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The Shamanism of

Luxury

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In ancient shamanic traditions, one could supposedly gain power or good luck by ingesting, touching or possessing certain sacred or magical objects. A cannibal might eat the flesh of his enemy to gain his power. A pretty stone could be used as talisman to attract a mate. Even today, endangered animals are poached throughout the world for certain body parts that are seen to have medicinal properties when consumed.

Western society today generally rejects such beliefs as unscientific and destructive. Ground horn of rhinoceros is not an effective cure for cancer, except to the extent that any placebo is. The danger is that it displaces more effective treatments—not to mention threatening the rhino!

There is one form of shamanism, however, that remains strong in our society: the market for luxury goods. We don't necessarily believe that a Louis Vuitton purse or filet mignon dinner will bring us good luck, but there is always an implied belief that consuming the special product—ingesting, touching or possessing it—will somehow make us more valuable ourselves.

Behind most consumer products is a practical function. The function of a wristwatch is to tell time. The purpose of food is energy and nutrition. The role of a car is to get to you from place to place with minimal maintenance.

The luxury market says that function is not enough. The product has to have a right brand, the right cachet. It has to convey the impression that you are important, distinguished. That's where the shamanism comes in. By consuming the product, you believe you are gaining some sort of magical power.

Advertisers never exactly say what the magical power is (so they can never be accused of lying). Instead, they imply it with imagery, such as a gorgeous model displaying the product in a

prestigious setting. And no one purchasing the product would acknowledge a belief in magic, but that's what their purchase implies.

You can buy a wristwatch for \$10 or \$10,000. What do you get for the extra \$9990? Do you get a more accurate timepiece? Only marginally so—and how accurate does a wristwatch have to be? The purchaser might claim that the luxury watch conveys a good impression to business and social contacts, but does anyone you meet really care about your watch compared to your words and personality? A valuable watch has to be protected and locked up. It limits your movements through the streets. In functional terms, it's a pain in the ass.

There's only one reason you would own a \$10,000 timepiece: the implied belief that possessing such an object makes you a better person.

There's always a cover story. The purchaser may speak of the watch as an "investment" or talk about its beauty or workmanship, but it's all a sham. The fact is, the purchaser suffers from low self-esteem and the luxury product is a magical talisman to salve it. "If I own such a valuable object, I must be valuable, too."

Luxury shamanism permeates our society, not just in the objects labeled "luxury" but in excess of all kinds: the premium hamburger, the exotic tourist destination, the expensive wine. It persists because of people's natural affinity for shamanic solutions to their problems. Buying something always seems much easier than actually changing one's life, which involves far more anxiety.

The other reason luxury grips our society is there's huge profit in it. There is little money in selling people things they actually need, because this is usually a commodity business where

competition keeps prices low. Slap some premium cachet on the product, like a designer label or vintage year, and suddenly you can sell the same thing for many times more. This obscene profit margin fuels the advertizing that dominates the world around us. The luxury sellers are out there hawking, cajoling, pushing their products on you, while the things-you-really-need sellers can't afford to. *You* have to find *them*.

Take luxury out of our economy, and there wouldn't be much economy, but that doesn't mean it's healthy. When people seek talismans for their problems, they aren't taking real actions to solve them. They are burdened by luxury, not freed by it, and real solutions are pushed into the distance.

There are other remedies for low self-esteem. You could, for example, accomplish things you are proud of. If you're not inherently pleased with who you are or what you've done, then there's always luxury to tell you what you want to hear. That helps explain why drug dealers, mafiosos and scam artists are notorious consumers of luxury. The more reprehensible your industry is, the more you need the shamanic potion to try to feel right.

But the rest of us should be content with function. If you do what you're proud of then you don't need the false reassurance of your value. You don't need the better class of wine—or even any wine at all! You need to find the things that work, that most efficiently get the job done, so you can get on with your own job of doing what's important.

—G.C.

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