

# The Year without a Purchase

*One Family's Quest to Stop  
Shopping and Start Connecting*

Scott Dannemiller

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# Introduction to the Worst Book Ever

**T**hanks for buying this book. I hope you keep reading, but I suspect there's a good chance that you'll stop after the first couple of paragraphs. And it's not because you're not smart enough to decipher big, fancy words.

Words like *decipher*.

No, I think you'll stop reading because this book isn't for everyone. When we told people we were not buying anything for a year, we had mixed reactions. Some folks thought it was a great adventure. Others? Not so much.

My best buddy Marty simply asked, "Why?" The expression on his face was the same look he might give if, say, I had just told him I was moving my family to the Amazon rainforest to open a restaurant that sells nothing but corn dogs.

Complete bewilderment.

When I told my brother, he asked, "Are you going to write a book about it?"

I shrugged. "Maybe."

He paused for a moment, then added, "That sounds like the worst book ever. 'Chapter 1: Didn't buy anything today.' 'Chapter 2: I want a new shirt. Not gonna get it.'"

"Thanks," I said. "I'll make sure to quote you on the dust jacket."

Big brothers are full of awesome.

Sadly, I can't fault their skepticism. I feel the same way, but for different reasons. For starters, why would anyone want to write a book about not buying stuff? Anybody who actually buys the book would probably feel like a failure from the word "go."

But I'm sure you picked up your copy at the local library.

Second, and more important, the vast majority of the people on the planet don't have excess spending money. Buying necessary items such as clothes, food, and shelter either stretches the budget, or is completely out of reach. It's the global norm. According to a World Bank report, roughly 80 percent of the world's population lives on less than ten dollars per day . . . 10 . . . the equivalent of two pumpkin spiced lattes at your local Starbucks.<sup>1</sup>

Those struggling to buy the basics will find our challenge laughable at best, and extremely offensive at worst. And justifiably so. I would feel the exact same way if I heard of a family experimenting with my harsh reality just for grins. So feel free to throw this book across the room. Just make sure there is no one standing in your way when you take aim. We don't want anyone to get hurt, and we don't have liability insurance for that kind of thing.

Now, if you have made it this far, there is a good chance the concept of not shopping for a year has some appeal to you, but you're not sure why. You just know that a vacation from consumerism somehow sounds like a good idea.

That's how it started for us.

Our situation is the middle-class American dream. We live in a modest, three-bedroom, two-bath house in the suburbs of Nashville, Tennessee. We have two kids. Our boy is six, and our girl is five. Jake plays little league, and Audrey is in Girl Scouts. I'm a self-employed corporate trainer. My wife Gabby works part-time from home. We have a gym membership. We drive a fourteen-year-old Acura Integra that's paid off and a seven-year-old Honda Pilot that's not. Look up "Cheesy Suburban Doofus" in the dictionary, and you'll see a picture of me in my driveway. I'm the one trying to start the lawnmower, wearing Crocs and socks, and whistling a medley of 80s-hair band ballads.

But something is wrong with this life. And it's not just my poor fashion sense.

You have probably felt it too. The day-to-day stress. The busyness. The feeling that you can never get ahead. The worries. The anxiety. The want and the need. The giving in and the giving up. We feel all of this and more for no good reason. On paper, we are living a dream life, but in our hearts we notice an empty space is growing larger by the day. A hunger and thirst for something more.

And it's not about the money.

Don't get me wrong. Money is important. Money is what drives our economy. Money allows us to buy our basic needs and survive. But it goes deeper than that.

Preoccupation with money is a symptom of something larger lurking just beneath the surface. What is it that fuels our desire for money and the material goods it can provide? Why do we choose to struggle for "more" when simplifying would be so much easier? And what have we lost in the process?

That's what this book is about. I wrote it to try to answer these questions and more. It is written for the disconnected. The stressed out. The anxious.

And maybe.

Just maybe.

It's for you.

Maybe you're feeling pressure to keep up with the Joneses.

Maybe you couldn't care less about the Joneses, but you are concerned that your kids might be shunned or made fun of if they don't have what the Joneses' kids have.

