creatures are ghosts who are consumed by the desire to eat. They have huge empty bellies, so they are always hungry but they have tiny throats so that they can't consume very much at all. Their entire existence is made up of vainly trying to fill their bellies, but they can't and they suffer so much. That is what happens when desires become more important than needs.

Of course, people need to be able to meet their needs, but do we need to try to meet every desire? Obviously not: consumption does not create happiness. Our ancestors were able to find joy, love and a sense of belonging and purpose without the drive to consume endlessly. But, in our new society, this need drives the whole developed world.

Consumers are the new kings, but only if they keep consuming. The question and the challenge for the new economy became, "how to get people to keep buying even when all their needs were met?" How do we get people to want things that they don't really need. As Paul Maser of Lehman Brothers said in 1924,

We must shift America from a needs- to a desires- culture. People must be trained to desire, to want new things, even before the old have been entirely consumed. We must shape a new mentality. Man's desire must overshadow his needs.

The way to make a man's desire overshadow his needs involved a new form of communication, called public relations. We need only examine one example to show how the art of public relations was used to create desire even when the product being promoted was distinctly unneeded. This example involves a one-time partner of Paul Maser, a man named Edward Bernays, the Father of Spin.

The Dark Side of Public Relations



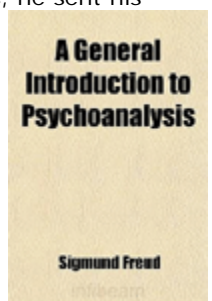
In the early 1900's, Edward Bernays was a publicist for stars visiting Broadway. He did his job so well that we can still remember many of his clients almost a hundred years later: people like Enrico Caruso, Nijinsky and Ziegfeld. Bernays was so good that, when the USA decided to join the First World War, he was invited to join the Committee on Public Information (CPI), the unofficial propaganda arm of the US Government.

The CPI's role was to convince Americans to support the war. It did this by demonizing the Germans and fomented suspicion of fellow citizens and promoted censorship at home. Journalists, artists and filmmakers were all employed to spread made up stories and slanted viewpoints, all in an effort to "stir up emotions and provoke hatred of Germany."

After the war, Bernays worked with the American Peace Commission in Paris. While in Europe, Bernays visited his uncle who lived in Vienna. His uncle complained that, because of the war, good cigars were hard to find in Austria. Once Bernays came back to the States, he sent his uncle a box of Cuban cigars. In return, his uncle sent Bernays a copy of his new book, a General Introduction to Psychoanalysis. His uncle was Sigmund Freud.

In Freud's writing, Bernays found an explanation of why people did things that on the surface seemed irrational. Bernays learned that it was possible to tap into a person's unconscious mind and create desires that went beyond simple needs.

With his success in promoting the war to the American public, Bernays decided he could do the same thing in peacetime. However, he knew that he couldn't call this propaganda, because that word had a negative connotation, so he created a new term. Bernays started the Center for Public Relations in New York. One



example, out of many of Bernay's "successes" is sufficient to illustrate how a few determined men could make desires more important than needs for everyone in modern society.

Bernays was approached in the late 1920's but the head of the American Tobacco Company, George Washington Hill. Hill had a problem: the tobacco industry was only tapping into half the cigarette market in America. While it was true that most men in America smoked, no women smoked. Hill wanted Bernays to change that. Bernays agreed to take on the assignment, as long as he could use a few Freudian psychoanalysts to interview women and find out why they didn't smoke. These interviews were the precursors of today's focus groups.

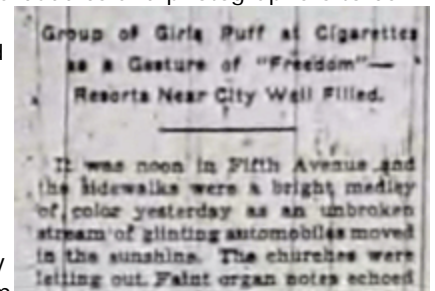


The Freudian analysts reported that women equated cigarettes with the male phallus. When they watch a group of men puffing at cigarettes, what they really saw were men waving their penises around. And, as Freud declared, all women secretly were envious of penises and wanted their own. Bernays decided to work out a way for women to equate smoking with having their own penises, their own political power.

