

Epiphany in Aisle Number Three:
Thoughts of a Wal-Mart Shopper

Or

Why We Don't Let Dad Shop Anymore

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This paper began with a jar of Roquefort salad dressing. It centers around a transcendental journey, if you will, of how I happened to purchase an item at Wal-Mart in Hopkinsville, Kentucky on September 5, 2003. As I tried to choose among the many different multi-colored brands, I suddenly marveled at how I arrived at this point in time and space to be confronted with so many wonderful options that I never knew existed. As someone who dis-likes shopping and who goes to Wal-Mart perhaps once every two years, I stood there spellbound. Transfixed, I pondered, ‘How could this be, what kinds of miracles have taken place to create such choices?’ Alone and lost in my thoughts in aisle number three, I felt like a King. It was a special moment in time, no doubt similar to when Sir Isaac Newton was struck by a falling apple and then went on to formulate the universal laws of physics. Standing there, questions, issues, consequences, and ramifications arose that I had never dared to consider or confront. Much like an out of body experience, all the pieces starting coming together, with the realization that a Wal-Mart purchase personifies the best that civilization has to offer, nothing more, nothing less. Hopefully, this paper will convey some of the insights that occurred to me as my hand reached upward to make a routine purchase at a rural Wal-Mart. Similar to peeling back the many layers of an artichoke, we will hopefully find the heart of the experience, illustrating that such routine moments should never be taken for granted.

My first thought was, ‘Why am I shopping?’ As one who believes in Thoreau’s mantra of “simplify, simplify, simplify”, salad dressing is not a commodity that I must have to survive. My purchase was neither a luxury nor a necessity, not even an item qualifying as Amish self-sufficiency. Similarly, this was a far cry from the “Four Musts” advocated by China during the Cultural

Revolution: a bicycle, a radio, a watch, and a sewing machine. My aspirations were much more intangible. The fact that my choice was Roquefort says something about my personal values and tastes as well. In fact, as I stood before seven shelves of salad dressings that exceeded well over one hundred different brands, I wondered if society really needs this many salad dressings? As my mind flashed back to shopping with my Mother as a young boy at Herbert Gray's IGA on North Main, I wondered whatever happened to just French, Italian, and Thousand Island? Then it hit me: my contemplated action involved more than just the purchase of a food product. By going shopping, I had voluntarily but subliminally entered a psychological and marketing battlefield. Shopping was going to allow me to prove to myself and to others that I was reliant, thrifty, knowledgeable, and perhaps even generous. In a nutshell, my moment of purchase was an indication that I had power and was self-sufficient. By purchasing Roquefort dressing I was declaring my independence to the world that I enjoyed more than the basics in life. Not only was it from a foreign country but my choice showed a higher level of sophistication than my nearby Wal-Mart shoppers. My purchase demonstrated to the world, if not sub-consciously to myself, that I deserved this luxury item. Why only one hundred years ago only nobility and the aristocracy ate Roquefort dressing. By my small purchase I was making myself a part of such nobligsee. Let everyone else eat Thousand Island.

At the same time, by paying the somewhat higher price, my purchase justified the labor that I performed to purchase this higher priced item. In the big scheme of things, what was an additional fifty-five cents? As David Brooks has observed, if one is a member of an average American college educated household, he is richer than 99.9% of the human beings that have lived before. In the view of Brooks, I was "stinking rich." In another sense, the actual purchase of the item could be seen

as an inconsequential part of the transaction. Perhaps more important was the fact that, having worked hard by coming in early and staying late, I could now legitimize my labor by purchasing a tangible item. The actual act of purchase was purely symbolic; I deserved this. What I bought became inconsequential, the point was, I must purchase something. Similar to the ancient hunter who went foraging for food, coming home empty handed was unacceptable. Shopping at Wal-Mart and not bringing anything home would not have enhanced my position within my immediate clan.

Another perspective to shopping was that it promoted my need for stability in an otherwise dis-ordered world. In a world of limited material possessions but apparent unceasing demand, shopping provides an efficient distribution system for the re-allocation of wealth. Diamonds are purchased at Tiffany's, silk ties at Brooks Brothers, and a utopian belief that we live in an ordered society is available off the shelf at the nearest Wal-Mart. In the secure world of a Wal-Mart store, I was able to purchase commodities and demonstrate to my family that they were well provided for and had a quality of life unknown to prior civilizations. From a historical perspective, such a bounty of products would have been incomprehensible to ancient societies. Few if any Kingdoms have existed that offered the luxuries of one Wal-Mart store. Most people in world history have died owning less than the contents that can be carried in one Wal-Mart shopping cart.

