

Shopping for Values: A Journey with my Daughter

Soon after my first marriage broke up, I had to take my then seven-year-old daughter Hannah shopping for clothes. It had always been something she did with her mother, while I mowed the lawns or wrote. But no amount of scribbling or gardening was going to fill the empty cupboard in my daughter's bedroom. I had to get out and prowl the racks with her.

We went to Dimmey's in Geelong during summer school holidays. We were bunking with my Mum and Dad for a few days and before we left Mum asked, 'Do you want me to take her and you can go to the beach?' The idea was appealing, but I was locked into the notion that anything Hannah's mother could do I could do, if not better, at least capably.

Hannah led me around every square metre of tables and racks festooned with coloured cotton, while the red lights spun their bargains and the announcements told us what we already knew: we were at Dimmey's, and we could pay less here than anywhere else for quality clothing. I wasn't sure about the quality, but I was rapt at the pricing: six bucks for two t-shirts and \$12 for a pair of jeans. Everything was Made in China, but Dimmey's didn't put a severe dent in my skinny post-divorce budget. And, even better, it hardly mattered what I bought Hannah; she was at an age when she couldn't have cared less about brands or what outlets her clothes came from. She worked on a variation of the Don Smallgoods theme: if they looked good, they were good.

By the end of our trip, my feet were aching. I groaned as Hannah tried on the last of seven different kinds of eight-dollar, three-quarter length pants.

'Just pick one, sweetie. And then we're going.'

'Can I have a hot chocolate?'

Yes, ten hot chocolates. Anything to get out of here. When we eventually did arrive back at Grandma's, Hannah fashion-paraded every item – and every possible combination of outfit – while we all oohed and ahhed at her style. And I forgot, as quickly as possible, about our shopping expedition.

Maybe it's a reality of being a parent in a separated family, but I have often been concerned I'm not doing enough to make my children's lives okay. And how can I ever do enough? I've denied them what they understand as a fundamental right: their two parents together, loving them in one house. No matter how resolved I have become to the truth that, yes, I am doing the best I can and I can't make up for the past, there remains something inside me that chews away, never far from the surface, telling me to make amends.

I suppose that accounts for my deep feeling of gratitude when I walked into Hannah's Grade Four classroom early in the school year following our shopping expedition and found hanging on the wall the poster she'd created to depict her three holiday highlights – one of which was shopping with Dad.

From her birth, I'd vowed that when Hannah grew up she'd never enter a department store and think the loudspeaker announcement, 'Welcome Shoppers', referred to her. When she was in prep, we watched TV commercials and I asked her what it was that companies were trying to sell. Even before products appeared on screen, she would answer accurately 'hamburgers', 'cars', 'phones', 'perfume' or 'toys'.

Later, I pushed her further and asked what it was that particular ads were trying to make her *feel*. That question initially took her longer to answer, but soon her responses came as quickly as the ad breaks themselves: 'That I need that toy to be happy . . . They're saying their hamburgers are great and I'll be happy if I eat one. But they're not that good, Dad, I've eaten them. And they're never that big!'

My campaign to inure Hannah from the evils of consumerism stayed on track through early primary school and eventually she came up with the questions: 'Why do you hate McDonald's so much, Dad?' If she'd been carrying pen and paper, I'd have told her to take notes. Here it is, Hannah: even though Macca's (how bloody affectionate) had gone

health-conscious in recent times, the 100 percent fat and then some Big Daks, Quarter Pumpers, McNothings and Sundaes (every day of the week, when it comes to chemical ingredients) were still the big sell items. I told her you can't drive from one town to another in this country without seeing a Golden Arch. I asked her what a green road sign meant and she said she didn't know, whereas she had no trouble remembering what the gold one meant. I ranted about the abuse of the environment – a billion burgers worth of beef, to quote my favourite songwriter, Bruce Cockburn – and the 'brazilian' that gives Brazilian rainforests (well, I skipped the snip reference). And, in the piste résistance, I told her 'they *make* kids work there – and don't pay them a thing.'

A few weeks later, my Mum picked up Hannah from school and, for a treat, took her to McDonald's. My daughter stopped short in front of the glass doors and looked with concern at her grandmother: 'You're not going to make me work here, are you Nanny?'

Okay, so I'd pushed it too far. In the ensuing years I have relented and I occasionally take her and her younger brother, Hugo, to McDonald's. I'm hoping this tactic prevents a backlash in their 20s when, free of my influence, they might eat burgers and fries for every meal. It seems to have worked; neither of them goes crazy, like some of their friends, for fast food.

But Hannah, unfortunately, goes crazy for shopping. And I feel partly to blame.

In July 2009, President Barack Obama admitted he hates shopping. What a refreshing piece of information; it could have been twittered to me all year and I wouldn't have deleted it. Whereas our former treasurer, Peter Costello, told us we had to shop to keep our economy on track and our own wallets lined, here was the president of the free world acting free. The bloke hates to shop – and he looks half-decent.

