

December 9, 2014



**A Holiday Wish.
Probably a dream, maybe a hallucination...**

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The numbers aren't in for the 2014 holiday shopping year; in fact, one of the challenges is that experts can't really tell when holiday shopping began this year—there were so many pre-Black Friday (BF) sales. However, the news is full of articles about the discouraging 11% downturn in Black Friday sales and some doubts about the performance of Cyber Monday.

I have never shopped on Black Friday, I didn't know it existed until Thanksgiving 1977 when a few hours after the turkey our hosts pulled out the newspaper and began looking at ads for Friday sales. Quite honestly, it seemed weird. I am not an expert on BFs, but that doesn't stop me from wondering about this extremely hyped-up cultural phenomenon.

As I read the analysis of the poor BF performance (in short it is too early for the experts to make their final pronouncements), part of me is wondering if something good might be happening. Maybe the discouraging performance is a sign of a really good shift in behavior. Maybe some consumers are becoming more sensitive to "stuff" and the environmental and social impacts of over-consumption and in response are consuming more wisely and thoughtfully.

Maybe more people are using the holiday dollars to buy basics—like replacing the 13 year-old, 160,000 mile car, figuring that they should get ahead of the looming disaster when the only car breaks down at the inevitable inconvenient moment. Certainly "re-gifting" is now acceptable behavior; the only danger being giving it to the person who gave it to you in the past: re-gifting does not mean it was a lousy gift in the first place, just not particularly the right gift at the right time. Some I know have wrapped gifts of purchases made while travelling, not hokey shot glasses, but nice scarves, ethnic jewelry, cute kids toys, nicely bound blank books for journals. Others are electing to gift family "treasures"—some pragmatic (like the unfortunately seldom used great soup tureen that was a wedding present) and some more touching like grandma's first doll or grandpa's album of photos from 1905 Alaska. And some families are even returning to the home-baked cookies, the home-raised honey, and homemade jams as gifts. You can make a lot of gifts in the 6-10 hours some spend shopping on BF.

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Many folks in our circle are using the holiday funds to upgrade what is broken in the house: the dresser that doesn't quite work, the microwave that requires a special touch for it to function, the fence that needs repairing; replacing the torn (though functional) swimming fins or the (also still functional) camera with the broken lens. You don't need BF for any of these things. These gifts are best given by card, discussing the specifications with the recipient and then making it happen early in the New Year. At one level, these gifts are not exciting, but they are meaningful and strangely personal; and they don't rely on Black Friday or Cyber Monday.

Recently a senior, overwhelmed by the cost and trauma associated with gift giving in the 21st century, gave his 13 grandkids a cow for a village in Africa. Each kid got a big piece of a puzzle (wrapped up) which when they assembled the puzzle together they discovered a 7 foot cow and then learned what the gift was.

Travel has increasingly become the gift for families—rent a cabin, go to Hawaii, plan a trip for later in the year, save the “holiday funds” for a family reunion in the summer or a March weekend in Disneyland. No BF needed for these gifts.

From another perspective, and this one is discouraging, some people and particularly young people are so particular about gifts these days that often the best gift is either money or directly fulfilling the request. The fun of giving is faded. Unless one has a very specific description of exactly what a young person wants, the chances are the receiver will be disappointed. There isn't a lot of room for creativity; or a reason to join the BF crowds seeking inspiration at a good price.

In the past, people saved for the Holiday Season all year—special savings accounts--and used lay-away; this forward planning shifted towards plastic and paying afterwards—the debt strategy. While still a huge problem in this country, there is a trend to reduce personal debt. Another reason to skip BF is the temptation manifest in the form of great “deals” and the tendency for plastic to just jump out of the wallet with seemingly no human involvement.

These are all good-for-the-world reasons for a lackluster Black Friday: a hint of hope for an over-populated planet where over-consumption is too common. Hope is a good thing; necessary but not sufficient.

On the other hand, maybe the discouraging BF performance is, as some suggest, just a result of an extended shopping season and a pending vibrant cyber-sales season.

Perhaps, and much worse, it is a reflection of the increasing disparity and lack of disposable income for the middle class. I doubt the billionaires ever focused their shopping on Black Friday.

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MAHB-UTS Blogs are a joint venture between the University of Technology Sydney and the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to joan@mahbonline.org

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