Also, as the provider of life's necessities, I alone had the authority to choose who would benefit from my wisdom and experience. What implied message would have been sent had I purchased Roquefort lite or that Italian was now the preferred family dressing? With each purchase, the purchaser has the power to choose which items will be used to indicate to the world his family's lifestyle, taste, values, and economic standing. Gone are the days when sumptuary laws limited what a person

could own or how they would dress because of a particular social hierarchy. No longer must one dress in a particular style and act accordingly, such as an artisan, farmer, or soldier. If one wants to eat and dress like a nobleman or one in authority, he now has the freedom to do so. Never will one Wal-Mart shopper tell another, 'You do not deserve that.'

Yet in another sense, I realized that shopping was a form of competition, not only with myself but also with my immediate peers. Shopping gives us a sense of accomplishment and, once we get past the basic commodities, we shop to belong and because we want what others have. Shopping allows us to prove our individuality and uniqueness to the world. What we choose to buy is an indication to the world of our individual sovereignty. Some items are purchased not because we have any inherent need for the item but because we exercise our authority to do so. Similar to the old 'This is my castle' mentality, so long as my actions do not endanger another person my choice is absolute and un-reproachable. On a small stage, no matter our station in life, shopping allows us to experience life on a grander stage in a stable and well-ordered environment. This is the way life is supposed to be; with each purchase we are declaring to the world, we are sovereign over our own life and inferior to no one.

After contemplating 'Why do I shop?' my next question became, "Why was I shopping in a large, box-type building?" Standing in aisle number three represented a major change in shopping history that I had previously taken for granted. I did not have to barter my wares with another in an open market bazaar that would have been the case 1,000 years ago. Nor was I a participant in a travelling English country festival that would have been the case 500 years ago and only held once a year. Nor was I in a 19th century country store on the Clarksville Road reviewing only a limited number of items. (As Henry Ford initially

advertised, the Model T comes in one color, black). To the contrary, I found myself in a safe, well lit, convenient building open twenty-fours where the scarcity of goods was not an issue. Secure among strangers and confident in the currency used to transact the sale, the biggest problem was having to limit my purchase based upon my available funds. I felt “alive”, able to experience the thrill of the commercial world the same as any person in my community and the nation. The threat of discrimination, the possibility of a faulty product, or the fear of having to buy the product today because it may be gone tomorrow never entered my mind. The fear of highway robbery travelling to the store and home again was not a problem. Should I need more cash I need simply go to the in-house BB&T branch bank or charge it on my credit card. Instantaneously, I found myself in my own Las Vegas casino located in Hopkinsville. Like Las Vegas, I had money in my pocket and Wal-Mart had designed a most seductive environment for a monetary transfer to occur. Rather than a slot machine trying to entice me, I stood among shelves with innumerable products of varying quality and cost. Facing a stacked deck, the question was not what I was going to purchase but rather which item and how many?

Like a modern day Merlin, Sam Walton devoted much time and energy to enhance the possibility that my money would become his. Through the simple act of walking into a Wal-Mart store, my life became orderly, knowable, and predictable. The prices were clearly marked (no haggling), the sales staff was available but not pushy, and I was guaranteed the lowest available prices. Although often taken for granted, I was presented with the opportunity to purchase ready to wear clothing (no need to buy individual buttons, cloth . . .), already assembled products, and food products ready to eat.

To increase my willingness to purchase, I was further encouraged to freely walk the aisles with anonymity and watch what other people bought and what they believed to contain value. Without a word being said, there was an ongoing exchange of glances as all customers sized each other up within the store. It was unlikely that we would ever see each other again, but each of our purchases provided a glimpse into the lifestyle of the other and how we led our life outside the store's concrete walls. Unlike the ancient open market bazaars, my shopping locale did not necessarily serve as the forum for community gossip, but by being observant I could ascertain what items were valued by others in the community. (Whatever happened to those had to have Madras shirts and Cabbage Patch dolls?)

Standing in aisle number three, I had the freedom to imagine my life differently. Would my life change and be significantly different if I chose Kraft's Creamy Style Ranch one week and Paul Newman's Italian the next? What would others think, would I truly lose weight, would I be more attractive? My initial goal to shop for a particular item had been transformed into an experience that could change my identity. I now felt empowered to reward myself with something new for whatever bad thing might have happened to me. More important, I felt free to break away from the tribe and to define myself and to make myself feel better. Certainly I could have transformed my identity inwardly, but such a transformation would have been much too passive. Only through the acquisition of new items was I able to show the world what I truly think and believe. I do this by what I wear, how I look, what I buy, and what I eat. Without actually saying a word, I defined myself, perhaps re-defined myself, through the act of shopping. In this case by purchasing a jar of Roquefort dressing.

