

Life after Shopping: My Pilgrimage to the Mall of America by Rev. M. Lara Hoke
a reflection at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Andover November 28, 2010
(Note: This was done as a “PowerPoint Reflection” with slides. The words here approximate what I said that day, which was more extemporaneous.)

I don’t know about you, but the marketing techniques this time of year make me crazy. I’m amazed how many fliers we get in the mail advertising this holiday sale and that. And of course, now email marketing is part of the picture. I just got an email inviting me to a “private shopping event” at Best Buy – imagine how special I felt. And then, of course, there are the techniques involving the timing of your shopping – if you aren’t lucky enough to be invited to a private shopping event like I was, perhaps you can distinguish yourself by being one of those shoppers who is in line at 4 a.m. to get the best deals on Black Friday! Or if you have the right coupon you can save 15% – but just for this weekend – hurry before sales end! And perhaps you can “save \$25” – after spending \$50 on something you don’t need, of course. The sense of *urgency* is what always amazes me – and how easy it is to get caught up in it.

How did we come to this? How did we come to be a country where the average person spends something like one hour a week in religious or spiritual time, but more than five hours a week shopping?¹

If you are old enough to remember shopping in the 30s and 40s, chances are you remember going downtown, going from store to store for what you needed. If you remember shopping in the 50s and 60s, perhaps you remember the advent of (what at the time seemed like) gigantic department stores (like Sears & Roebuck). Now you didn’t have to go downtown and deal with difficult parking and the other challenges. And you could go into one big store with departments and find what you needed – there would be less need to brave the elements. If you remember shopping in the 70s, then you probably started seeing shopping malls. They had all the advantages of the stand-alone department stores, and then some. Retail convenience was taken to a whole new level. And with places to sit and eat and little fountains and such, shopping malls offered a full day’s entertainment. So more than ever, they offered not just a place to shop for what you needed, but also a spot to hang out and even socialize.

Just like many Americans – certainly many Americans from my generation, Generation X – I grew up with shopping malls. Truly, they loom large in my memories from youth and adolescence. As a tween and teen, the shopping mall was where you hung out with friends in your spare time. I know teenagers still hang out in malls to some extent. But truly. *Nothing* like what we Gen X-ers did in the 1980s. We were the ultimate, and original, mallrats.

The trick was, of course, to get a ride to the mall. Maybe Mom or Dad or an older sibling could get you there – or eventually you or your own friends might have access to wheels to get to the mall yourself. You went to the mall with a minimum of spending money – but some.... And what did you do, for hours, to entertain yourself? We generally didn’t have enough money to buy anything much, mind you. Maybe enough for a snack or small meal at the mall food court. Maybe a few quarters for the mall arcade – mind you, this was before computer games and

¹ I first heard this statistic in the documentary *What Would Jesus Buy*; the “American Time Use Survey” of the Bureau of Labor Statistics seems to confirm this.

Nintendo and X-Box, so pinball and Pac Man and the like seemed like big fun. But generally, you spent your hours walking around the mall, going into stores, talking loudly and irritating some customers and clerks, sometimes trying on clothes – never buying... More than anything, the mall was a vehicle for adolescent socializing. You went to spend time with your friends. And there was limitless people-watching and flirting potential, for those so-inclined. I went on just a handful of dates in high school. The first date I ever went on was with a boy I met, yes, at the shopping mall. Strange, but true. It was the 80s, and when we weren't watching video after video on MTV, we were at Capitol City Mall.... Or the East Mall... or some other mall. That's just what we did.

In some ways, I look back, and it all seems pretty harmless. I mean, it was a relatively safe environment. I suppose you could find trouble if you were really looking for it. But all in all, there were adults around, and security, and it was basically safe and harmless. Or, *was* it? Because sometimes I really wonder. *Was* it harmless? Though we 80s mallrats were mostly not buying much in those malls growing up, we were surrounded by the endless goods that malls have. The endless variety of products that you might never know existed if you didn't see them in the window. And once you see them, you might *want* them. And it might start to feel as though everyone cool has them. And when you grow up and make money of your own and have those magical wands called “credit cards”, you might convince yourself that the kind of stuff you've wanted for years is actually stuff you *need*. I believe that the years we spent hanging out in shopping malls, combined with the never-ending barrage of ads on TV and the Internet, has addicted my generation to shopping.

Now, I haven't exactly enjoyed shopping malls since I was in my late 20s. I suppose maybe between getting older and the advent of Internet shopping, the malls lost some appeal. But for better or worse, like MTV, they will always be a part of my youth.

Switching gears... This past summer, I had a whole new kind of shopping mall experience. I went to the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly – the annual business meeting of the UUA – in June, and it was held in Minneapolis, MN, last year. I didn't have much free time, but I did give myself an evening off. I wasn't sure what I would do, but then it hit me: Isn't the Mall of America nearby? I'd heard about the Mall of America since the early 1990s, and I'd always been a little curious. And somehow, I felt like I'd come away learning something about our culture. That was how I rationalized it, in any case, as a kind of pilgrimage. And so I got on the commuter train and went to Bloomington, MN, where I became one of the 40 million people who visit the Mall of America each year. Since it opened in 1992, more than half a billion people have visited, making it the biggest tourist destination in the Midwest.²

The Mall of America is 4,200,000 square feet in size. That's big enough to hold seven Yankee stadiums. There are more than 13,000 parking spaces available; more are planned. Actually, an expansion of the mall is being planned, which would be a 5,200,000 square foot expansion. They're working on funding it. The Minnesota State Legislature has passed a bill granting the city of Bloomington the right to raise property tax and sales tax to pay for the expansion, so that's a start. But I digress.

