

# Talking Shop

By Theodore Dalrymple

For the first time in my life, I have been a shopkeeper—admittedly for no more than a few hours, but I found it a curiously intense experience.



It was not an ordinary shop, either, but that of Chinese antiques and furniture, as well as of carefully selected ornaments and knickknacks, chosen with care by the owners. They are friends of mine, and

they asked me to look after the shop when they had to go to a funeral.

Naturally, I was rather worried that I would make a mess of it, for example entering the wrong sum in the credit card machine and thereby causing the owners a great loss. I needn't have worried: I didn't make a single sale. In a shop like theirs, most people who enter are just looking, and you have to live in hope that someone will come in and buy the most expensive item on a whim.

I sat behind the counter with a book, but the need for alertness somewhat interfered with my concentration on it, an extended essay on the way in which, in the modern world, we have sacralized the victim rather than the hero. I suppose the reason for this is our increasingly democratic sentiment, or at least protestations of democratic sentiment. After all, everyone can be a victim, but few can be a hero. Besides, we

like to elevate ordinary people who are just like us, as we like to pull down those who are clearly our betters. Feet of clay are gold dust to biographers.

I was not looking after the kind of shop that people enter for mundane or essential items. There was not a single item in the shop that anyone could call essential or that he truly needed, such as soap, and most of the items were not even useful, except in the sense that the decorative is useful (man does not live by utility alone). No one pops out of his house just to buy an antique Chinese lacquered chest or an 18th-century print of tropical fruit, as they do to buy a loaf of bread or a pint of milk.

So I was stuck behind the counter while idlers, with nothing better to do, sauntered round, picking things up in desultory fashion and turning them round in their hands, or approaching a picture and peering at it as if examining it for bedbugs. I was terrified that one or more of them would turn out to be a shoplifter, and that when I handed the shop back to my friends the stock would have diminished but no cash would have been taken. At the same time, I was afraid of making false accusations against would-be customers, for in this life there are always false positives as well as false negatives.

Should I approach them and ask if they needed my help? What if they asked me about the age and provenance of that decorated red lacquer chest over there? Should I tell them the truth and avow my ignorance, or should I make up a preposterous story ("It comes from the reign of the emperor Li, who reigned from 1357 to 1373 and was murdered by his eunuchs") on the assumption that they knew no better themselves? The nearest I came to a sale was when someone wanted two of an item of which there was only one, "a unique piece," in our shopkeeper's jargon.

I have never thought much of shopping as an activity, let alone as a pastime. I remember the panic of some of my

patients when I asked them what interested them, and they would cast around in their minds for something to say, before replying (after much soul-searching) that they liked shopping, which I came to define as the impecunious in search of the unnecessary.

In the days when great crowds would shop in person rather than spend hours on the internet scrolling down for something unnecessary to buy (unnecessary except in support of the poor suffering GDP, that is), I found them sad to observe. The joy of possession is at best fleeting, even where there is no buyer's remorse, for possession of something is soon taken for granted by the possessor, while the debt incurred lasts much longer.

Inveterate shoppers seem never to learn that the joy, even mere satisfaction, of purchase rarely or never lasts long. In this respect, experience teaches them nothing: They are like gamblers who hope for a killing next time, no matter how many times they have lost in the end.

I had never before observed shoppers from the other side of the counter. How easy it is to become misanthropic! What a pitiful parade appears before you!

Some people smile and say good morning to you, but others have special eyes that work rather like the neutron bomb is supposed to work: They see things in the shop but not the person behind the counter, as the neutron bomb kills people but leaves buildings and objects intact.

How badly people dress, how few of them make the best of themselves! They squeeze into clothes that are too small for them, dressing for the size they would like to be rather than for the size that they actually are. It is not only their size for which they dress inappropriately, but their age. Almost no one these days dresses older than an adolescent. What do they see when they look in the glass? People do not want to remain

forever young, but forever adolescent.

I was particularly appalled by the way women of 50 or 60 bared their shoulders (it was a warm and sunny day) to reveal a stupid butterfly or dragon tattooed on their shoulder. This was not done when they were young, but rather when they were in middle age. I wanted to berate them for their idiocy and bad taste. They were old enough to have known better.

"Can I help you?" I asked. I am quite good when I try at being unctuous and servile.

"Lovely things you have in here," came the reply.

"Why don't you buy them, then, instead of just looking at them?" I wanted to say. But instead I said, "Please do come back, the stock changes all the time."

What a good thing insincerity is, how important it is not to speak your mind! What a boor a totally sincere man would be!

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