Unsaid to this point is the key question of, 'Do I actually need this item?' Sometimes we purchase an item because we truly need it. One buys a garden hose

to water the lawn, no other product will work. (Actually, one bought the hose when he bought the house). On the one hand, we buy items because we feel that we will miss out on something, usually items that we don't even need. My teenage daughter purchases items 'on-sale' or 'marked down' simply because they are a 'great buy'. The fact that her closet is full of shoes is proof of this 'need to buy'. Often bought on impulse, such items are purchased while shopping for an initial item that rarely has any connection to the impulse item. It is as if, once challenged with an 'On Sale' sign, we feel compelled to buy the item now rather than feel remorse in the morning. On the other hand, this 'need to buy' rather than the actual 'need of the product' is the result of changes in fashion. I have never understood who defines 'fashion' or more important why should I care. Look at me. I have on a white shirt, a blue blazer, a red tie, light colored pants, and Weejuns. Some variation of this outfit is what I wear all the time. As I tell my daughter, Weejuns are great, they are kinda brown and kinda black, so they never really go with anything but kinda go with everything. To me, function triumphs over fashion.

However, to many people, fashion is quite important and the reason many items, particularly non-essential items, are purchased. Fashion is the reason we buy goods that are obsolete before the item's useful life is over. We do not really know who defines fashion, but yet are so insecure in our current condition that we feel compelled to change the way we cut our hair, wear our ties, decorate our homes, and travel about the community. It is interesting to note that the status quo attempts to preserve its current culture and authority whereas 'new money' challenges the status quo with anything new, no matter how outrageous. Such inherent change creates a constant state of imbalance as to what is and is not fashionable, i.e. acceptable. For most people, shopping involves an intentional attempt to remain a

part of a certain group, but to do so on their own terms. (For those of us who think we are independent and not fashion-conscious, I will pay anyone in this room a dollar that has sideburns, is wearing a wide tie, lives in a ranch-style house, and drove to Athenaeum in an AMC Pacer.)

Although the concept of 'taste' has been mentioned, this concept needs to be reviewed in greater detail. 'Taste' in the big sense represents a consumer's own personal and subjective preferences. 'Taste' indicates my willingness to differentiate myself from the group and at the same time-share my definition of 'taste' with others. Like a 21st century empiricist, if my tongue, nose, eyes, and convictions tell me an item is worthwhile, then who can second-guess my judgement? I have never understood why people wear Abercrombie shirts or Vanderbilt blue jeans, but that is basically what 'taste' is, it is different for everyone. 'Taste' helps people to define their own individual lifestyle at that particular moment and point in time. It is unlikely that anyone in this room is wearing bell-bottom pants. Those of you who were marketing majors will remember the term VALS (values and lifestyles), introduced by a group of Stanford professors in 1978. This model fused psychology, sociology, and demographic data into a typology of consumer behavior. It broke the market into nine categories, with "survivors"-people who have no money to spend-on the bottom, and the "integrated"-people who have reached the consumer nirvana of having enough to spend and a firm, sane notion of how to spend it-at the top. These nine categories have since been expanded and identified American tastes into sixty-two different categories, with names such as "Winner's Circle," "Pickups and Shotguns," and "Gray Collar." Each category identifies a purchaser primarily as "outer-directed", whose pattern is to compare themselves to those just above them

on the status ladder, or “inner-directed,” consumers who value the experience of shopping over the actual good itself.

In my situation, when I left the house for Wal-Mart I just wanted to purchase a jar of Roquefort dressing, not send any type of personal or social message. Yet, the actual moment of purchase proved wrought with anxiety. Confronted with several different jars, my primary decision was simply, ‘Which jar tastes best in terms of quality and value?’ It was at this point that life became complicated. I realized that I had been pre-programmed by years of watching 77 different cable TV channels, subscribing to 6 different magazines, 3 different newspapers, 100 radio channels, internet ads, and countless billboards to develop a preference for certain ‘brands.’ Labels marked ‘Kraft’, ‘Paul Newman’, ‘Marzettis’, and ‘Hidden Valley’ competed for my attention. Unable or unwilling to ask a clerk for assistance, I wished I were back at Giles Market, I was faced with having to make this decision alone. Suddenly faced with the names of exotic labels, well-known brands, big servings, small servings, what was I to do? Wal-Mart, to my joint pleasure and angst, had presented me with too many choices of Roquefort dressing and comparable alternatives. What previously had been a blessing, finding myself in a shopper’s paradise, was now a burden. I alone had to make the decision and fight through the sixty-two different categories of consumer behavior at this point in time to make a purchase of Roquefort dressing. Suddenly I realized why most men find shopping to be stressful and not a good use of time. This was women’s work, as most women view shopping as a great responsibility and an opportunity to spend the household’s income in the best manner possible. Overcome with doubt, I reached for the most expensive jar, but feeling guilty that this was perhaps the chicken way out, did price alone indicate that the brand tasted the best? Unsure, I nonetheless made the purchase and headed for the checkout counter. To assuage

