

Shopping for Identity
a sermon delivered by Rev. Rebecca F. Benner
at the Accotink Unitarian Universalist Church
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READING from *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less* by Barry Schwartz

Scanning the shelves of my local supermarket recently, I found 85 different varieties and brands of crackers. As I read the packages, I discovered that some brands had sodium, others didn't. Some were fat-free, others weren't. They came in big boxes and small ones. They came in normal size and bite size. There were mundane saltines and exotic and expensive imports.

My neighborhood supermarket is not a particularly large store, and yet next to the crackers were 285 varieties of cookies. Among chocolate chip cookies there were 21 options. Among Goldfish (I don't know whether to count them as cookies or crackers), there were 20 different varieties to choose from.

...I could choose from among 230 soup offerings, including 29 different chicken soups. There were 16 varieties of instant mashed potatoes, 75 different instant gravies, 120 different pasta sauces. Among the 175 different salad dressings were 16 "Italian" dressings, and if none of them suited me I could choose from 15 extra-virgin olive oils and 42 vinegars and make my own. There were 275 varieties of cereal, including 24 oatmeal options and 7 "Cheerios" options. Across the aisle were 64 different kinds of barbecue sauce and 175 types of tea bags.

Heading down the homestretch, I encountered 22 types of frozen waffles. And just before the checkout...there was a salad bar that offered 55 different items. (p. 9-10)

Freedom to choose has what might be called *expressive* value. Choice is what enables us to tell the world who we are and what we care about. This is true of something as superficial as the way we dress. The clothes we choose are a deliberate expression of taste, intended to send a message. "I'm a serious person," or "I'm a sensible person," or "I'm rich." Or maybe even "I wear what I want and I don't care what you think about it." To express yourself, you need an adequate range of choices.

The same is true of almost every aspect of our lives as choosers. The food we eat, the cars we drive, the houses we live in, the music we listen to, the books we read, the hobbies we pursue, the charities we contribute to, the demonstrations we attend—each of these choices has an expressive function, regardless of its practical importance.

SERMON

When I was in junior high school, I, like so many others, was obsessed with having the right clothes. I rarely did, but I so much wanted the same designer jeans that it seemed like everyone else had. I wanted the same style shirts, the popular sneakers, and of course the right hair cut. I desperately wanted to belong, to be accepted, and what I bought and what I wore seemed to be the key. I thought these things, and the belonging they would bring me, would make me happy.

My sister took the opposite approach—buying clothes and doing her makeup in ways that she felt would set her apart. She dressed all in black, wore lots of dark makeup, and pierced her nose and eyebrow. I know won't surprise you that, though this did set her apart from the majority of

those around her, it also brought her belonging in a smaller but in many ways no less conformist group.

Ours is certainly not an unusual story. The particular styles of clothing, haircuts, accessories, or gadgets that signal our belonging change through the years, but the desire for acceptance and the superficial ways that is achieved remain.

Ideally, as we get older, we get more comfortable with who we are. We are more willing to reveal and express our *uniqueness* through how we look, what we wear, and all those different ways we signal to the world who we are. We make our choices based less on what everyone else is doing and more on what feels true to ourselves.

Ideally, we no longer buy into the message that we need a particular look or a particular thing in order to belong, in order to be happy. The growing prevalence of plastic surgery, Botox treatments, extremely expensive designer clothing, and weight-loss schemes, however, seem to say maybe we haven't changed as much as we would like.

There are any number of important issues tied up in this, but the two I want to explore with you this morning are those of identity and of happiness. How do we know who we are, and how do we communicate that to the world? And how does that contribute, or not, to our happiness?

There are any number of ways we can frame our identity. Through our relationships—thinking of ourselves as husband, wife, partner, mother, father, friend. Through our work—as minister, lawyer, teacher, fisherman, builder. Through our personal qualities—as smart, funny, thoughtful, creative, hard-working. Through our hobbies—as amateur pilot, bridge player, scrapbooker. Through the group identities we consider our own—as a Unitarian Universalist, an African American, a gay man, a conservative. For some of us, our identity, at least for a time, may be dependent of something that has happened in our lives; we might think of ourselves as a cancer patient, a widow, an abuse survivor, a recovering alcoholic.

We are, of course, all of these things and more. Which elements of our identity take priority may depend on where we are, who we are with, how we are feeling about ourselves. And then there are those parts of our identity which only we and perhaps those closest to us know. Those quirks of personality, those secret hopes and dreams which lie at the center of who we are.

Our identities are fluid, both in the moment and over the long term, and there is much to celebrate in all the different ways we can understand ourselves, and all the ways we have to share with others who we are. I believe that the work of feeling secure in and being able to express our identity is a life-long task, and a difficult one in this society where little of our identity is a given and we are responsible for nearly all of it. After all, here in the early part of the 21st century, identity is one of the most important questions. Our individuality is celebrated. Self-actualization and personal happiness seem to be our ultimate goal.

What worries me at this time in this history of our country and our culture is the degree to which our identity seems to be less and less about all those things I listed above and more and more about us as consumers. Who we are, in the eyes of society and often in our own eyes as well, appears more and more dependent on both *what* we consume and simply *that* we consume.