² Statistics from the Mall of America website and Wikipedia.

Now, growing up in a shopping addicted generation, I knew enough to make a plan before I went to the mall – you know, I gave myself limits. I told myself, you’re allowed to buy one thing – nothing more than \$20 – and you’re allowed to buy dinner or something to eat. But I have to tell you, as I was sitting on the commuter train on my way to the mall – it was a stormy night, the mood was interesting... And I was sitting there bargaining with myself. You know. What if I see something really unique? What if I see something that I really need that is on a great bargain? What if I buy presents for other people, that shouldn’t count at all, right? There was a lot of dialogue inside my head sitting on that train.

When I got out of the train, the first thing I saw was an overflowing garbage can. Something about this jolted me; I felt oddly convicted. But up the escalator and inside the mall I went. The place literally took my breath away. It made me feel dizzy! I was greeted by a huge crowd and a din of noise. I feeling that I can only describe as feeling “soul sick” came over me. And I told myself: No buying anything here. It was like the reaction some of us have to the marketing madness of Black Friday – we react with a counter slogan, “Buy Nothing Day”, right? So that’s what overcame me once inside: I will buy nothing here today. Just food. (There must be an exemption for food, right?)

I had not read up on the mall, so I didn’t know anything except that it was huge. I was actually shocked by what I saw. The Mall of America, with its 4.2 million square feet, has more than 50 restaurants. There are more than 500 stores – that’s more than four miles of storefront. Naturally there’s a huge movie theater complex. There’s a mirror maze in the mall. There’s a miniature golf course in the mall. Why, there’s a hotel in the mall, and a casino. There’s an aquarium beneath the mall. There’s an amusement park inside the mall. Why, there’s even a wedding chapel – the Chapel of Love Wedding Chapel – right there in the mall next to Bloomies. More than 5,500 couples from around the world have been married there.

Little by little, my appetite went away – I mean my appetite for food. This does not happen to me very often. But I almost had butterflies in my stomach in there... I just didn’t feel like eating.

In the end, I succeeded: I did not buy any retail products, nor did I pay for any of the amusements, nor did I buy any food. In fact, the only thing I bought was another Metro Transit ticket to get back to Minneapolis as soon as possible.

At the time, on the train ride back, I felt almost giddy. I was very proud of myself. I felt triumphant. I had gone to the MOA and *bought nothing!* Shouldn’t that entitle me to bragging rights for the rest of my life? But the more I’ve reflected on the experience, the less proud I feel. First of all, really, why did I decide to spend one of just a couple of free evenings in a huge shopping mall – by myself, no less? Why did I let myself become one of the millions of tourists to go to the MOA? And why is it that I had to go through all the psychological bargaining? And why on earth does it feel like an *achievement* that I bought nothing? Particularly when I didn’t really need anything! Why does shopping have such a powerful grip on me, even though I know better? Even though I know – like you all do – that endless and mindless and joyless consumption is a cultural shame – it’s a “sin”, if you like that language.

In a strange way, I think the Mall of America's slogan provides an important clue. What is the slogan? MOA: "More ways to be you". *More ways to be you?* The more I think about it, the more I think that many of us use shopping as a way of defining ourselves... we use shopping as a way to establish an identity. Back before shopping was so central – and back when we spent less time sitting in front of the TV or Internet, isolated and soaking up marketing messages – back then, your identity was determined largely by how your family and friends – the folks you spent your time with – saw you. You were the funny one. The well-read one. The one who tells a good story. Or what have you. You were what your loved ones saw you as, and perhaps also your job (which has been important in identity in this country for a long time). When you spend a lot of time with friends, where everybody knows you well, it's easy to have a strong sense of identity. But today? With our isolated existences? With so much TV and Internet time, more and more it is the world of marketing that we look to for a sense of ourselves. It's filling a gaping void in a world where truly so few people know us well. I am what I wear. I'm a Levi's gal. I am what I drive. I'm a Chevy Aveo, but I wish I were a Toyota Prius. I am what gadgets I have. Right? I'm a PC. Are you a Mac? And on and on. You can go to a place like the Mall of America, and through your retail choices you can find "more ways to be you".

After the offering, we will watch brief excerpts from *What Would Jesus Buy?* a documentary about Rev. Billy and the Church of Life After Shopping (from which I got this sermon title). (They used to be the Church of Stop Shopping, which you'll hear in the video.) They are part cultural protest, part performance art. And the message is anti-consumerist: Stop your mindless consumption. Buy what you *need*; if you need nothing, buy something for someone who *is* in need. Give gifts of yourself, not gifts that are things. I am in agreement with the message, and am mostly amused by the delivery they use. But I want to close with this additional plea. Whatever you do or don't buy this holiday season, please, *please* spend more time with your friends. Spend more time with your family – I mean your extended family, not just the folks you live with, though quality time with them is good too. Don't turn on the TV when you get home; step away from the computer. Don't hide behind shopping and a fog of busy-ness this holiday season. Call a friend – or text, if you must. Socialize. Don't you miss regular, impromptu socializing? If you find you don't have enough friends who have time to "hang out", then something is out of synch in your life. Life is too short to be isolated, and you are too fabulous to hog yourself to yourself! Get out there and share yourself... and you will indeed find more ways to be you. May we all have the courage to find intimacy in our lives. May we all have the courage to be our authentic, true selves. Blessed be, and amen.