

The Art of Shopping Thrift Stores

Laura spreads the wool, hand-knit afghan out and looks it over carefully. I think her thoughts include her evaluation of the quality of the afghan, its price (\$1.00) and the possible need for it in our home, one of our daughters' homes, or the home of a friend. Laura doesn't decide to buy or not to buy quickly. She folds the afghan and puts it back on the shelf. She files information about it in the back of her mind and lets it simmer there while she looks at clothing, used furniture, and anything else that catches her attention in this thrift store, which is primarily stocked with donated, used items. Some items are new, donated by people who discover they don't need what they have purchased, or donated by stores that need to clear shelves.

Thrift stores make goods available at low prices and direct goods toward use rather than toward the dump. Laura's favorite thrift store is a small, old cabin behind a church, with high quality items, where the highest price is \$3.00. The store sends its income to missions around the world to help support their work.

I usually don't come with Laura to these stores, because our styles of shopping don't mix well. When I shop, I see if they have what I need, perhaps a work shirt, buy it or don't, and leave. Laura usually doesn't seek anything specific but assesses much of what is stocked against the background of everything she knows, a time consuming process that I don't have the patience for, though the fruits of that process are all around me at home and on me here at the store. We have a wool rug, a lamp, books, blankets, curtains, clothing, and several pieces of furniture that Laura found for low prices at thrift stores. With us, we have the sweat pants I wear as long underwear, the thick, soft, wool sweater I have on, that is in new condition, that Laura bought for \$4.00 but that would have cost about \$85.00 at a regular store, her wool hat (50 cents), and her

crewel-work purse which she bought years ago for 10 cents.

Our daughters grew up with clothing mostly from thrift stores. Many of their toys had lived earlier lives before Juniper and Amanda acquired them at very small prices. Many of our dishes, pots and pans, and tools that we acquired for home use or for my jobs, we found in thrift stores.

Buying many of our needs from thrift stores as our daughters grew helped us keep our need for money low enough that we could make having a creative existence as a family more important than earning large amounts of money.

Our daughters are grown and on their own now, but the good work goes on. Last time Amanda and her husband visited us, Amanda wore a skirt, a sweater, and a hat that came from thrift stores. Brian's hat and sweater had known previous ownership. Had I not told you, you would not have known, because clothes purchased used at low cost can look as good as new.

I don't think Juniper shops thrift stores now, but she lives a frugal existence and has expressed appreciation for being raised in a family where material values came after values for creative existence and time and closeness together.

Today, Laura is still absorbed in her assessment of what is available in this store. She knows I don't wait well, and she would stop shopping and come with me if I told her I was ready to go home, but contemplation of what her careful shopping has done for us makes me more patient. In any case, I don't like to interrupt an artist at work, and, with practice over the years, Laura has made her skill at finding needed items at low cost into an art.

There are several items I need that might be available at a nearby store, so I decide to walk there, see if they have what I need, and walk back. By the time I get back, Laura might be finished.

I tell Laura I'll find her when I come back, and I walk out into the winter day. A small wind blows, taking most of the warmth out of the sunshine. I remove my gloves from my jacket pocket and put them

on. They are grey, soft, warm wool, very high quality, probably normally about \$10.00. They are one of two pairs Laura bought for me some time ago at a thrift store for 50 cents a pair. They are just right for the cold wind as I walk across the asphalt parking lot toward another store.