

**A Global Family Portrait?**  
**delivered November 25, 2012**  
**by Rev. Michelle Collins**

Did any of y'all go shopping on Friday?

The day after Thanksgiving ranks as the highest grossing shopping day of the year here in the United States, although only since 2005. Before that, the highest was the Saturday before Christmas, but Black Friday still ranked up there. And there are all sorts of theories as to why it's called Black Friday, although again the name is only a recent attachment to the day. The theories range from traffic jams in Philadelphia to accounting profit's being colored black on the balance sheets and that Friday being the day that many retailers turn to profits for the year.

But it's not even Friday anymore. Starting really this year, many retailers opened their doors Thanksgiving evening, some as early as 8pm. And Amazon has been offering countdown to Black Friday deals for quite a while.

The National Retail Federation keeps statistics on shoppers and profits, no surprise. In the United States last year, 226 million people shopped over the Thanksgiving weekend.<sup>1</sup> I don't know if they double count some folks – they probably do – but that's still a lot of people. There's only 314 million of us to begin with, including the kids. The average amount spent was just under \$400 total. And then the pictures of the lines upon lines of people, waiting for that special deal for a gift, or increasingly, for themselves. That's even made it into the advertising – Target had a commercial this year with the tag line “one for you and one for me.”<sup>2</sup>

What is going on here?!?

First, take a holiday that, at least in modern times, is about families gathering and sharing time together. But then the big televised event of the morning is a parade historically put on by one of New York City's larger retailers, whose finale is the appearance of Santa Claus. Enter the onslaught of holiday consumption. Remember when it was 8am on Friday. Then back to 7am. Then some folks were in line for 4am openings. And now it's infringing on Thursday, with Walmart leading the way to Thursday evening sales. The National Retail Federations lead article this weekend was titled “Thanksgiving Shopping Quickly Becomes Holiday Tradition for Millions of Americans.”<sup>3</sup> I was glad to hear of the walkouts and strikes organized by many of

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.nrf.com/modules.php?name=News&op=viewlive&sp\\_id=1260](http://www.nrf.com/modules.php?name=News&op=viewlive&sp_id=1260)

<sup>2</sup> My thanks to Madison Avenue for finally being a tad bit more honest and couching overconsumption not only in terms of generosity but also framing it in terms of individual desires.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.nrf.com/modules.php?name=News&op=viewlive&sp\\_id=1461](http://www.nrf.com/modules.php?name=News&op=viewlive&sp_id=1461)

Walmart's employees due to these Thanksgiving Day openings and their wanting to spend the holiday with their families instead of at work preparing for shoppers.

226 million of us took part in this strangest of rituals last year – the numbers aren't in for this year yet. And I do call it a ritual. It has traditions and symbolism attached to it and lots of energy reinforcing it every year. It's a ritual that directs behavior. But as a ritual, how powerful is it for shaping our identity as well? How much of our identity is wrapped up in the acquisition and possession of STUFF?

Today I shared from one of my favorite photo books, the collection *Material World* by photographer Peter Menzel.<sup>4</sup> I have been fascinated with this book for years. It's based on a nifty central concept – what they did was they went around the world to 30 different countries and found statistically average families, with average income, typical family arrangements, a typical home, traditions, and religion. Then they created what they called the "Big Picture." I can't even imagine how difficult it must have been to convince families to do this part. They brought the family's possessions, or selected possessions in the case of wealthier countries; they brought that family's stuff out in front of their house and took a portrait of the family surrounded by their stuff. As you heard in our story today, the goal of the project was that those looking at the pictures could learn more about their fellow human beings and better understand what their lives are like.

One of my favorites is Mongolia. The family pictured lives in a yurt which is semi portable housing with a round wooden frame covered by traditionally animal skins but in modern times more likely to be sturdy fabric. For the Big Picture, they just rolled back the wall and roof on one side to open up the house. Sitting in chairs around their dining table are the father, mother, their two children, the father's sister and her daughter, everyone who lives in the yurt. A favorite meal is laid out on the table. Front and center is the family television complete with their statue of the Buddha that sits on top. The family sheep is tethered beside the house. And their little boy is laughing like he just heard the best joke in the world.

I love seeing many of the differences between families, although I'm often not sure what larger understanding I'm gleaning from them aside from just stark income differences. The family in Japan has a lot of shoes. In Iceland, their musical instruments are important to them. In Uzbekistan, the family's possessions consist primarily of a vast number of rugs and quilts. The Chinese family values the fish in the pond beside their house, and during harvest time family members take turns sleeping by the pond to keep them from being stolen. Televisions are

---

<sup>4</sup> Peter Menzel, *Material World: A Global Family Portrait*, 1994.

featured prominently in many of the pictures, at least for the families who can afford them. And many show extended families who all live under the same roof together.

The title of the book is *Material World* – which makes sense, it's a display of the material possessions throughout the world. But let me go a little further than that – does it mean to be a world that is material? A world whose defining feature is material goods, or lack thereof? The subtitle of the book is *A Global Family Portrait*. In my excitement about the book, I got swept up by this way of thinking myself – using this lens of possessions to understand other humans and who they are. Looking at someone's stuff to know who they are as people. It seems our material possessions and the rituals surrounding them DO define our identity!

This idea has been intentionally crafted and reinforced over time.