my buyer's remorse, on the way to the counter I purchased a bag of malted milk balls with a name brand, confident that my psyche could recover. Thus, armed with one product that I needed and an impulse item, my trip to the market remained a positive experience.

But on the way to the counter, a second epiphany occurred. Like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid watching the relentless pursuit of the Pinkerton detectives cross the Western plain, I wondered almost out loud, "Who are these guys?" I realized that Wal-Mart has had quite a social and economic impact on Hopkinsville. Above my head was a banner advertising Hopkinsville Milling products, Flynn Enterprises (Hopkinsville's largest employer) was featured in Wal-Mart television commercials several years ago, Kentucky Derby Hosiery sells socks to Wal-Mart, and many local workers gained employment at the nearby distribution center when it opened several months ago. Other local businesses with strong ties to Wal-Mart include Trace Industries, Knight & Hale, Continental Mills, and the produce of local Mennonite farmers. And Hopkinsville is only one of the 3,234 communities in which Wal-Mart has an American presence (an additional 1,170 stores are in foreign countries). I soon realized that Wal-Mart is a \$244,000,000,000 a year operation that is the largest non-government employer in the United States. Wal-Mart is the largest company in the world as measured by annual revenues. Wal-Mart's computer is second only to the one located in the Pentagon. The truth is, Hopkinsville is like most communities across America, "Hopkinsville is a Wal-Mart kind of town." Based upon my earlier thoughts, I agreed. For most people in most purchases, the need for diamonds and silk ties are not an everyday purchase. Rather, I had just been presented with more items that I knew existed, they were competitively priced, and I had done so without leaving my community. I realized that Wal-Mart exercises tremendous leverage over its

suppliers to maintain such low prices and those who fail are quickly replaced. From an academic standpoint, I realized that Wal-Mart is often used in college courses as paragons of market strategy, pricing, cost structure, promotion, transportation, distribution, and inventory management. Like our own Mother or Grandmother, Wal-Mart has assumed the role of loco parentis in keeping all costs low so that products can be purchased for less. By walking into a Wal-Mart, we have passively, if not subliminally, defaulted our ideal opinions of quality and value to whatever products the Wal-Mart buyers from Bentonville, Arkansas have selected for our review. Perhaps Wal-Mart has not given me exactly what I want, but it has presented it to me in a most efficient manner. As one college professor observed after studying Wal-Mart for several years, "They have an almost single-minded focus on reducing costs. It's imbued throughout the organization. They are very stingy when they buy for America and distribute products for America." (As an example of Wal-Mart's frugality, executives continue to share hotel rooms while travelling on company business.) It is hard to believe that Wal-Mart first stated in Bentonville, Arkansas in 1962, only forty-one years ago. Some have persuasively argued that the economic impact on America is greater from Bentonville than Silicon Valley.

However, the opportunity for me to purchase numerous products has not occurred without criticism. Wal-Mart has often been criticized for decimating the retail trade in many Main Streets across America. Gone are many of the leaders of our community, not only from a business but also from the leadership previously provided the community by these business owners. Cayce-Yost, Arnold's, Giles Market, and Keach Furniture are only a few of the businesses that have ceased to exist in Hopkinsville. How many United Way, civic organization leadership positions, bank board directorships, or school board positions are held by Wal-

Mart employees? Now, this is not meant as a criticism, for most Wal-Mart management live in a community for only a few years and are then transferred to another locale. Wal-Mart's business model demands that their time and attention be singularly focused on managing their specific stores. The profitability of his Wal-Mart store is of primary concern, not the furtherance of the local community. But this shift in emphasis represents a preference by the local consumers as well, preferring personal convenience and low cost to leadership in the community. As noted by Professor David Anderson of Centre College, Wal-Mart brings advantages and dis-advantages to a community: "It allows poor people to buy food and other necessities. That's the good thing. The bad thing is that it erodes downtowns and eliminates nicer stores that have better service and pay their workers better." The plight of a typical minimum wage earner and employee of Wal-Mart is well characterized in Barbara Ehrenreich's "Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America." The author chronicles her attempt to support herself on the wages paid as a clerk while working at a non-union Wal-Mart for a month. Wal-Mart has worked hard to maintain a non-union workforce and is a major reason that Wal-Mart is able to offer "Low Prices--Always." At the same time, Wal-Mart is the only discount retailer to be named as one of America's "100 Best Places to Work" in three of the last four years.

