

On Want and Need

by Susannah Q. Pratt

It isn't normal to know what we want. It is a rare and difficult psychological achievement.

— Abraham Harold Maslow

“Oh,” say people who hear about our decision to refrain from shopping for a year. “How great. So, like, you’ll just be buying the things you *need*.”

Yes, it would seem. Though I am no longer sure.



My in-laws are fond of recalling how, as an adolescent, my husband was expert at making a case for his “needs”. Among the items he *needed* were an Atari, a Ralph Lauren polo shirt, and a hot tub. His own father, Howard, grew up on the shores of Lake Superior in a small town called Grand Marais. Howard’s father Harry, the town dentist, passed away when Howard was eight. From that time forward, Howard, his brother, and his mother lived off of her first grade teacher’s salary until the boys were old enough to contribute to the household income. It is not surprising to me that John’s pleas for a hot tub went unheard.

My husband’s adolescent self is not the only one with a tendency to conflate want with need. I, too, have sat by and watched ‘want’ slide lazily into ‘need’ in our family conversations. We *need* to get AAA batteries before leaving on our road trip. We *need* to get some new throw pillows for the couch. I *need* a pair of navy shoes to wear with a new dress. Any close examination of our syntax would indicate that we are constantly in need. I know this not to be the case.

In an attempt to draw a bright line between want and need, I went to the (online) dictionary. Here is MerriamWebster.com on the noun “need”: “1. A necessary duty or obligation; 2. A lack of something requisite, *desirable* or useful.” Desirable?

And now, on the verb “to want”: “1. To have a strong desire for; 2. To have *need of*.” Need?

I am beginning to think it is not just our family that tends toward conflation here.



In his 1943 paper, “A Theory of Human Motivation” Abraham Maslow debuted his now famous Hierarchy of Needs, an iconic pyramid depicting how our higher order needs—self-actualization, self-esteem—rest on first having satisfied our more basic physiological and relational needs: food, safety, love and acceptance, belonging. Though the framework has had its share of critique in psychological circles, I’ve always liked it. For me, Maslow’s pyramid operates like a secret decoder key for human behavior, a reminder not to take other people’s tension, stress or anger personally. More often than not the source of these emotions is a little bit of crumbling somewhere in the base of a person’s pyramid—a sick parent, a divorce, a move.

Maslow came to mind as I was puzzling over this want/need question with Elliot, my nine-almost-ten-year old. Far more helpful than Merriam or Webster, Elliot offered the following response when I asked him how he would describe the difference between want and need: “Want is pretty much, like, optional. Need is, well, like not optional.”

Maslow and Elliot have it right. It’s hard to think about formulating a college savings plan when the electric company is threatening to cut off the lights. The light bill *needs* to get paid first. My middle school kid can’t feel great about himself when he is out of sorts with his friends. He first *needs* to feel a sense of belonging among his peers. There is a requisite interdependency and sense of progression built into the whole thing. Need gives way to need, as want gives way to want, but satisfied need—different from want—moves toward realized potential, a fulfilled life, and ultimately, goodness toward others. In 1970 Maslow added to his pyramid a topmost layer,

Transcendence, describing it as the state in which one reaches full actualization through the giving over of one's self to some higher goal involving altruism or spirituality.

Continually satisfying our desires does not point us in this direction. In fact, it is quite possible that it moves us in the opposite direction, as the Avett Brothers explain in their song *Ill with Want*.

"I am sick with wanting.
And it's evil how it's got me.
And every day is worse than the one before.
The more I have, the more I think,
'I'm almost where I need to be,
if only I could get a little more.'"

If satisfied need, taken to the extreme, is actualization—consistently satisfied want, the song seems to suggest, is addiction.



Desire is more than the anemic, optional cousin of need. It is a singularly powerful emotion, and no one understands that better than those in charge of selling things to us. My family is enrolled in a department store points program. In this ingenious strategy, making purchases on specific dates gives you "triple points" to be redeemed strategically on certain days. And—here's the brilliant part—unused points eventually expire. Points equate to discounted dollars, and to remind you of this, the store sends you a note to tell you how many points (dollars) you have available, and also to alert you to their expiration date.

The first time we received one of these reminders during our year of no buying, my stomach lurched with anxiety. Fearful that we were leaving money on the table, I, chief guardian and enforcer of the no-buying rules, panicked. I ran from the front hall clutching the reward certificate to find my husband to ask him if we should make an

exception and go shopping. The store had succeeded in creating in me a powerful mix of desire and obligation. To be a responsible steward of my points, I couldn't just let them disappear—good things might slip through my fingers.