At the time, the strongest feminine political movement was the Suffrage movement. Women had just won the right to vote in the States, but they were far from equal to men. Bernay's concocted a stunt: he was famous for his stunts. He arranged for a group of young debutantes to disrupt the yearly Easter parade in New York City. He arranged for his media buddies and photographers to be on hand for the protest, which he said was going to be staged by some

Suffragettes. This was not to be a protest by some young women but by political statement by the best-known woman's movement in America.

At a signal from Bernays, the debutantes marched into the parade and disrupted it. When the media came to talk to them, the young women took out cigarettes, which they had hidden in their clothing. They lit up the cigarettes and in total defiance to the custom of the day, smoked right in front of the reporters. While cameras captured the moment, the reporters asked the obvious question, "Why are you girls smoking cigarettes?" The women, trained by Bernays, replied



"These are not cigarettes, these are Freedom



Torches!"

In this single stunt, Bernays linked smoking to women's emancipation. While the Suffrage movement was popular with most women in America, few would dare show open support for her sisters on the front line. Now, all women had a simple way to show their support for the struggle.

They could start smoking in public. And they did.

This simple but highly effective propaganda technique, of linking a woman's independence to smoking cigarettes, was used for several decades by tobacco companies (note the advertisement on the right for Virginia Slims). Yes, women have

come a long way. But these torches of freedom, of course, were not torches of happiness or freedom. Instead of lifting women up to equality with men, it dragged them down to equality with men. Now women and men were equally free to inflict terrible diseases upon themselves, all because it was good for the tobacco business and thus our economy. Just ask Debi Austin, a laryngectomy survivor, who is so addicted to tobacco that she has to smoke through the hole in her throat left from her surgery to remove throat cancer caused by her smoking. She is a liberated woman, thanks to Bernays, and the power of advertising and public relations, or as it was originally called, propaganda.

Nobody needs to smoke. Many people want to smoke. It is not rational to want to do something that has a high chance of killing you, ruin your health, and cost you significant amounts of money along the way. No addiction is rational. The darkest power of advertising is its ability to make us do things that are not rational and that are not in our best interests. John Kenneth Galbraith, a prominent social critic and economist from the 1950's and later noted,

... advertising by producers is increasingly needed to make affluent consumers keep buying their products

... the raw power of electronic mass advertising [is] capable, with enough money, of artificially creating demand for products that consumers had no idea they wanted or needed."



I'll never forget the people who helped me get cigarettes when I was a kid.

-Debi, started smoking at 23. Had cancer surgery removed at 42.

Advertising can be good or bad depending upon which of two objectives it is being used for. Advertising, at its best, informs people about what is possible, and leaves to them the choice of what to do. Advertising, in its darker guise, is used to manipulate people: to motivate you on an unconscious level to do things that are not be in your best interests. Since the appeal is made to your unconscious mind, no choice is involved.

Think back to ads you have been subjected to. Review in your mind billboards and other forms of media communications. Recall the ads you watched in the last election, as one specific exercise. Ask yourself, were these ads meant to inform me, or to conform me. You inform citizens, you conform consumers. Were the appeals for our votes targeted to our fears and desires, or to our ability to make informed, rational choices?

We have a real dilemma: as people who are concerned about the state of the environment and the consequences that are upon us now from our mass consumption and desire-driven society, how do we protect ourselves from the ignoble use of advertising and public relations? There are solutions. One is called mindfulness. Another is called contentment.

Mindfulness Revisited

A health-conscious person is mindful of what she puts in her body. She is mindful of what she eats. She knows that, if she eats junk, her body will turn into junk. She will become sick or just vaguely unwell. This awareness of what we allow into our body needs to be extended to what we allow into our minds. We need to be mindful of what we watch, read, and listen to. We need to use the same care that we take to avoid junk food, and also avoid consuming junk thoughts.

