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Consumerism, and the Decline of Intimacy and Community

The predominant culture relentlessly promotes two things. One is economic success. Endless cues, incentives and sanctions push us prepare for a career as we grow up and to devote enormous amounts of energy to it when we come of age.

The other is consumerism. Our children are so inundated with toys that skipping a rock, kicking a can down the street, and climbing trees are becoming lost arts. And, throughout our lives, the opportunities to shop – promoted by nonstop ads and our uncritical celebration of the latest ingenious gadgets and most expensive clothes, cars, and houses – are, quite literally, endless.

In this Reflection, I describe the ways in which this consumer mindset infiltrates our lives and hamstring our efforts to live differently and better.

Several years ago I participated in a service trip. Early one morning, our hosts took us, in open-air trucks, to work on an organic farm. We returned to our guesthouse to a lunch of bologna and cheese sandwiches and macaroni salad. As I ate my sandwich and talked with my companions, I noticed how good I felt. My body had a wonderful ache from the work. My spirit felt energized from the shared experience and solidarity I felt with my companions. Even my sandwich seemed tasty.

Our group consisted of people like me, privileged North Americans thoroughly habituated to a consumer-oriented way of living. So, as eager and expert consumers, we planned a dinner that night at one of the fanciest restaurant in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Drinks were served on a gorgeous lawn where peacocks quietly grazed. When there was a sudden downpour, waiters with oversized umbrellas appeared in an instant to escort us to our tables. The place settings were elegant in every detail, the food both perfectly presented and delicious.

The stark juxtaposition of lunch and dinner stunned me. Sitting at dinner I realized that the seductive beauty of what others had created had lulled me into a state of passivity. With respect to lunch and the events that preceded it, I was an active participant in creating my experience. At dinner, however, I reverted to a habitual consumer posture that I know so well. In that role, I was the passive recipient of someone else's creation. I was substantially inert; infantilized.

This posture of passivity flows inevitably out of our engrained habits as consumers. Our implicit expectation is that most everything we need has been prepared by others and can be purchased. Our only job is to choose this product or that one.

What makes this mindset so problematic is that it extends far beyond clothes, cars, and electronics. It permeates virtually every area of our lives.

Take intimate romantic relationship, for example. Properly conceived, it is a journey. People are drawn to a partner by back of the brain “love” chemicals. But, then, the success of the relationship is measured by the partners’ ability to heal and grow together; to share themselves and express their needs in contactful ways; to see the other and stretch to meet that person’s needs.

The norm that exists in our consumer-oriented culture is, however, very different. Making no distinction between people and things, it encourages us to evaluate both solely in terms of what they can do for us. So choosing a partner becomes an exercise in comparative shopping, not very different from the search for the right car or house. If our partner meets, and continues to meet our criteria, we keep him. If he falls short, he is replaced. And, sadly, this outlook often persists even after children are introduced into the equation.

Habitually adopting this approach, we pay an incalculable price. Our neurobiology makes intimate connection an indispensable part of our self-regulatory structures, both physically and emotionally. For that reason, we need to persevere in our relationships, not only with our intimate partners but also with family, friends, co-workers, and others with whom we share our lives. There is no other path, if we ever hope to develop the intimacy that sustains us.

But with our consumer oriented focus on “what can you do for me,” we squander these opportunities for intimacy. Instead of doing the hard work of relationship, we move on. In the end, our relationships are limited and, far too often, transient. The close, mutual cooperative, and enduring connections with others, so essential to our emotional well-being, perpetually elude us.

People who take this approach to relationship often think they are taking charge of their lives. But this belief is illusory. Like me – sitting at a banquet prepared by others – their stance is passive. Because, as consumers, they can only take – or leave – what is offered, their options are effectively limited to what is offered. There is no opportunity to struggle, learn and grow in the crucible of relationship; to be active participants in the creation of mutual and authentic relationships.

This same process – at work in our intimate relationships – has massively infected our larger communities as well. Robert Putnam, in Bowling Alone, documents a massive decline in our communal involvements in the last half of the 20th century. Among its many causes is our pervasive consumer mindset.

Most of us have become mere consumers of communal organizations, asking only if they can contribute to our lives. What is missing is a sense of ownership; a felt need to contribute to their creation and perpetuation. True to our consumer-oriented mindset, few

of us feel any obligation to volunteer for the many necessary but thankless jobs that keep these organizations alive and vibrant.

This same process shows up in the workplace. While managements' lack of loyalty to workers is no surprise, the extent to which workers now seem to accept this point of view is astonishing. Unions have been in decline for 50 years or more and our pervasive consumerism is one of the less appreciated causes.

The mainstream culture's engrained perspective is that workers – like virtually everything else in our society – are mere economic commodities, to be bought and sold. Most workers, implicitly accepting this perspective, take for granted management's unfettered right to treat them in any way they see fit. The idea of resisting management's dictates – or, even more farfetched, organizing with others to resist – seems beyond most workers' imagination.

Finally, this same phenomenon thoroughly defines our politics. Instead of being active participants in co-creating our public policies, we look for a magic candidate – still another type of product – to cure our ills. Barack Obama's 2008 election is a perfect example of this process. Peter Gabel, in a recent article in *Tikkun* magazine, identifies its flaws:

A major weakness with that 2008 moment is that it was constituted by 6 months of watching Obama on television, by an overreliance by each of us in our separate space on watching that remarkable smile and listening to that sometimes-transcendent oratory. It was not constituted out of our own social movement, emerging from our own idealistic actions over time through which we stitched ourselves together in real social relations. It was mainly a cheer led by one person through TV. Without his "mediation," we didn't exist.

Understanding the breadth of consumerism's influence, and its effects, is an essential first step in coming to grips with it. Beyond that, we are in a war of attrition. The only way to wean ourselves from these sorts of deeply engrained, self-defeating mindsets is to systematically practice new habits of living that more effectively serve our purposes. And that, of course, is what Radical Decency seeks to provide.