

# Opinion | My Year of No Shopping

Ann Patchett

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Nashville — The idea began in February 2009 over lunch with my friend Elissa, someone I like but rarely see. She walked into the restaurant wearing a fitted black coat with a high collar. “Wow,” I said admiringly. “Some coat.” She stroked the sleeve. “Yeah. I bought it at the end of my no-shopping year. I still feel a little bad about it.”

Elissa told me the story: After traveling for much of the previous year, she had decided she had enough stuff, or too much stuff. She made a pledge that for 12 months she wouldn’t buy shoes, clothes, purses or jewelry. I was impressed by her discipline, but she shrugged it off. “It wasn’t hard.”

I did some small-scale experiments of my own, giving up shopping for Lent for a few years. I was always surprised by how much better it made me feel. But it wasn’t until last New Year’s Day that I decided to follow my friend’s example.

At the end of 2016, our country had swung in the direction of gold leaf, an ecstatic celebration of unfeeling billionaire-dom that kept me up at night. I couldn’t settle down to read or write, and in my anxiety I found myself mindlessly scrolling through two particular shopping websites, numbing my fears with pictures of shoes, clothes, purses and jewelry. I was trying to distract myself, but the distraction left me feeling worse, the way a late night in a bar smoking Winstons and drinking gin leaves you feeling worse. The unspoken question of shopping is “What do I need?” What I needed was less.

My plan had been to give up what Elissa gave up — things to wear — but a week into my no-shopping year, I bought a portable speaker. When I got it home I felt ridiculous. Shouldn’t “no shopping” include electronics?

I came up with my own arbitrary set of rules for the year. I wanted a plan that was serious but not so draconian that I would bail out in February, so while I couldn’t buy clothing or speakers, I could buy anything in the grocery store, including flowers. I could buy shampoo and printer cartridges and batteries but only after I’d run out of what I had. I could buy plane tickets and eat out in restaurants. I could buy books because I write books and I co-own a bookstore and books are my business. Could I have made it a full year without buying books? Absolutely. I could have used the library or read the books that were already in my house, but I didn’t; I bought books.

Gifts were the tough one for me. I’m a gift-giver, and I could see how gift shopping could become an easy loophole. I decided to give books as gifts, but I didn’t always keep to it. My editor married in 2017, and I wasn’t about to give him a book as a wedding present. Still, the frantic shopping for others needed to come to a halt. The idea that our affection and esteem must

manifest itself in yet another sweater is reductive. Elissa said she gave people time, a certificate to watch their kids or clean their house. “That,” she told me, “turned out to be the hardest thing. Time is so valuable.”

I was raised Catholic and spent 12 years in a Catholic girls school. In the same way a child who grows up going to the symphony is more likely to enjoy classical music, and a child raised in a bilingual household is probably going to speak two languages, many children raised Catholic have a talent for self-denial. Even now my sister and I plan for Lent the way other people plan family vacations: What will we let go of? What good can we add?

My first few months of no shopping were full of gleeful discoveries. I ran out of lip balm early on and before making a decision about whether lip balm constituted a need, I looked in my desk drawers and coat pockets. I found five lip balms. Once I started digging around under the bathroom sink I realized I could probably run this experiment for three more years before using up all the lotion, soap and dental floss. It turns out I hadn’t thrown away the hair products and face creams I’d bought over the years and didn’t like; I’d just tossed them all under the sink. I’m using them now, and they’re fine.

In March I wished I had a Fitbit, the new one that looked like a bracelet and didn’t need to be connected to a smartphone. For four days I really wanted a Fitbit. And then — *poof!* — I didn’t want one. I remember my parents trying to teach me this lesson when I was a child: If you want something, wait awhile. Chances are the feeling will pass.

The trick of no shopping isn’t just that you don’t buy things. You don’t *shop*. That means no trawling the sale section of the J. Crew website in idle moments. It means the catalogs go into the recycle bin unopened on the theory that if I don’t see it, I don’t want it. Halfway through the year I could go to a store with my mother and sister if they asked me. I could tell them if the dress they were trying on looked good without wishing I could try it on myself.

Not shopping saves an astonishing amount of time. In October, I interviewed Tom Hanks about his collection of short stories in front of 1,700 people in a Washington theater. Previously, I would have believed that such an occasion demanded a new dress and lost two days of my life looking for one. In fact, Tom Hanks had never seen any of my dresses, nor had the people in the audience. I went to my closet, picked out something weather appropriate and stuck it in my suitcase. Done.

I did a favor for a friend over the summer and she bought me a pair of tennis shoes. Her simple act of kindness thrilled me. Once I stopped looking for things to buy, I became tremendously grateful for the things I received. Had I been shopping this summer I would have told my friend, “You shouldn’t have,” and I would have meant it.

It doesn’t take so long for a craving to subside, be it for Winstons or gin or cupcakes. Once I got the hang of giving shopping up, it wasn’t much of a trick. The trickier part was living with the startling abundance that had become glaringly obvious when I stopped trying to get more. Once I could see what I already had, and what actually mattered, I was left with a feeling that was

somewhere between sickened and humbled. When did I amass so many things, and did someone else need them?

If you stop thinking about what you might want, it's a whole lot easier to see what other people don't have. There's a reason that just about every religion regards material belongings as an impediment to peace. This is why Siddhartha had to leave his palace to become the Buddha. This is why Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor." It's why my friend Sister Nena, an 85-year-old Catholic nun, took a vow of poverty when she entered the convent at 18.

Sister Nena was my reading teacher when I was in the first grade, and in the years since, she has taught me considerably more. When I ask her if there's anything she needs me to get for her, she shakes her head. "It's all just stuff," she says, meaning all of the things that aren't God. If you're in the market for genuine inspiration on this front, I urge you to read "[Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship](#)," by Gregory Boyle, a book that shows what the platitudes of faith look like when they're put into action.

The things we buy and buy and buy are like a thick coat of Vaseline smeared on glass: We can see some shapes out there, light and dark, but in our constant craving for what we may still want, we miss life's details. It's not as if I kept a ledger and took the money I didn't spend on perfume and gave that money to the poor, but I came to a better understanding of money as something we earn and spend and save for the things we want and need. Once I was able to get past the want and be honest about the need, it was easier to give more of my money to people who could really use it.

For the record, I still have more than plenty. I know there is a vast difference between not buying things and not being able to buy things. Not shopping for a year hardly makes me one with the poor, but it has put me on the path of figuring out what I can do to help. I understand that buying things is the backbone of the economy and job growth. I appreciate all the people who shop in the bookstore. But taking some time off from consumerism isn't going to make the financial markets collapse. If you're looking for a New Year's resolution, I have to tell you: This one's great.

What I still haven't figured out is how the experiment ends. Do I just start shopping again? Shop less? I called Elissa. I hadn't seen her in years. She told me that after she bought the black coat, she decided to re-up for another year. "I realized I had too many decisions to make that were actually important," she said. "There were people to help, things to do. Not shopping frees up a lot of space in your brain."

So for now I'll leave my pledge in place. Who knows how far I can go? In a country hellbent on selling us dresses and shirts with the shoulders cut out (though I like to think I wouldn't have fallen for that one even if I had been shopping), it's good to sit on the bench for a while. Or as the great social activist Dorothy Day liked to say, "The best thing to do with the best things in life is give them up."