

Discount Shopping
By Ruth Nemzoff

I prided myself on not liking to shopping. I was too busy with important matters to put together glamorous ensembles. I was above *that sort* of material focus. Then my house in the Boston suburbs burned down. Left with only the clothes on my back that smelled of smoke, I had to go shopping like it or not! I didn't even have a change of undies! A privileged problem, I acknowledge. But where to go? Some friends sent me to fancy shops with a personal shopper. Others sent me to discount stores. My favorites were the stores with communal dressing rooms because the personal shoppers pressured me to buy expensive clothes. In the communal dressing rooms, I was offered multiple opinions.

Many towns have discount stores with communal dressing rooms. Bostonians in their 80's or 70's were brought up with Filene's Basement where you changed in the aisles. New Yorkers knew Loehmann's. Then came the chains like Hit or Miss. Currently T.J. Maxx and Marshalls are dominant discount retailers. New to the field are small boutique discounters that sell their surplus from boutique designers. Many of these are owned by women. Shopping I could rationalize, was not merely material acquisition, but also a chance to help small entrepreneurs succeed. In Boston Designer Circus dominates that market. There you not only find advisors, but also clients who feel free to critique the fashion maven's counsel.

I still love the intimacy of communal dressing rooms. It's a chance to enter the lives of strangers. I hear about upcoming weddings and all the decision-making around the color of the dress, the style and I also hear their nervousness about the new in-laws. I see sisters bonding with a frankness few friends can achieve. I learn that shopping can be a social event, far less fattening than eating. I learn the thrill of the chase; it's fun to find the "perfect" dress. It's nice to feel enhanced. I came to understand that for some people shopping is a substitute for the atavistic need to hunt.

When I was elected to the New Hampshire State legislature, my go-to-attire was jeans covered with peanut butter stains, a peace sign, and a plaid shirt.

But when I entered the legislator, the first thing I did was buy some business suits, intuiting that dressing, like the packaging of my views, is a political act. Before my book tours, I chose a stylishly tailored suit that conveyed authority yet openness--or at least I thought it did. As I watched other women choose clothes for professional events, I realized that clothing can be a way of signaling many messages. I helped a flutist select a dress for her upcoming appearance with the Symphony ... glamorous yet not distracting...and I helped the head of a school select an appropriately stylish yet business-like number for this year's annual graduation. I learned that no matter what your body type, you can look stunning or sloppy. I saw that even all those tall, thin women whom I have always envied have a hint of fat and can look like clothes-hangers—or Miss Americas—depending on the shirt, pants, or dress they are trying on. Full bodied women can look glamorous or like snowmen.

The take-away for me is: forget plastic surgery. Instead, as your body changes, buy some new clothes at reasonable prices. It's far cheaper and a lot less painful. You can transform how your body looks and

change it daily. You're not stuck with a surgery-gone-amuck. Humans have always decorated their bodies. Clothes can satisfy this basic human activity with a lot less pain than scarification and tattoos. First world solution, yes, but one that employs many people at all levels of the industry.

Most important of all, I learned that maybe I was a bit judgemental, shopping is a way of socializing. Time for me to re-examine all my prejudices about the way others spend time.

Ruth Nemzoff is a Scholar in the Brandeis Women's Studies Research Center