



Amy Domini

People, planet, purchasing power

How buying Ben & Jerry's ice cream made me a more conscious consumer.

I HATE TO DATE MYSELF, BUT I'M OLD ENOUGH TO REMEMBER having three pairs of shoes. The Buster Browns were for all the time; these sturdy brown lace-ups were for school, play and most activities. Next in usefulness were the black patent leathers with the velvet bow; these were for birthday parties, church, dinner with my grandparents and holidays. Finally came the Keds. Keds were only for playing tennis. Yes, this is true, and although it was a long time ago, it was in my lifetime.

This would never work today. Possessions have swamped us. Shoes have become specialized; so have scissors, batteries, candles and razors. Most observers agree that the demand for stuff has horrific implications. It creates ghastly environmental effects as we rip out raw materials to make things. It bankrupts families.

In *Culture and Consumption*, Canadian cultural anthropologist Grant McCracken introduced the concept of the Diderot effect, the unintentional transformation a simple acquisition sets in motion. In "Regrets on Parting with My Old Dressing Gown," French Enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot bemoaned the sorry state of his life, the result of a gift of an elegant red dressing gown from a well-meaning friend. The dressing gown had been so fine that he had replaced his straw chair with one covered in Moroccan leather. He had replaced his prints along with his desk and updated his study. This improvement process went on until one day he felt unwelcome in his own study. He had become a slave to a level of fashion befitting his new dressing gown and regretted it.

It may seem a silly story, but we sense its rightness. And I would argue it gives us a special insight. Perhaps some types of consumption are positive change agents. Consumption is an enormously influential force. It affects behavior patterns of individuals at the personal level in such a way that whole societies are transformed. When anthropologists attempt to open communications with a jungle tribe, they leave pots and other goods the tribe finds useful and values. The door is opened.

We know this. Now we must harness it.

I look at my own consumption. A sneaky change took place over the past decade. Maybe it started with purchasing Ben & Jerry's yummy ice cream. I found I read the carton and wondered why other ice creams didn't tell me what a fine person I am. Then

came Stonyfield's yogurt. I got so educated that I wandered into a Whole Foods. After three visits, I gave up on fruits and vegetables if they weren't organic.

Pretty soon, I was getting political about this. I boycotted coffee shops that didn't offer fair trade coffee; I started reading more and more about the politics of hunger and the dangers of pesticides. I noticed which politicians were raising my issues. It changed me. My eccentric Aunt Sylvia doesn't buy any clothing

first hand. She's in her eighties and has saved what is rumored throughout the family to be a fortune. But she thinks buying new clothing is just plain wasteful. I've gone from thinking she was an oddball to thinking she's fantastic.

Now I'm becoming the oddball. When plastic bags come from a dry cleaner, I tie off the opening where the hanger was and use them as garbage bags.

Last Christmas, my adult children came over to take the ribbons, boxes, papers and cards I'd saved, sometimes for several years running. It's a lucky thing they do, because I gave up physical gifts four years ago so have no use for the trimmings. It isn't that I'm against giving. I put three dollar bills in my pocket each morning and give them to the first three people who ask.

Did buying Ben & Jerry's ice cream make me a more tolerant woman? It did mark the beginning of a change. Like Diderot, I am caught in a continuous process of expanding and improving my new sense of self. But unlike Diderot, it feels right. I feel more and more welcome. I feel more and more a part of something important and good.

I'm hoping the purchase of mutual fund shares from a responsible fund family does the same thing. The investor has taken a casual, perhaps thoughtless, step, little suspecting he or she has begun a journey of personal redefinition. At some level, this person is no longer one of the overwhelmed, buffeted by forces beyond his or her control. This individual will take small steps: shop more deliberately, vote more deliberately, read the newspapers differently and be a more engaged (and tolerant) citizen. ■

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