A May 2005 editorial by Catherine Getches in the Washington Post begins this way:

As a twin, I think I have an unusual appreciation for the desire to be unique. When I was 10, this drive even involved breakfast: I challenged my mom's homemade-everything, health-food-only policy and begged for brand-name, boxed cereal. Even if I couldn't convince my mother that Trix really were for kids—Grape-Nuts and Cheerios were as close as I got—in my mind they fortified me as an individual, at least in the General

Mills sense of things. I ate one kind of cereal and my sister ate another, and I was way too young to see the irony of using a brand name to make myself special.

Luckily I got past the clueless phase. But these days it seems that most of American society is sinking into my preteen mindset. From what I see, more and more people are buying into the idea that mega-companies can mass-produce human individuality. (May 29, 2005)

She goes on to describe all the ways the internet caters to our “unique” identity, almost always in the service of mass-marketing. We can get our own versions of many companies’ home pages—myyahoo, mywashingtonpost, and so on almost forever. I was just reading a book that talked about Disney World weddings, of which there are six to eight a day, weddings sold by offering us our ultimate personalized dream wedding, which of course uses all the familiar, and ever so commercial, Disney themes and images.

Like we did in junior high school, we still often look to what we buy, and now how we buy it, to both define and express who we are. Maybe it’s not designer jeans any more. Maybe it’s the car we drive, the neighborhood we live in, or the stores we shop in or refuse to shop in. As when we were younger, we use our choices as consumers to put ourselves in the mainstream, or perhaps to set ourselves apart.

So much of advertising these days is aimed at our desire for identity. If we want to prove our toughness, we buy a Dodge Ram pick-up truck. If we think of ourselves as adventurous, we should demonstrate it by buying a four-wheel-drive Jeep SUV. If we care about the environment, we’ll buy a hybrid. If we’re a choosy, careful mom, we’ll choose Jif peanut butter for our family. If we want to be hip, we’ll have the latest technology—be it the thinnest cell phone which shows videos and take pictures, or the fastest computer on the block. If we, male or female, want romance, we’ll color the gray out of our hair, or lose 15 pounds.

Our consumer choices, large or small, are no longer merely practical choices about what is available, what works best for us, what fits in our budget, or what is simplest, but are instead statements about who we are and who we want to be. In addition, we come to believe that what we choose ought to make us happy.

There are real dangers in this. Wanting to fit in, to prove something about ourselves, we can easily acquire a lot of stuff we do not need and we can spend money we do not have. Not everyone does this, of course, but, especially for those just starting out, the message that in order to really be someone, and in order to feel good about ourselves and our lives, we have to have a lot of stuff, and the right stuff at that, can lead us to live well above our means.

We might take jobs just so we can get the things we want or think we deserve or believe will make us happy, rather than because we love the work, or because we feel like we are doing something that benefits the world. One of the most popular leisure time activities is now shopping. Rather than ice skating or walking in the woods or going to museums, we are going to the mall or shopping on the internet. We feel entitled to luxuries so far beyond the imaginations of most of the people in the world that it is almost obscene.

But none of this is what I consider the biggest danger we face. The biggest danger is this—the more that we and others define ourselves as consumers, the more we will bring the consumer mentality into every area of our life. We are no longer consumers only when we are in the mall or the grocery store. We have become consumers in our neighborhoods, in our religious communities, in our expectations from government, and, perhaps worst of all, in our relationships with other people.

As consumers, our focus is on ourselves, on our individuality, on what we and we alone want. We ask ourselves—what am I getting from this? Am I getting value for my dollar, my time, my effort? Might there be something better out there, something I would like more, something that would make me happier? It's not that these questions should never be asked. But if this is our dominant way of being in the world, we are in trouble. Lost in the consumer mentality is any concern about the community, about the wider world, about anything beyond our own desires.

Barry Schwartz writes about how this works in religious community:

Whereas most of us inherit the religious affiliations of our parents, we are remarkably free to choose exactly the "flavor" of that affiliation that suits us. We are unwilling to regard religious teachings as commandments, about which we have no choice, [we see them instead as] suggestions, about which we are the ultimate arbiters. We look upon participation in a religious community as an opportunity to choose just the form of community that gives us what we want out of religion. Some of us may be seeking emotional fulfillment. Some may be seeking social connection. Some may be seeking ethical guidance and assistance with specific problems in our lives. Religious institutions then become a kind of market for comfort, tranquility, spirituality, and ethical reflection, and we "religious consumers" shop in that market until we find what we like.

