

A Dealer's Life

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"A collection to which there are no new additions is really dead."

~ Sigmund Freud

"I must always have an object to love."

~ Communication from Freud to Carl Jung

I bought my first rare book for a quarter when I was about 13 years old. It was a small 19th century classics dictionary. I still have it. With my allowance of a nickel a week it cost me five weeks of savings. Considering the cost, my father asked me if I was sure it was what I wanted. He said I ought to think about it for a week and then, if I still wanted it, I should buy it. It was a tortuous week as I began to think that someone would buy the book before I could return to the shop. At week's end we went back and, miracle of miracles, it was still there. I was supremely happy to buy that little book even though the price seemed truly exorbitant. I remember nodding vigorously that, "yes, this is what I want to buy," when my father asked if I was sure on that second weekend. As I

counted out my nickels I did not ask for a discount and none was proffered.

Through the years, before I left for college, I bought many items from that dealer. He bought and sold anything that caught his fancy. Every weekend I went there with my father who bought books and the occasional pipe or antique. I would also go with my mother who redecorated the entire house with her finds, a pair of wingback chairs in need of reupholstering (bought separately, months apart!), lamps, a mission-style dining table with matching chairs and so on. By the time I entered college I was a confirmed collector. My room was filled with stamps, coins, books, baseball cards, and fossils from our Appalachian hills.

After college, ensconced in my first professional job, I became interested in what kind of life I might have as a dealer. I was traveling a lot and would always seek out shops in the cities I visited to see what was on offer. At some point I suppose I thought of becoming a 'vest pocket' dealer as a way to support my collecting habit. I quickly found, however, that it is well nigh impossible to collect what you sell. Customers, understandably, will believe you are skimming the cream and selling them the stuff you consider below your standards. Finally, at the age of twenty-seven, I took the plunge with a business partner and opened a retail bookshop after making the decision not to pursue a job in New York. I reasoned that if I went to work in the Big Apple I would settle in comfortably and never attempt anything else; it can be hard to leave the comfort of the known life. I also thought that if I failed at dealing – and how could I as a young master of the universe, I was still young enough to retreat to my professional training. In very little time I made the leap from handsomely employed, moderate collector to

neophyte dealer and factotum; that is, from buyer to seller.

The dealer lies at the convergence, the intersection if you will, of two traditions: art appreciation and merchandising, i.e. connoisseurship and the flogging of one's stock-in-trade. The balancing act required between the two makes for a life of pleasure and pain, ecstasy and despair as these two sometime fractious entities seek their respective limelight; first bows for the one, then the other as they then link hands to share the stage. In the best of all possible worlds, and in the best dealers, these 'arts' gain their necessary balance with more frequency than predicted by serendipity alone.

But to materially appreciate the item, no pun intended, one must first acquire it. And that is an art unto itself, all the more so in these times of best-of-class scarcity. What dealer has not had his or her chest tighten and voice crack and rise upon asking to inspect an object of admiration, anxiously holding tight against the seller taking note of your increased blood pressure with a resulting moment-of-

avarice price ‘jacking’? It is that most liminal of mercantile moments followed, hopefully, by the timeless haggling of the marketplace. Each of these processes has its own subtleties, its own dance and the older one gets the more finesse one ought to exhibit in this *pas de deux* precedent to one’s right of possession.

The coda to all this rigmarole, this *ritual*, of course, is the lament of the seller over parting with a treasured object as it is wrapped for departure to its new (temporary) home. Perhaps employees, relatives or onlookers will gather together as this happens as if in witness to the passing of this particular baton.

At night in his lodging the dealer may well open the carefully wrapped package to either admire the new object or, just as important, see if it really measures up to that initial adrenaline rush that prompted its purchase. Ownership is a powerful aphrodisiac, as we all know, and with many dealers does not diminish with the passing of time. Age may soften the edges of one’s hunger but not the appetite. As Proust’s Swann noted, “I say

to myself, rather as Mazarin said of his books, ... it will be very tiresome to have to leave it all.”