Junk food is characterized by empty calories that stress the body and additives that harm us. Healthy food, by contrast, nourishes the body. Junk thoughts similarly contain harmful additives and empty calories. They stress and harm us. Healthy thoughts and healthy forms of communications nourish us.

We must be awake: we must not allow harmful advertising and propaganda to enter our minds. What we allow ourselves to watch on TV, what media we choose to read, what radio programs we choose to listen to, all of these may contain high levels of junk food for the mind. We need to read the labels, and reject any food that is unhealthy for our bodies. We need to review the media we consume and reject any forms that are unhealthy for our minds.

Cutting out junk thoughts will have a very dramatic effect on your mental and emotional health. Stop watching so much TV. Reduce your consumption of newspapers. Avoid magazines. Don't listen to talk radio. If you reduce the junk food going into your mind, you will start to notice fewer and fewer cravings. In place of the need to constantly be doing things, to be buying things, to be going places, you may notice a growing sense of ease. A peaceful feeling will start to manifest. As this inner peace grows, unpolluted by all the junk thoughts you have been feeding your mind, another feeling will start to blossom. You will start to feel contentment.

Contentment

Contentment is the key to overcoming the subliminal effects of the dark side of advertising. Contentment is a mindfulness

practice that we apply internally. When we are driven by desire or even fear, we are internally off-balance. We can never be happy when we are in a state of fear or longing. Happiness can only arise when there is contentment, and contentment is only available right here in the present moment. Or, as Rabbi Schwartz once remarked,

True happiness is wanting what you already have!

Does purchasing something create lasting happiness? Certainly not - at best it gives you a "hit" of pleasure just as any addicted person gets when he gets his drug of choice. But this brief buzz quickly wears off and often leads to the counter-feeling of "buyer's remorse". Why did I buy that? Why did I eat that? I feel sick now...

True happiness cannot be purchased...the consumer society was never designed to make us happy; it was designed to make us wealthy - the owner of lots and lots of stuff. In fact - if consuming created happiness, then we would no longer need to buy anything more.

Happiness means being happy the way you are and with what you already have! If you are happy with the way you are and what you already have, you won't be motivated to buy anything else. That would be bad for the economy, so PR and advertising is designed specifically to make sure you never feel happy for long, but that you are constantly in a state of craving and want.

For the scientifically minded, who love equations, here is another way of saying the same thing.

$$\text{Happiness} = \text{Contentment/Desire}$$

If your contentment is high, so is your happiness. If your desire is low, your happiness is high. The less you desire, the happier you will be. If you reach the state of a Buddha or a saint, you may find that your desires cease to be: desire becomes zero. In that case, your happiness will be infinite, or at least indefinable. You will be indefinitely happy.

The Buddha long ago recognized this link between happiness and desire, which he called craving. He listed craving as one of the five main causes of suffering. Fulfillment of desire is not the problem nor is the mere possession of goods. The problem, our suffering, arises when we cling to possessions and when craving takes hold of us. Like the hungry ghosts mentioned earlier, cravings can never be completely satisfied. They are endless. We need to be mindful of how we are feeling so that we can short-circuit our subliminally induced cravings before they turn into unfulfilling actions.

A more modern Buddha said something very similar. Mahatma Gandhi said,

"The earth provides enough to satisfy everyman's needs, but not for everyman's greed."

He went on to warn us,

"God forbid India should take to industrialism after the manner of the West
... It would strip the world bare like locusts."

Unfortunately, India and China have taken after industrialism in the manner of the west, and the world is being stripped bare.



The way to avoid the dark side of propaganda, of advertising and public relations is to wake up. I need to wake up to the realization that I already have everything I need. I may not have everything I want, but I never will. Wanting is the way of the hungry ghosts, and the way to suffering. Practice contentment: think of what you already have and realize how you have everything you need. When you feel happy with what you have, you won't feel the need to consume. Practice being mindful of what you allow into your mind: avoid the mental junk food offered to you on a daily basis.

