

Relationships in the Age of Consumerism

BY BARRY J. BRYAN

Glossy advertisements tempt us to see even personal and social relationships in selfish, individual, possessive, and covetous ways. Yet we find a contrasting message in the Bible and in the lives of those saints in this age of consumerism who live beyond appearance, beyond affluence, and beyond marketable achievement.

With a bit of imagination we can begin to glimpse how consumerism is shaping our way of life, how it is tempting us to see personal and social relationships in selfish, individual, possessive, and covetous ways. Rather than seeing ourselves as students being mentored through a teacher's guidance, patients covenanting for a physician's care, children embracing a parent's nurture, or spouses growing into union with a lover's love, we are lured into seeing ourselves as consumers in all of our relationships, always looking ahead to the goods and services we've contracted for, but never getting enough.

I'll start close to home by imagining the lives of two university professors. The first one resides in a safe and nurturing community—a small town, urban suburb, or city neighborhood—in which she actually knows and interacts with her neighbors, and she enjoys teaching at the beautiful campus nearby. Because her career as a professor improves the community's future, it has great meaning for her and others. Her work is challenging, but it is rewarding to her intrinsically as well as financially. Her schedule leaves adequate time for her to enjoy her family and friends, and to pursue outside interests. Her few material possessions are of high quality and they easily satisfy her needs; as a result, her home is smaller in size

and less expensive to own. This professor is connected to her surroundings, rather than merely living or working in them, because she has a stake in the welfare of the community. She purchases the necessities of life from local businesses whose owners are known to her. By driving a simple, older vehicle, she preserves for herself the weeks or months that earning the thousands of after-tax dollars for a new car would take away from her each year. With this extra time, she explores the avocations and volunteer work that she really likes to do with her mind and hands.

The second university professor looks in the mirror each morning and worries, "Am I wealthy enough? Am I attractive enough? Am I successful enough? Am I famous yet?" He does not know that God loves him just as he is; the good news of God's generous care for us—"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow," Jesus proclaims to anxious consumers, "they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these" (Matthew 6:28b-29)—has not seeped deeply into his self-awareness. As the day unfolds, he falls into a compulsive behavior of constant busy-ness, arduously grasping for happiness that he never seems to find. He wishes he was a bit wealthier, a tad thinner, and had better skin tone so that he could wear more stylish clothing. Above all, he wants to be "successful," by which he means more recognized and appreciated for his contributions at the university. Ironically, though the professor cannot sense he has "made it," his students believe he is successful when he takes time to listen to them, celebrates their sports or cultural achievements, and generously helps them with their daily assignments or in preparing for exams. Why doesn't he "lighten up," his students wonder, for they know that he has already "made it," that he is at his best when he is simply nurturing their student-professor relationship.

The second professor is one I see in the mirror each morning. Like many Americans, I am too often distracted by the performance-based atmosphere of consumer culture, at the expense of becoming a better person. Though in more cynical moments we may tell ourselves that the lifestyle in the first scenario is not even possible, most of us harbor deeper dreams that are not so easily realized by making money or becoming successful. We want to live from wisdom, compassion, and freedom, not appearance, affluence, and achievement.

COMPULSIVE BUSY-NESS

One day my student, Hall, came to the office and asked if I would look over his resumé. Inwardly I said to myself, "I'm too busy right now. Just leave it with me and I'll do it later. I am doing something much more important, writing a research paper." I'm not proud of this inner voice that lures me to remain compulsively busy, yet I have heard it often, for it indulges my fantasy that I can single-handedly ensure some "higher purpose" in my life. The good news, however, is that on this occasion I ig-

nored the call of compulsive busy-ness. Was my being busy really more important than a student who needed my advice and attention? After all, I encourage my students to stop by the office; I want them to feel welcome and comfortable when they see me there, around campus, or in the community. Making students feel welcome is often more important than matters related to the course I am teaching them. I want to be present to them in a kind and caring way. When Hall came into the office, I consciously turned away from the computer, faced him, and admired his enthusiasm for life and responded to his respect for my guidance. I took off my armor of being busy and listened to my student.

These few moments of listening to Hall might seem unremarkable. Neither the student newspaper nor student-run television news program will carry a headline: "Busy professor spends time with student." Yet in such a moment of listening to my student, I embrace God's purpose for my life at least as deeply as, and perhaps much more deeply than, in many other things I do. The purpose of our lives is not to be hurried and frantic, but rather is to be fully present to the people and situations we encounter in ways that are wise, compassionate, and free.