Some of us cannot imagine having an occupation other than as a dealer (or, maybe, collector.) We say, “it’s in our blood,” certainly a tip of the hat (even if un-attributed) to Schopenhauer who articulated human intelligence as the blind servant of the unconscious with much of what we actually see, in fact, being illusory, a human construct. Most of us do know, however, that these ideas about the unconscious were more fully fleshed out by that collector of artifacts and souls, Sigmund Freud. (The ‘human construct’ idea, i.e. science is not a mirror, a true thing in itself, it is a method, was the realm of Mach, an heir of Kant, and also was explored by Freud.)

The years in the dealer lane have been very good to me and to non-dealers the wheeler-dealer life often seems a ‘fantasy’ job. I always used to say to those who entered my shops fawning over the life I must lead, “Well, it’s not quite like selling sox and shoes at the department

store, but it does partake of some of the same skills, with janitorial responsibilities thrown in for good measure.”

Unlike those who wish to enter a life in the trade now, I was fortunate to start at a time when I was able to meet many of those star dealers who came to this country as refugees. They made their names by buying and selling the extraordinary things that came onto the market with the close of the Second World War. European economies were in a shambles and even the rich had to dispose of family heirlooms to keep afloat. These dealers, often after a period of gruffness, were unstinting in their earnest desire to see a newcomer enter and get established in a time-honored business – though not so well as to actually challenge their own businesses! I remember once being outbid at one of the Sotheby’s Honeyman Rare Book sales in London by the legendary John Fleming who was sitting several rows ahead of me. It was on a book I desperately wanted. After the sale I summoned up the courage to ask him why he had bought that particular book.

He said, matter-of-factly, that he did not know anything about the book but if I thought it was worth what I was bidding he could surely get much more [than me] for it. Along with the gift of having eyes in the back of his head, I am sure Fleming experienced an inner delight at beating me on that book no matter that I was a little fish in his big sea. I was inwardly seething but, along with the big-dealer-squashes-little-dealer aspect, I guess it was a backhanded compliment on my book knowledge. (Another Freud comes to mind here: *Schadenfreude* – the secret little pleasure ones gets from the misfortune of a colleague.)

The life of a dealer is a rich and strange cloth that, while composed of a thing both hard and true, nevertheless rests on a bed of unnecessary possessions. We dealers, of course, like to think our stock-in-trade is necessary but in our absence life would go on – albeit in a culturally impoverished state. The peripatetic writer Bruce Chatwin, in his thought provoking essay *The Morality of Things*, wrote that the adoration of things is a sin of settlement. But even migratory,

hunter-gather societies adorn their elemental possessions. As a species we are unable to move about our universe without putting our stamp on our possessions and surroundings – to beautify them, in point of fact. We see, from those few items discovered, that even our genetic cousins the Neanderthals marked their possessions in an elemental manner. I find it hard to believe that one cave dweller did not grunt to another a note of approbation upon seeing his associate's new set of stone beads. (Envy and trade must have appeared very early on!) I enjoy reading Chatwin and agree with him that we sometimes sacrifice our freedom of action to become the privileged guardians of things, their imprisoned slave, nevertheless I would rather modify his comments as a reference to gadgetry and commercial gloss. I like to think of myself as a *shadchen*, a matchmaker. There is a deep satisfaction in shepherding items to good and appropriate homes. There is a non-bestowed grace that comes from leading a life of immersion and engagement with beautiful things that we ourselves had no

hand in creating (though we may have created a market for it.) Selling is prose. Appreciation is poetry.

I have had people pooh-pooh my father's injunction to wait for a week before I spent my quarter on that first rare book purchase. "My goodness, it was only a quarter," they will often say. What this comment fails to internalize, however, is that the purchase was *five weeks* income! True, the amount is less than the De Beers engagement ring rule that states, without equivocation, that the diamond you buy your spouse-to-be ought to cost at least two months salary, but it was still a lot of money to me. And, as a percentage of one's income, it would be a lot of money for any working person now, as well.

I do stop to reflect before I spend five weeks income on an item these days, but often do not wait unduly if I can afford the purchase – or even if I cannot afford it! As I also learned early on, a collector, or dealer, who won't go hungry for a short time in order to buy a great thing, is no collector or dealer at all. This is

especially true in the current climate of scarcity for great items. The global economy has depleted indigenous native arts and life-style the world over at an incredible rate, replacing it with plastic,

T-shirts and rap. I have learned, however, one important, additional thing since that early, first purchase. I now know to ask for a discount!

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