It was great to know I am in good company whenever I tell people I dislike prowling the streets – or the web – especially for clothes. Dads like me and Obama, flat out with work and family, want a shop where we can buy in one hour all the clothes we need for two years, that look half-way fashionable, without having to try any of them on, without listening to any Top 40 music, and where no one tells us we look good, even if we look

tragic.

While me and the president can avoid shopping for ourselves, our kids are another story. Hannah's excitement about her Dimmey's debut with Dad had created a monster: she decided two years ago that her 10th birthday should be a shopping party followed by a sleepover. Her friends' Mums looked at me like I'd lost my trolley. Notwithstanding the fact that I'd have to go shopping at Highpoint (also known by locals as 'No Point') on a Friday night, there was the fact that I'd be doing it with five Year Four girls. 'You're brave,' was the popular rejoinder, or a smirk that said, 'Good luck. Fool.'

My then girlfriend now wife Jo looked at me equally sceptically.

'Is that a good idea?' she winced. She's as anti-consumerist as me and couldn't fathom why I'd take my intelligent, media savvy tween daughter shopping for her birthday. Wouldn't it undo all I'd been trying to tell her about how brands aren't important and that shopping is a necessity not a hobby?

'Umm, probably' I replied. But when you've seen your daughter's classroom poster – and you've seen also the horror in her eyes the day you had to tell her that her Mum and Dad would never be together again – you make these kinds of concessions. And the shopping trip was okay in the end – we visited Smiggle, where we smelt the fruity erasers, and we skipped through games shops, jewellery outlets, irritating tween girl Top 40 clothes shops and drank stupid amounts of hot chocolate. The girls spent less than \$10 each and, far from needing brands to impress each other, were happy to buy pens with fluffy feathers. They had a special and unusual night (shopping with a Dad? For a party?) and Hannah kept telling me in private that she loved me. That's worth the tangle of bodies in any megaplex. And it was a once off.

Umm, no such luck. As part of their dual home arrangement, my kids have a birthday party every second year at my house. Last year, Hannah's 12th, the roulette wheel spun and landed on me again and in May '09 she wanted a repeat performance of the Shopping with Dad Poster Boy Tour '07. The same wince from my wife and, this time, from me.

'Hannah, I don't know . . . Can't you think of something else?'

'But it was fun last time, Dad!'

'Yeah, but – ' I said and, as we hit a volleyball over a net in the backyard, I offered her alternatives: a disco, a gymnastics party, a pizza night, an indoor pool party, a picnic,

a blah, a blah and a blah.

‘The girls loved it too, Dad! They all want to do it.’

My pride swelling, I tried my last weapon: the truth.

‘Sweetie, I don’t think it’s good for you to have a shopping party. Shopping isn’t a hobby—’

‘—Yes, it is.’

No, it’s not, I said, and I gave her all the listen-here-young-lady reasons why it isn’t, the main one being that it isn’t creative, not like the drawing and writing she likes to do.

‘Yes it is Dad,’ Hannah replied, fixing me with one of the most serious expressions I’d seen from her. ‘I’m being creative when I look for clothes, when I check out the colours, and I think about the different things I’m going to wear and how they express me,’ and, she said, *and, and, and*, ‘Dad, it’s not just *shopping* – we find out about each other cos of what we like and don’t like. And we talk and we . . . hang out.’

She didn’t have the words for it, but I knew what she meant: she and her friends bonded when they shopped. Like I’d bonded with her. A week later she designed an invitation – ‘Confessions of a Shop-a-Holic’ – and a month later I was at Highpoint with five Grade Six girls, their mouths full of an indistinguishable mix of gum, lollies and Lady Ga Ga lyrics, each arm carrying two shopping bags full of tween jeans, things that smelt ‘nice’, crap fake gold bracelets, rubber wrist bands (a black one given to me with the word ‘strength’ written in white) and, I discovered later, in Hannah’s shopping bag, Mother’s Day and ‘Step Mother’s Day’ presents purchased with money she’d received for her birthday.

That final non-consumerist ring of the cash register thrilled me, but Shop-a-Holic ‘09 still gave me pause. Wasn’t I, literally and figuratively, shopping for my daughter’s love? Yes, she’d bought some presents for her mum and step-mum, but, in allowing my desire to please her to over-ride my values, hadn’t I, well, weakened my brand?

An answer came in June of the same year. The kids and I went to the Pompeii Exhibition at the Museum during school holidays; a good old proper, no nonsense excursion: lots of ancient artefacts, paintings of angry Mt Vesuvius, educational 3D movies – and people’s tragic deaths described in detail. Afterwards, we ate lunch, quietly thankful that we didn’t live near an active volcano. A three-year-old in a cute dress

walked past and I felt warmth for her – she wasn't likely to be crushed by falling debris, at least not today. But Hannah's eyes followed her intensely. 'I hate that,' she said. 'She doesn't even know what brand she's wearing . . . Kids don't need brands . . .'

But my daughter was still wearing mine. I munched my pie in triumph – bring on the teenage years! Well, maybe not bring them on.