Wake up to the feelings you get when you are sad, unhappy, frustrated, angry ... if the idea comes into your mind that shopping or buying something will relieve your condition, you are responding to the dark side, you are giving in to the propagandist's agenda. Shopping when hungry, bored or depressed is never a cure for what ails you. What you are missing is contentment.

Of course, an economy is important ...we do have needs to be met, people need jobs, and a healthy economy can help meet our needs, but in comparison to the challenge facing us environmentally, the current form of economy we practice today can not be our highest priority. Remember too, getting everything we want is not the way to happiness...we can't buy happiness...happiness requires deeper work. We need to wake up and notice the difference between our need and our greed, between our need and our desire.

One final word on the economy we have, versus the economy we could have. The following comes from Paul Hawken and it is part of a commencement address he gave to students at the University of Portland in May of 2009.

The living world is not "out there" somewhere, but in your heart. What do we know about life? In the words of biologist Janine Benyus, life creates the conditions that are conducive to life. I can think of no better motto for a future economy. We have tens of thousands of abandoned homes without people and tens of thousands of abandoned people without homes. We have failed bankers advising failed regulators on how to save failed assets. We are the only species on the planet without full employment. Brilliant. We have an economy that tells us that it is cheaper to destroy earth in real time rather than renew, restore, and sustain it. You can print money to bail out a bank but you can't print life to bail out a planet. At present we are stealing the future, selling it in the present, and calling it gross domestic product. We can just as easily have an economy that is based on healing the future instead of stealing it. We can either create assets for the future or take the assets of the future. One is called restoration and the other exploitation. And whenever we exploit the earth we exploit people and cause untold suffering. Working for the earth is not a way to get rich, it is a way to be rich.

This is a Test!

Where did your last bottle of Shiraz come from? Did you buy a bottle from Australia? Australia Shiraz is very good. Did you know that there is some very good Californian Shiraz as well? For people living in North America, that bottle of Ozzie wine was flown halfway around the world. Wine is heavy. Bottles are heavy. It takes a lot of energy to ship wine from Oz to America. Shipping has a huge carbon footprint. Remember, transportation of goods and people accounts for 13% of all greenhouse gas emissions.

From where I am writing, in Vancouver on the west coast of Canada, I know that there is British Columbian Shiraz as well. California is certainly closer to me than Australia, but B.C.'s Okanagan Valley is even closer than California. Now, I can hear the purists complaining already, "Australian Shiraz tastes better!" I once took a wine tasting course and was able to develop my senses to a high level. I was finally able to detect the difference between red wine and white wine. Alright, perhaps I am not able to appreciate the wonderful bouquet of an Ozzie Shiraz compare to B.C. Shiraz, but to me there is not that much of a difference. In any case, is the difference worth the price that the environment is paying? Is it really so important to you to have the "best" Shiraz that you have to get it from halfway around the world?



Can you tell me why you chose your brand of Shiraz? Did you really purchase it for taste reasons, or was there some invisible hand guiding your selection? Did the thought that Ozzie Shiraz is the best move you to buy it, or did you really feel that it was the best? Or was it the cheapest Shiraz? It may have been priced cheaply, but its environmental cost is the highest. Aware now of the consequences of your choice, in regards to the carbon footprint of the wine you are buying, is the taste really so different that you need the bottle from far far away, or could you be content with a local offering?



Could you be content without ... (fill in the blank)... ?

This is the key question that you can ask yourself over and over. Every time you feel a need to consume, to buy, to travel somewhere, ask yourself, "could I be content without this?" Let's put this to another test.

You are thirsty. Which do you need?

Do you need Perrier from France, Pellegrino from Italy, or Aquafina? Of course, this is a trick question. As David Suzuki once said, if you can't drink your tap water, what you need is a new mayor!

Again, consider where these bottles come from. Water is heavy. Glass bottles are heavy. Do you really need to pay for water that has come all the way from France or Italy? Do you really think that French water is better than your water? Or, do you really need Toronto tap water, which in Canada is where Aquafina water comes from (at least for most of the country.) Why do we feel that we need to buy water in bottles? This is not a need, it is a desire created by clever marketing and PR.