DISTORTED VALUES

Though glossy advertisements are promoting modern myths such as "Material possessions will make you happy," often at the expense of developing meaningful personal relationships with God and with other people, the Bible offers a contrasting message that won't die with fads. The Apostle Paul knew that wealth, being physically attractive, success, and fame are not the secrets to contentment. "In any and all circumstances, I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and being in need," he declares. "I can do all things

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through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:12b-13). About the temporal nature of material possessions, he observes: "for we brought nothing into the world, so that we cannot take anything out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction" (1 Timothy 6:7-9).

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Tonya Stoneman reminds us in “Countering Consumerism.”¹ Unfortunately, what money cannot buy, our consumerist hearts cannot properly value. The Apostle realized that God can satisfy this need for undeserved and complete love, within all of our relationships, like nothing else.

Consumerism, by replacing our desire for healthy relationships with an artificial, insatiable search for things and the money to buy them, ironically shows little regard for the true utility of what is bought. For instance, it values family ties and friendship, but primarily as a rationale for buying ourselves the latest communication services, or (at best) as an opportunity for gift-giving. How we value every relationship becomes mediated through the spending of money on goods and services. Yet happiness can’t be purchased in the marketplace, no matter how hard advertising tries to convince us of it.

Market-driven forces are usurping roles once assumed by families, friends, and communities in providing meaning in our lives. Major life events, such as graduation or weddings, have been transformed into consumer events with their culturally-approved hierarchy of demands for things. These demands can assume a life of their own: salaries and job prestige after college graduation day, or the bride’s dress and the parties leading up to the wedding, often assume more significance than true career satisfaction or the bride’s and groom’s state of mind.

Despite these influences of the consumerist culture, many people continue to live with compassion. When a friend requires help, a child desires a hug, or a patient needs consoling, they rise to the occasion. In these moments they transcend consumerism and its definition of success.

This sort of humility and being there for others makes a person more attractive in human relationships. The individuals who are the most beautiful in my world are the people who live simply and wisely, frugally and compassionately, without any overshadowing need for acclaim or recognition. They live with a grace sufficient to each moment. They are the individuals to whom I turn when I need to talk to someone. They are truly saints in the age of consumerism because they live beyond appearance, beyond affluence, and beyond marketable achievement. I aspire to be this type of individual: this type of professor and colleague, this type of son and brother and uncle, and this type of friend.

RESISTING CONSUMERISM’S MANY LURES

The cultural atmosphere of consumerism lures us into other “senseless and harmful” desires. Here we’ve reflected on its tempting call to compulsive busy-ness, but we might just as easily consider its enticement toward greed or envy. In *Living from the Center: Spirituality in the Age of Consumerism*, Jay McDaniel says the lure of consumer culture is like a siren with many calls.² Several of the ten temptations of consumerism that he lists tend to distort our relationships. We are swayed to believe that having a

successful career is more important than being a good parent, a considerate neighbor, or a kind and loving person, and to think that enjoying prosperity in the suburbs with a perfectly manicured lawn is the highest goal in life. We are persuaded to see the universe not as a communion of subjects, but rather as a collection of objects. And we are tempted to suppose we are entirely on our own, because there is no grace or ultimate mercy within the depths of things.

The first step in resisting consumerism's numerous allurements, McDaniel reminds us, is to recognize that these are enemies of our better selves and destructive of our communion with God and others. Then with a bit of imagination we can envision "healing alternatives": that living lightly on the earth and gently with each other is much more important than appearance, affluence, or achievement; being a good parent, neighbor, and colleague surpasses having a successful career; and doing truly good work is measured in service to others, which may be unnoticed, rather than in piling up money or wasting natural resources. And we will see that helping others and dwelling in solidarity with people in need is more important than prosperity in the suburbs.

Most importantly in my opinion, we must catch a vision of the universe as a place in which we are not on our own, dwelling among objects to manipulate, but as a community of subjects before God, whose grace nourishes all our relationships.

NOTES

1 Tonya Stoneman, "Countering Consumerism," *IN TOUCH Magazine* (Atlanta: In Touch Ministries, March 1999), 2.

2 Jay McDaniel, *Living from the Center: Spirituality in the Age of Consumerism* (St. Louis: Chalice Press), 62.



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