

My latest “Cheap” book

Flipping through the channels on a Sunday afternoon, I stopped at CSPAN to see what the “book notes” topic might be. The author stood at a podium expounding on a book. After a few minutes watching, I decided to continue to watch Ellen R. Shell talk about “Cheap: the High Cost of Discount Culture”. At the end of her talk and question time, I jotted down the name of her book and made up my mind to purchase her expensive hardcopy.

Shell takes the reader on a journey from Woolworth’s to Woolco; from K-Mart’s “Blue Light Special” to Sears Catalogue. She introduces us to Discount Centers with its philosophy of “cutting back on customer service giving the impression the merchandise was cheap, not because of low quality but because of low overhead.” Discounters offered people not what they wanted but what was the cheapest, thus eliminating slow performing items. She suggests that “trips to Discount Centers begin with high hopes, moves to a frustrated search and ends happily with a surprising number of unanticipated purchases.”

She goes on to explain some gimmicks and terminology used to lure people into purchasing items. She talks about “brand dillusion,” “loss aversion,” “natural” value versus “market” value. She mentions how the advent of shopping carts changed the shopping experience and how Wrigley’s Chewing Gum was the first product branded with UPC codes in order to facilitate the introduction of scanners. She also indicates that the numbers 1,2,3, are used most often at the beginning of a price, never at the end and how, in the 1880’s, the number 9 showed up in prices. The “rebate” and “coupon” trap is another area that she covers in her book. Filling out a “rebate” form is anti-climatic and the redemption rate is between 5 – 10%

She devotes an entire chapter to the IKEA experience; IKEA, not the world’s largest furniture “maker,” but the world’s largest furniture “retailer,” with its “Lack” coffee tables, Its “Rusig” rugs and its “Galant” drawers; furniture made by 1,300 vendors in 53 countries; a company that developed the “flat-pack” mentality. They promote the value of their products by “outsourcing” to the customer who comes “from the adventure of hunting down, hauling home and using your own hands to put together a well-designed object.”

Shell has taught me a lot about the antics and psychology used by businesses to entice customers into their stores to purchased perceived “bargains.” Obviously, such psychology works as we all love getting a bargain.

Sometimes, I think people think they can use the same psychology to obtain a bargain based redemption and salvation from God.

I remembered a young law student from another parish who wanted to get married in our church. We charge an “out-of-parish” rate to non-parishioners for use of the church. When this young bride-to-be noticed the rate she would have had to pay, she began to look for a church bargain. Some days later, she called from law school to see how she could become a member of our parish. Obviously, we discovered a “bargain-hunter.”

Sometimes, we find people needing to make a big production of having a funeral in church with all the trimmings for a person who rarely went to church except for being a “C & E Catholic” (Christmas and Easter) or, as some refer to such, as “P & L Catholics” (Poinsettias and Lilies). Is such a production an effort to make up what has been lacking for several years?

Also, we find some people who show up to get married in the church and we rarely see them again until the baptism of their first child. Then, there is another lacuna until that child is ready to make first Communion and then later Confirmation. In some cases, the old adage seems appropriate: being “hatched, matched and dispatched” through the church.

We discover that the price for redemption is anything but a bargain basement price. It does involve a full price with no room to haggle or discount. The true cost is the cross.

Oh! By the way! I did get a good deal on Ellen Shell’s book. In fact, I got a bargain. I ordered it on Cyber Monday on line. A few days earlier, a well-known bookseller had sent me a 15% off on line coupon toward the purchase of one book. On their web, they also offered a “Members” discount even though one did not have a “Members” card. Free shipping was also included. Did I get a bargain? Did I get a “Cheap” book? Of course, I did. At least, it was cheaper than the full price.