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A buying fast offers a real breather

Instead of shopping till she dropped, author dropped shopping

ENNIFER WILLIS

The Portland Tribune, Feb 27, 2007 (1 Reader comment)

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you've ever wondered what you're spending all your money on – and why – you're not alone.

Caught up in the madness of the 2002 Christmas shopping season, writer Judith Levine accidentally spilled the contents of her shopping bag into the snow on the streets of New York City. As she picked up her items, and looked at the many overstuffed bags of electronic gadgets, gizmos and toys that surrounded her, she

she'd had enough. Levine decided on a 12-month shopping fast. During 2003, she and her partner, Paul, didn't buy anything other than basic necessities, like groceries and toilet paper.

The result was a new perspective on consumerism and sustainability, and a new book, "Not Buying It: My Year Without Shopping." Levine will visit Portland for a book signing at Powell's Books on Hawthorne ([map](#)) on Monday.

Though already an environmentally conscious consumer, Levine was surprised by how much stuff she'd amassed in her home. A pre-fast inventory of



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Aside from necessities like basic groceries and toilet paper, Judith Levine and her partner abstained from the consumer culture for a year, which had an effect on both the environment and Levine's bank account.

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the kitchen alone revealed three kinds of salt, eight kinds of rice and nine kinds of vinegar.



She and her partner didn't stock up on anything prior to their no-shopping experiment, yet they never ran out of soap or shampoo.



"Paul used to travel a lot, so he had a gazillion of those little eensy bottles of shampoo," Levine says.



A year without shopping made them examine what was a desire, and what was really a necessity. Since they both worked from home, office supplies like printer cartridges were mandatory. But when they ran out of Kleenex, they decided to make do with toilet paper instead.





Stuff's made of other stuff

"Not Buying It" is a fun and inspiring read, and it reveals Levine's deep concern about the impact of overconsumerism on the environment.



"The full life cycle of a product has an impact on the Earth, on our waters, the air and our soil," says Karen Josephson, Portland Outreach Coordinator for the [Northwest Earth Institute](#). "Our consumption is directly related to the destruction of the environment."




Every item has to be created – using natural and man-made resources, often employing low-wage labor, and using fossil fuels for transportation.



When we're done using the products we purchase, they often end up in the landfill.



"Every product has a life story, and there are consequences in every chapter of that life story," she says. "The things that I buy have an effect in the world."



Levine's year without shopping also taught her the social power of the marketplace. Instead of spending only on ourselves, we all benefit when we spend our money together on shared services and programs: A community swimming pool becomes a social center, rather than everyone buying their own backyard oasis.




"To me, the big transformation was from thinking of myself as a consumer, to thinking of myself as a citizen," Levine says.



The financial impact of the shopping fast was significant as well. Levine saved \$8,000 and was able to pay off her credit card.

"I used to worry a lot about money, panic about money, feel out of control, like a lot of people do," she says. "I can decide how much I'm going to spend. I can substitute a cheaper thing, or a homemade thing, or no thing, for something that I would buy."

Showing her that she can live happily on not much money, the experiment left Levine feeling more confident about her financial future.

"I'm 54 years old. Someday I might want to retire," she says. "This made me realize I could do that."

Less to store, less to clean

Josephson says our society of automatic consumerism has many of us working harder than we need to, just so we can buy more stuff we don't really want.

"One of the first things we can do is to just take stock, assess our lives personally," Josephson says. "Ask yourself, What makes my life satisfying? What is it that I really long for? Pretty quickly, you come up with the answer that this stuff you buy isn't the answer for deep satisfaction and happiness."

Collecting and keeping so much stuff eats up not only money, but also time and space. You have to have a big enough place to store all your stuff, and then spend time maintaining, cleaning, and shuffling through it.

“It takes maybe years of maturity before people look back and say, ‘Well, that isn’t necessarily what was really meaningful in my life,’ ” Josephson says. “It would be nice to know that up front.”

Levine says a big obstacle to being a more conscious consumer – and a better global citizen – is impulse buying.

When you’re tempted to buy something, Levine recommends first taking a few minutes to really think about that potential purchase, and its consequences not only to your wallet, but to the environment.

“Just wait,” she advises. “Even with a short amount of waiting, many impulses pass. And then if you still really want it, maybe it’s something you do really want or need.”

Fast over, diet continues

Three years after their experiment, Levine and her partner still aren’t big consumers. But when the yearlong fast ended, “I did go out and rent six movies, kind of binged,” Levine admits.

“One thing that I learned is that you don’t have to go out and buy just tons of things,” she says, placing an emphasis on buying fewer things and enjoying them more. “Like getting a good chocolate bar. It’s very satisfying.”

Readers have e-mailed Levine telling her that “Not Buying It” has forced them to consider their own roles in the world, their relationships and their responsibilities as citizens.

“I do think the book compels people to think a lot about themselves and about the bigger consequences, the connections between themselves and the world through the marketplace and through the economy,” Levine says. “But it’s not a heavy book. It’s really a fun book to read. It’s a laugh.”

Judith Levine

When: 7:30 p.m. Monday, March 5

Where: Powell’s Books on Hawthorne, 3723 S.E. Hawthorne Blvd.

‘Not Buying It: My Year Without Shopping’

by Judith Levine

Free Press

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