Another criticism is that although many options are offered, the items are standardized, downscaled, and of poor quality. Professor Marshall Blonsky of the New School and Parsons School of Design, both in Manhattan, observes that shopping at Wal-Mart is a "heartless experience", where "America's least common denominators [are] gathered together." Professor Blonsky adds, "It proves something I have been trying to teach for years: the indifferent equivalence of everything with everything else, for an audience that has no concern for that

difference, and no discernment of quality.” However, this observation by a Manhattan professor is ironic, for it completely misses the genius of Sam Walton. Wal-Mart’s expansion from rural Arkansas was never an attempt to become the tastemaker of America. Wal-Mart’s goal has always been to provide basic products at the lowest available cost in the most efficient manner possible. Wal-Mart’s philosophy is not to provide people with something that they did not previously want, like diamonds or silk ties, but rather the lowest price on a commodity, like Kodak film. In a major statement in support of democracy, Wal-Mart views its customers as discerning consumers and not gullible dupes. Arguably, one Wal-Mart store is all that is needed as proof that capitalism is the most efficient economic model, and that empowering a nation’s masses for their own economic benefit is preferable to communism, socialism, or Nazism. If only we could build several hundred Wal-Mart stores in Afghanistan and Iraq.

What men like Walton and other contemporary retailers have realized is the fact that we always want more regardless of age, sex, or nationality. As observed by Simon Potter as early as 1889, “[One’s] standard of life is determined not so much by what a man has to enjoy, as by the rapidity with which he tires of any one pleasure . . . To have a high standard of life means to enjoy a pleasure intensely and tire of it quickly.” Basically, people in most Western countries have more than they need and will never have all they might want. Being somewhat pessimistic, perhaps our contemporary societies have reached the point where we basically work to consume, trapped in a cycle of false hope and inevitable disappointment. With each season, fashion leads us to purchase more and different items than what we already possess.

Finally, as I walked toward the checkout counter, I wondered if I should have felt guilty for the social costs created by Wal-Mart rather than the economic cost

that I was getting ready to pay. What should the significance that Wal-Mart aided in the demise of downtown Hopkinsville, probably does not pay it's workers what they deserve, or that some of the products might have been made overseas by an under age worker play in the purchase of my particular product? Should I care whether Wal-Mart allows its gay employees to have the same employee benefits as same-sex couples? Unfortunately, at the moment of purchase, my interests were deemed of higher importance than those of others and society. Perhaps this was self-serving, but can there really be any other way to purchase an item? As hopefully presented in this paper, the purchase of a commodity is actually an extremely complex process. Whatever my competing economic, psychological, marketing, and even emotional concerns were at the time, they must all be balanced. When push comes to shove, the self-interested preference of the individual consumer prevails. This is obviously what the majority of consumers in America have demonstrated with their feet and pocketbooks when given a Wal-Mart option in their community.

Going forward, it will be interesting to see how many Wal-Mart stores and shoppers the world's resources can support. How many product choices does a consumer have the right to expect? What will happen when a consumer can purchase any product and any brand at a lower cost over the Internet? Will consumers move in this direction and away from Wal-Mart over the next forty years, just as they moved from Main Street America? Will the consequence be that our local manufactures will find themselves unable to compete as more products are manufactured overseas in countries like China, Mexico, and Africa? Will the employees who now work in our manufacturing plants find themselves unable to purchase goods at the local Wal-Mart? Will we become a nation not of Wal-Mart but of Dollar General stores? Will our indoctrination of always having to have the

lowest price shift America from a manufacturing to a service economy? If so, who will buy the products and can they maintain their household income after having to learn new jobs and trades? Who knows, but it will be interesting to watch and see where the shopping preferences of America lead our country.

And just think, all this began with the purchase of a jar of Roquefort salad dressing. It is for thoughts such as these that my family will no longer allow me to shop alone at Wal-Mart anymore.