Listen to what American economist and retail analyst Victor Lebow said in 1955:

“Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfactions, our ego satisfactions, in consumption. The measure of social status, of social acceptance, of prestige, is now to be found in our consumptive patterns. The very meaning and significance of our lives today expressed in consumptive terms. The greater the pressures upon the individual to conform to safe and accepted social standards, the more does he tend to express his aspirations and his individuality in terms of what he wears, drives, eats- his home, his car, his pattern of food serving, his hobbies.

These commodities and services must be offered to the consumer with a special urgency. ...We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing pace. We need to have people eat, drink, dress, ride, live, with ever more complicated and, therefore, constantly more expensive consumption.”<sup>5</sup>

It's planned and calculated manipulation.

How true, and how frightening, this rings today. According to this quote: “Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life...”

Not only during the holiday times but year round – how much conversation centers around stuff, what we want, what we have, what we're giving away, what we're doing with what we have, and what we think about what others have?

Back to the quote: “...[it demands] that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals...”  
Black Friday sales, wish lists and visits with Santa Claus, birthday parties, holiday parties and gift

---

<sup>5</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victor\\_Lebow](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victor_Lebow)

exchange traditions... what other rituals do we have for how we purchase and how we use our stuff?

“...[and it demands] that we seek our spiritual satisfactions and our ego satisfactions in consumption of goods.” Ego satisfactions and their connection with material property is obvious – “keeping up with the Joneses” and “the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.” And so much marketing is designed with this in mind – using appeals to the ego in order to sell their product.

But spiritual satisfaction too... one’s sense of meaning and fulfillment, feelings of connection with other human beings, relationships and how they are nurtured, enacting one’s values, and especially the ways that identities are formed and refined. I can think of ways that all of these spiritual satisfactions can be connected with material goods, and also ways that things proclaim their ability to meet these needs!

The consumption of goods has become overconsumption. Just look at the drama surrounding Black Friday and a typical December holiday season. It’s not just identity through consumption but OVER-identifying with things and with the rituals surrounding them. The consequences for this are disastrous.

In an environmental sense it’s just not sustainable, both in the short term but especially in the longer term. Consumption even at current levels would take multiple planet earths to maintain in terms of raw materials, energy resources, absorbing pollution and by-products, production, distribution, and so on. Individual footprints created by current consumption patterns are staggering.

But it’s also dehumanizing, this materialism is. The more energy that we pour into the rituals surrounding the acquisition and giving of stuff, the more energy it takes from our lives and from our very being. These rituals are how we channel our energy and our attention to it. The rituals take over our identity and shape our humanity instead of the other way around.

Someone told me recently how in the past she had always gone shopping on Black Friday because she felt like she had to. She felt like she had to. Unconscious expectations; societal norms; is it just the way things are? When the rituals start to tell us who we are is when we need to start raising our attention to them and making conscious decisions about how we want our identity to be shaped and who we want to be, ourselves and as a human body. But how else can we do it?

Staying with this idea of rituals that define us, let me propose a couple of others, rituals that unite us and form identities for a portrait of our humanity.

In the United States, we engaged in an entirely different set of rituals earlier this month, and for quite a while longer really, when the campaigning got started in earnest. Not only are the elections part of the way that we choose to govern ourselves but they are also saturated with a variety of rituals. The process of voting, working or volunteering with putting on the elections, campaign commercials, phone banks and telephone campaigning, both from the side of making the phone calls and of course receiving vast numbers of them. Polling, debates, even the color coordination of which state has voted in favor of which party. They are rituals. These rituals have a tremendous amount of energy that we invest in them! Is it worth it? I'm not going to go there today. They do say a lot about how we choose to govern ourselves and then how we go about implementing that choice. Governance in small scales and on much larger ones has been a defining feature for much of human history. Humans are united in their agreements of how their societies function. They are significant rituals, ones that in cycles we do put a good deal of energy into, but I don't know if they feed the spirit.

What I'm yearning to find are rituals that connect with something deeper in ourselves. I'm looking for what could really be an alternative to the strangle hold that consumption has in our society. We need to find these rituals and start building on them, giving THEM our energy instead.

Let me tell you about a group that I worked with in San Francisco. During my year of internship with the Faithful Fools Street Ministry, I co-led our weekly Bible study. It was one of my favorite parts of my work that year. This group had its own set of rituals – a table full of Bibles from a wide variety of translations, a platter of doughnuts and a pot of hot coffee, and the fact that the group started and ended every single meeting with singing. Now I can't say that we were a stellar group of vocalists by any stretch of the imagination. But there was one song that blew me away every time that we sang it. While the group sportingly struggled through most of the hymns, when we did Amazing Grace no one even needed the music. It was a full 4 parts (or maybe more) with some of the most robust and emotional singing I ever heard. And they never got tired of it! It was also one of the most requested songs that we did!

The singing of Amazing Grace is a societal ritual, and I'd rank familiarity with the song, maybe not with Happy Birthday or Jingle Bells, but not far from them. But not only is it a ritual, it's one with this fabulous enriching energy attached to it. This has the power to challenge some of the energy that all of this shopping and consuming carries! This is what we need! Spiritually enriching and community enriching rituals. Ones that are viable alternatives to society's overriding rituals. Constructive rituals rather than destructive ones. Our work, as individuals and as a church, is to seek out rituals like this and find ways to enact them.

What other rituals can you think of? What other rituals do we have that are how we want to be defined as humans? As a society and as humanity, we have to find these, before we forever destroy the health of our only planet, losing ourselves in the process. What rituals can we find today? What rituals can we make? May we seek out ways to live these alternatives in our own lives, and carry them into the rest of the world as well. Blessed be.