Maybe you feel trapped in a job that drives you nuts. It leaves you feeling burned out, with only enough energy to snap at your spouse or your kids; but you can't change for fear of changing your lifestyle.

Maybe you're giving your family a better life than you ever had, but you still feel unfulfilled.

Or maybe you're just tired of buying crap you don't need, but you keep doing it anyway, and it creates a ton of stress in your life.

If any of these describe you, then you're probably feeling imprisoned by your life.

You want to know a secret?

It doesn't have to be that way.

# Part One

## Living with Integrity

How did we get here, and what's it all about?



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## Chapter One

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# Darth Vader and the Call from God

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs . . . Love never fails.

(1 Corinthians 13:4–5, 8 NIV)

**M**ost ideas don't hatch overnight. Especially the questionable ones. They need time to percolate like a good cup of coffee. That's how it was for us.

You could say it all started ten years ago when Gabby and I started feeling disconnected—not from each other—but from reality. Gabby was working 50–60 hour weeks as an operations manager for a computer manufacturing company in Austin, Texas. When asked what she did for a living, her response was a simple, two word answer: “Professional Nag.”

She made money by staying on top of details and making sure other people did what they were supposed to do. Frankly, she was good at it. Her frantic days were spent bouncing from phone calls to meetings, dealing with crazy people. People who firmly believed that late computer shipments would cause the sun to explode and kill us all.

Unfortunately, she was becoming one of those people.

Gabby noticed her life becoming more transactional. Conversations were no longer meant for increasing understanding

and building relationships. They were a means to an end. Just another task in an ever-growing to-do list, and this attitude was beginning to bleed into her personal life, blurring the lines between life and work.

My job wasn't much better. I was a recent transplant to Austin. I worked as a technical trainer for a technology company. I hardly knew a soul and traveled most of the time. When I wasn't traveling, I was working online, spending time with "virtual people." To compensate, I forged relationships in places where people were forced to interact with me.

If I felt the need for some conversation, I would just drive over to Kool Klips, and share life stories with Belinda as she gave me an aptly priced six-dollar haircut. This worked well until our in-depth chatter served to be too much of a distraction, and my hair began to look like I had taken a nosedive into my kitchen blender.

Then there was the grocery store—a perfect place to pick up some crackers, spray cheese, and spot-on relationship advice. I began to call the checkout clerks my personal friends, learning about their families and social lives. I would hold up the line to ask lots of questions and delve into their personal business. It was an honest attempt to build community with those around me and create a more connected world. Unfortunately, my desperation turned this simple act of friendly conversation into something creepy. Shortly thereafter, they installed self-checkout lines.

Coincidence? Not likely.

On the outside, life was good for us. We had good jobs, a house in the suburbs, and vacations to exotic destinations. Inside, we felt as if we were stuck on a hamster wheel, pursuing activity for activity's sake.

Over dinner one night, we were both bemoaning our harried existence. We were becoming cogs in the wheel of a culture that was drawing us closer and closer to things that felt so very unimportant. We both felt the need to change the trajectory of our lives. We knew we wanted to focus on something different, but we weren't sure what that something different might be. That's when I blurted out, "Maybe we should just be missionaries or something."

They were throw-away words. A hypothetical question wedged in between bites of mashed potatoes and mac-n-cheese. In retrospect, I probably said it to get my wife to fall in love with me all over again by giving the impression that I was some sort of saint.

It didn't work.

In the time it took me to move my fork to my face hole, a smile instantly formed on her face, and she answered with an enthusiastic, "OK! Let's do it!"

I nearly aspirated my meatloaf.

I heard an audible "click" echo from inside her skull. My wife sprung into *work mode*. Ever the planner and organizer, she was frantically creating a mental Gantt chart of tasks, resources, and deadlines. She rattled off a list of "to-dos."

- Research potential locations
- Choose a destination
- Sell the house
- Sell the cars
- Find someone to take care of our dogs

The flood of words spewed forth as if a dam had burst inside her. It was like she had been planning this all her life. This idea of disconnecting in order to reconnect had captured her heart. It was a drastic change to kick start meaning, and she held on with both hands.

