

Layoffs, new clothes, and shopping ethically

Renée Schafer Horton | Feb. 14, 2011 NCR Today

On Sunday right after Mass, I headed out to do the one thing I dread more than going to the dentist: shopping for new clothes. [Dante](#) [1] got it wrong when he described the various levels of hell because he left out shopping malls.

I so hate this activity that I put it off until my clothes are either so uncomfortable or, as is the case this time, I'm starting a new job.

Nearly two years ago, I joined the [more than 14,000 journalists](#) [2] who lost their jobs in 2008 and 2009 when Gannett shut down the newspaper where I worked. As the higher education reporter, I'd been covering layoffs at our local university and community college and really thought I understood how the "down economy" was affecting people.

Of course, I had no clue. Like so many other experiences, one must live through a layoff and the subsequent job-search desperation to comprehend the magnitude of insecurity and fear that takes over one's life in that situation.

One thing that happens -- especially after you've come THIS CLOSE to a job only to receive the call (again) that you were not the candidate picked -- is you begin to question everything about your appearance. Maybe, you think, you should whiten (or straighten) your teeth or have a professional highlight your hair or buy new clothes.

The problem is, when you're out of a job, you don't really have the money to do any of those things. So you do your best with home-whitening kits and dye your hair in the kitchen sink and make do with the one suit you had from your prior job and hope no one notices it is a tad outdated and a little too tight.

I've never been one to obsess over appearance (call my kids if you need this confirmed), but these past two years have made me rather paranoid about such things as pumps and pencil skirts. Once I landed my current position, I knew I'd have to make a shopping trip.

Which is how I found myself pondering the purchase of a \$68 button-down dress shirt and \$100 pressed and pleated slacks. The prices were enough for pause, but what really got my attention were the "made in" labels: the Philippines.

It is safe to say the women who made those very nice clothes would not be receiving much of the purchase price. [Although pressure has been brought](#) [3] against the sweatshops run by designer label companies and some changes have been made, the people toiling in the overseas apparel industry are still not making anything close to a just wage.

This is a problem for a Catholic trying (and often failing) to live an integrated life. My faith calls me to see Jesus in everyone, to care for the poor and downtrodden, to work to right the wrongs in the world. And for the

most part, I do.

Case in point: Recently, when getting a morning coffee, I gave a waitress \$10 to feed a man who looked in need of a meal to go with his free cup of coffee.

Ergo, my dilemma. It had been a long day, and I was exhausted. I had a pile of new-employee paperwork waiting for me at home, as well as family obligations. I just wanted a couple of professional outfits to get me started in this new job, clothes that would boost my confidence a little after 18 months of the confidence-bludgeoning known as job searching.

I sat down in the dressing room, cradling the clothes, and cried. It felt like a me-or-them scenario. I knew buying the clothes would neither hurt nor help the specific Filipinos who made them; the clothes were already here and those specific workers were onto making something else.

But knowing what little I know about the conditions of factories overseas, it felt like buying them would hurt those particular people, even if the clothes would benefit me in a new job.

In the end, I made a compromise that surely made no substantial difference in the garment industry but calmed my conscience a little: I bought the pants, but left the shirt.

Is there anyone else who struggles with this issue? How do you reconcile your faith with your marketplace habits? Discuss among yourselves and I'll check back here after working at a job for which I am extremely grateful.

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Links:

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dante_Alighieri

[2] <http://newspaperlayoffs.com/blog/>

[3] <http://www.economist.com/node/305062>