

Lauren Dawson

Sunday January 21, 2018

My Dear Lady,

There are such a number of things I would like to share with you.... Like for example I think we just had the very best Breakthrough Day that has ever happened. I am not alone in saying that. Multiple people at the dinner we just had, agreed it was the best ever. Ever so briefly, it was like being in the Seminar in the feeling where God really completely takes over and all the moving parts (like we, ourselves) are all just instruments he is moving around his chessboard so that everyone can individually receive what is needed. I am utterly inspired. Sara did a magnificent job. But mostly God is moving in for the people and for all of us like never before.

I want to share with you about the remote people, that we had a record 12 people at our streaming meditation this week for the Kalindi meditation series of 5 public meditations, designed for her birthday and to support people to set up their year. People are saying that those are some of the best meditations we have ever had. We have 2 brand new people who came to one and then called me to sign up for all 5.

Because I support the remote people in the US, I want to share that after this Seminar we finally have one remote person who is absolutely on fire to participate in everything. He calls me nearly every other day about the next question he has or to let me know what he accomplished next including applying for the Freedom Walk Path already and requesting that his application be reviewed right away so he can attend the Go Deeper Day. (Which we will of course make sure happens.)

But the thing that tonight, everyone said I must write to you about, and that my heart had been wanting to share—was about the 100th monkey phenomenon, and one crystal clear example of how I witnessed that happening this December.

Sometime towards the end of last year, you suggested that the Path take on not shopping for a year. We agreed and I would say this one was not so easy for me personally. But in December, ironically while I was actually at a shopping mall,

getting some small presents for Peter's family, I found the article that I have attached to this letter.

It was a New York Times article called, "My Year of No Shopping." I was stunned. All I could think of was "Oh my God the 100 monkey thing is happening mainstream!" This is the New York times!. In the article, the author talks about how when she takes on this practice, she discovers how much more time she has, how freed up her mind is for other things like giving, and how this addiction essentially has been making her feel worse while promising give something it doesn't deliver. She also realizes how much of what she needs she already has, and that she has gratitude for what she does have. She ends the article with this quote: "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."

I was just so excited to read the article, which helped me in that very moment in the mall. It came with that feeling of God reaching down from Heaven to give you a personal message Himself. But also it inspired me so deeply as an example of how what we are doing is helping the over-all consciousness of the world as Gourasana always said. It was such a direct example.

In another example, Peter's sister's kids, who are now young adults, declared that they did not want Christmas to be "so materialistic anymore." So mostly instead of gifts, we all wrote cards to each other appreciating who people are and what they give and bring. This message of letting go of material addictions was everywhere. And it was coming from so many sources. It was being realized in all the monkeys. I don't know why this excited me so much but I feel God in it. It has a feeling of the supreme almighty moving messages and realizations into this plane, that are sorely needed here. And I love to feel the ways that we are helping that to happen.

I love you Lady.

Lauren

My Year of No Shopping

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 hell bent 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."

Ann Patchett is the author, most recently, of the novel "Commonwealth" and the co-owner of Parnassus Books.