Meanwhile, I compiled a list of ways we might die as missionaries in a developing country.

- Impaled on long, sharp spears
- Cooked in a giant, black cauldron
- Thrown into a volcano
- Murdered by drug lords
- Ravaged by dysentery

Needless to say, I was not on the bandwagon. I have always been a fan of making the world a better place, so long as it means I don't have to change anything about my life. Like Martin Luther

King, I, too, have a dream. The difference is, rather than rally millions of people to put their lives on the line for truth and justice, I prefer to discuss my dream in very ambiguous terms over a plate of nachos.

So, there we were, battling it out. One of us motivated by love, and the other motivated by fear. A quick glance at history and the nightly news shows us that fear normally wins. Fear is strong. It has bulging biceps and ginormous pectorals. Fear admires itself in the mirror, grunting as it hurls weights the size of Volkswagens into the air with ease.

Love, on the other hand, is fragile. Love blows kisses and dandelion fluff into the breeze. Love bakes a batch of cookies for the school fundraiser and offers you a comfy seat on the bus. Normally, love doesn't stand a chance against fear.

But love is persistent. And this was a long-term battle.

As the weeks wore on, I began to wonder if the nagging in my gut had less to do with my eating some bad sushi and more to do with God, but I couldn't be certain. I was looking for a sign. I wanted it to be something obvious, like the voice of The Almighty echoing through my living room. To me, God's voice sounds like James Earl Jones' Darth Vader mixed with a hint of Charlton Heston.

*Scott. I am your Father.*

Alas, the celebrity voice-over commands never materialized. If God was sending signs, He must be using fine print. Maybe The Almighty Marketer was trying to speak to us through all of those roadside billboards adorned with pictures of faraway lands? Or the advertisements that were in our faces twenty-four hours a day?

That's when I started to notice all of the hints buried in the pages of newspapers and magazines. Laundry detergent. Potato chips. Hair Club for Men. It wasn't the *products* calling out to us. It was the *slogans*.

"A new formula."

"You want more."

"It's time for a change."

But I still wasn't sure it was a call from God. One evening, Gabby and I were discussing our options when the phone rang.

She answered. It was an acquaintance of ours. The woman didn't sound anything like James Earl Jones, but her words were a rubber mallet to my noggin.

"Hi Gabby. This is Katy. I know it's short notice, but I was wondering if you and Scott would be interested in joining a two-week mission trip to Guatemala next month."

God is funny.

We had been thinking of spending a year or more as missionaries, but the concept was terrifying. The uncertainty of such an experience was creating an avalanche of anxiety. Now, it was like God was pulling double-duty as a telemarketer, telling us, "Here's your money-back guarantee! Just try it out for two weeks, and if you don't like it, you can return to your mundane old life. But if you're satisfied, we'll give you a full year of mission service and even throw in this lovely set of steak knives!"

It's hard to say no to bonus steak knives.

We agreed to go on the trip as a way test the waters of missionary life. What we didn't realize was that this simple decision likely sealed our fate. Love's persistence overcame the strength of fear, fueled by the same force that put us on the hamster wheel in the first place.

Peer pressure.

Yes. That force that made you wear a tuxedo print t-shirt to prom back in the '80s? The mysterious power that told you to streak the quad back in college? The one that caused us to give in to the expectations of others, trying to leapfrog the Joneses and losing ourselves in the process?

God can use it for good.

In much the same way you might tell your friends about a new gadget you just purchased, we innocently told friends and family about our two-week mission trip. Inevitably, this led to discussions about a possible year-long commitment. Which led to people asking, "Why?"

This is when the tone of our conversations would shift. We moved beyond chats about Lasik surgery and family vacations and dove into the deep end of the connecting pool, discussing life and its frustrations. We talked about stress and busyness. We talked

about meaning. We talked about the false allure of manufactured joy. And the more we talked about these things, the more people would ask, “So when are you leaving?”

Now we were trapped. There was no good reason *not* to commit to a full year. Besides, if we told people we were going to look for meaning, we *had* to do it. What would they think if we didn't? We would be frauds, falling short of their expectations. But at least this time, we had a hunch that those expectations were pushing us in the right direction.