"Bottled water is largely a market based on anxiety!"

Gina Solomon, National Resources Defense Council senior scientist

The idea that we need to buy water in a bottle has been implanted in our minds. A propaganda machine successfully convinced us that tap water is not healthy for us and that only bottled water is safe. Ironically, the government quality controls over our tap water quality are far higher than over bottled water.

Is bottled water safer than tap water? Not really. The plastic bottles that water is shipped in can leak harmful chemicals into the water, such as BPA. Government does not control all these chemicals. The warmer the bottle gets, the more leakage occurs. When the bottles are stored in warehouses, the temperature can go up to 30C. The temperatures in the trucks used to ship the bottles can go higher than 40C. The temperature in the back of the store where the bottles await stocking on the shelves can also be as high as 40C. And once you buy the bottle, many people store them in their cars or cupboards where again the temperatures can be quite warm. Tests of the quality of the water are usually done at the bottling factory, but most of the chemical leakage can occur when the bottles are heated, which occurs after the bottle leaves the factory. Bottled water is not healthier water.

Even if you are not worried about the health concerns and don't think that paying a buck fifty to get water that is free out of the tap is a problem, think of the environmental consequences of your buying decision. Every year, just in the USA, 28 billion plastic bottles are bought. It is a \$100 billion/year market.

(Can you imagine what great deeds we could do with \$100 billion every year?)

85% of these bottles are not recycled but end up in landfills, or worse, they end up in the oceans. It takes 17 million barrels of oil to manufacture these bottles, and then another 33 million barrels of oil to transport the water from the factories to your homes. This is 50 million barrels of oil each year just in the USA. That is more than 2 days consumption of oil for the entire transportation sector in the USA! There is a very big environmental, climate and economic cost to the myth of bottled water.



Certainly there is a convenience factor at work here too ... but that is often laziness. Everyone can take a canteen or a steel water bottle or some other container with them when they travel or are at work. Every restaurant will serve you tap water. There are water fountains around, if you look for them. Don't let convenience be an excuse. Again, I am not saying, never drink bottled water, never eat meat, never drive your car. What you do once in a while is not the problem. But if you do this all the time, that is a problem. Wake up to the fact that you are making unconscious choices, and change these into conscious decisions.

Another test: where does your food come from? You have heard the refrain, "think globally - buy locally" but, do you? Do you buy mangoes and bananas on a regular basis? Where do they come from? Ecuador? Mexico? Why not buy local apples or pears? Do you buy acai, the new super-fruit that comes all the way from Brazil, or locally grown blueberries and raspberries? These local berries are already very high in anti-oxidants. Studies have shown that the average meal travels 1,500 miles to get to your plate. You may be surprised just how far away your meat, your bread, your yoghurt has travelled to get to you.

Mindful buying will reduce the mileage that your food has to travel. All it takes is to check the label. More environmentally conscious stores will label where fruits and vegetables come from. In Vancouver, Canada most of the peas I see in the stores are from China! Pears that I would have thought were grown locally in B.C. were from Argentina! If there are no signs, take a moment and ask grocer where his produce comes from.

Become a locavore. Buying locally and buying organic will not only help our environment and the climate, it will also help your local economy and will make it easier for your community to be food self-sufficient. Local food independence is going to be very important in the future as the price of transportations rises and a lack of water in many of the bread baskets of our countries reduce their agricultural output. We can start now to grow our food independence by shopping at local farmer's markets.

The Mindful Buying Resolution

If you agree that Mindful Buying is easy and will have a big impact on our environment, you may be ready to make the following resolution.

Aware of the damage and suffering caused by unmindful consumption,
I resolve to be aware of how what I purchase or consume affects people,
animals, plants and my planet.

1. Do I need this, or simply want it?
Could I be content without it?
2. Think globally by buying locally - check where everything is produced and/or packaged
3. Check what the product is made from, and see if there are safer, less energy intensive alternatives
4. Avoid products and packaging that are not recyclable
5. Where feasible buy in bulk, or in larger quantities, and share
6. Buy organic, despite the cost ... if it is not available, ask!