It may seem odd to talk about religious institutions in these kind of shopping-mall terms, but I think such descriptions reflect what many people want and expect from the religious activities and affiliations. This is not surprising, given the dominance of individual choice and personal satisfaction as values in our culture. Even when people join communities of faith and expect to participate in the life of those communities and embrace (at least some of) the practices of those communities, they simultaneously expect the communities to be responsive to their needs, their tastes, and their desires. (p.39-40)

This isn't entirely bad, but it does have its problems. As religious communities look at those who come through our doors as consumers whom we need to attract, our focus becomes more on trying to determine what people want than on the larger meanings and values the community is hoping to convey. The more we look at the people in our pews as customers whom we need to hang onto, with whom we need to build "brand loyalty," the more we forfeit our ability to be about anything more than the immediate needs and desires of those who gather together each week. And the more that people in our churches are looking merely to meet their own needs in religious community, the less their connection to those communities will be meaningful and transformative.

We have been taught that, as consumers, if we can only find just the right thing—be it a high-tech gadget, a relationship, a car, or a religious community—we will finally be happy. That we can, once and for all, feel fulfilled. The problem is, as we all know through our own experience, it doesn't work.

Schwartz again:

Human beings...want to experience pleasure. And when they consume, they do experience pleasure—as long as the things they consume are novel. But as people adapt—as the novelty wears off—pleasure comes to be replaced by comfort. It's a thrill to drive your new car for the first few weeks; after that, it's just comfortable. It certainly beats the old car, but it isn't much of a kick. Comfort is nice enough, but people want pleasure. And comfort isn't pleasure.

The result of having pleasure turn into comfort is disappointment, and the disappointment will be especially severe when the goods we are consuming are "durable" goods, such as cars, houses, stereo systems, elegant clothes, jewelry, and computers. When the brief period of real enthusiasm and pleasure wanes, people

still have these things around them—as a constant reminder that consumption isn't all it's cracked up to be, that expectations are not matched by reality...

Faced with this inevitable disappointment, what do people do? Some simply give up the chase and stop valuing pleasure derived from things. Most are driven instead to pursue novelty, to seek out new commodities and experiences whose pleasure potential has not been dissipated by repeated exposure. In time, these new commodities also will lose their intensity, but people still get caught up in the chase. (p. 172)

What may be saddest and most damaging is that this experience and our response to it all too often affect not only how we deal with the things in our lives, but also with relationships. We look to romance, to love, to our friends, to our religious communities for happiness, for pleasure. And they bring us this. But like with everything over time, our feelings change over time. Pleasure becomes comfort. Ecstasy becomes contentment. The surprising and new becomes simply a part of our everyday lives. It can be tempting, whether we are talking about the car we drive or the love relationship in our lives, to begin the chase again.

Sociologist David Myers, in his book *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty*, talks about findings from studies on marriage:

Today's more divorce-accepting attitudes contribute to the decline of marital satisfaction, report [Paul] Amato and [Stacy] Rogers from their follow-up surveys with 2,033 married persons. "The belief that an unrewarding marriage should be jettisoned may lead some people to invest less time in their marriages and make fewer attempts to resolve marital disagreements," say the researchers. Thus "greater freedom to leave unsatisfying marriages" may ironically increase the likelihood of marriages becoming unsatisfying. Divorce acceptance feeds marital unhappiness which feeds divorce. (p.45)

In other words, by approaching marriage as a consumer—by evaluating it using cost-benefit analysis, by looking at it primarily through the lens of our personal needs and desires, by making sure we have some version of a return policy in place—we are more likely to create unhappy marriages, and marriages that end in divorce. Such an approach, toward marriage or anything else, does not take into account value much beyond our own personal wants and happiness of the moment.

The more areas of our lives to which we bring the attitude of consumers, the more of our lives will feel trivialized or shallow or unsatisfying. The more we are caught up in the chase, the less our lives will mean.

We must find an alternative to being merely consumers of life. We must find ways of knowing and expressing who we are that go beyond the things we buy and the amount of pleasure we feel in any given moment. We must learn that joy comes from a much deeper place than the pleasure that comes with something or someone new.

I believe the most important thing for us is to reclaim the parts of our identity that are created only in relationship with others. Above all else, living in the world as consumers separates us from each other. It puts us in competition, or at least in comparison. It focuses us on our individual desires rather than the good of anything beyond ourselves.

But we are *not* merely individuals. We are embedded in community—in our families, our neighborhoods, our circles of friends and co-workers, our society. We would not be who we are without these things, and we cannot exist in isolation. To act in isolation only hurts us and hurts others.

The bonds of marriage, of family, of religious community, are deeper and involve much more than whether we are feeling happy with them at any given moment. It is not all about us.

I am deeply committed to the value of the individual, to everyone's right to freedom, self-discovery and fulfillment. But more and more, I am coming to believe that if we focus on these things alone, we are doing great harm to our world as well as ourselves. There must be times when the needs of the whole take precedence of the needs of the one. There must be times when the question we ask is not "what's in it for me?" but rather "what do I have to offer?"

We are more than what we drive, what we wear, what we buy. We are much more than the pleasure we feel in any given moment. Let us trust in ourselves and even more so in each other, and know that our value goes far beyond the role we play in the marketplace. Let us not consume life—moving through the world in constant chase of the next big thing. Let us instead live our lives—discovering who we are in what we do to make the world a better place. Discovering who we are in whom we love, and who loves us. In doing so, I do believe, we shall be blessed.

May it be so. Amen.