Except, of course, there is no real money waiting for me at the store. To realize the value of the points I had to first expend money on an item for which I did not have any intrinsic desire. No want existed before the store manufactured it in me. But once they did, *my sense of desire didn't even have to be attached to a specific item to be activated*. Through the point system they had created just enough urgency and hunger to get me in the door.

The magic of marketing is such that not only can it manufacture longing out of thin air, it can also take just a hint of interest and massage it into something more. Shortly before our no buying experiment started, my husband and I were considering a wooden trellis for our backyard. Clicking idly around on my computer, I followed a trail of links that led me to a website with discounted garden furniture, including a trellis of the type we had been discussing so (here was my big mistake) I clicked on it.

In short order that trellis, and others like it, found their way from around the Internet and onto my computer screen. Constantly. They were there when I checked my email, the weather, or the news. I found myself thinking more and more about a trellis until, when I looked out in my backyard, I could envision one where there was once only a notion. Since we were in the year of no buying, I did not click on anything again and the trellises (trelli?) began showing up with less frequency—gradually retreating to the various websites from whence they came.

Children hear the phrase “whet your appetite” as “wet your appetite”—which seems not entirely inaccurate, as though it might be a reference to our salivary glands. The actual phrase, however, means to sharpen one's taste for something, the “whet” referring to a whetstone—a device used to sharpen knives. This is how I think about what is happening with my stalker-trellis and the marketing scheme it represents. A raw lump of vague desire is gradually being carefully honed by the messages all around us—beautiful pictures, low, low prices, convenient delivery, easy assembly. Without my even being aware, my appetite for a trellis is being slowly sharpened until this desire now takes the shape of a hook. Eventually, the tip will be so sharp that my want will

snag. Were it not for the year of no buying, I would have eventually clicked again on the trellis—this time to buy it.



Not all of our cravings have been manufactured or stoked by the forces of marketing. Human beings are obviously quite capable of genuine desire. It is the pang we feel when we come across something that delights and surprises us, and we therefore suddenly want to own it. It's the rush of emotion, unbidden, that my husband feels when he sees a Porsche drive past. Or when he walks into REI.

Children express genuine desire with great regularity and sincerity. On a recent trip to New York City we made our way to 30 Rock and to the NBC store at its base. We'd been in the store no longer than five minutes when Oliver and Foster came running up to us holding a mug decorated with *Parks and Recreation* star Nick Offerman's mustachioed silhouette. "Please," Foster begged, "it's Ron Swanson." The fervor with which they made the case for the mug was impressive, considering a) it was our year of no buying, b) neither of them drink coffee, and c) it was a \$17.00 mug with Nick Offerman's face on it. The earnestness with which they explained why this particular mug should be added to the collection of over twenty mugs we already own could only have been born of real desire.

Genuine desire—different from manufactured or cultivated want—deserves to be heeded as it reveals something true about us, or our situation, that has not necessarily been created or exaggerated by the forces of marketing. Our cravings are a part of the mysterious algorithm that makes us who we are. The danger of fully responding to this type of want, however, is that the way it presents in our children—intense, fleeting—is true of our adult desires too.



Here was my mistake: in our consumer culture there is no bright line between want and need. If there is any boundary between them at all, it is porous. For years, the only functioning thermometer in our house was a digital ear thermometer that, for some reason neither my husband or I could explain or fix, read out in Celsius. We'd be woken in the middle of the night by the cries of a feverish child, and in that drowsy and somewhat dread-filled state that only a child in distress can produce, one of us would take the temperature of the sick child huddled against our chest, while the other would stumble around in the dark looking for a smart phone so that we could convert the thermometer reading to Fahrenheit. It was, in the words of our favorite sarcastic twelve-year-old friend Max, "genius".

Why, you wonder, did we not just take ourselves to the nearest pharmacy and get a new thermometer? I have wondered this many times. For starters, we only felt the need acutely at 2 a.m. As soon as we had converted to Fahrenheit and had returned the sick child to bed, the more pressing purchase, the one we would remember the following day, was Children's Tylenol.

But I also think, in the words of mothers and grandmothers immemorial, we were just "making do" with our quirky thermometer. We lacked a perfect item, but we had jerry-rigged a good enough solution. And I think it is here, in this space, that want finally brushes up against need. Did we need a new thermometer? Debatable. But now, at last, is the debate we should be having.

Our year of no buying forced us to dwell in this space, to develop a tolerance for doing without. A few weeks into the year we noticed that John's standard brown leather belt, the one he wears to work almost every other day, was cracked and looking shabby. In an attempt to forestall a purchase, Foster retrieved a brown marker from his art set and colored in the cracks. I don't think we were kidding ourselves to say the belt didn't look half bad.

Eventually, however, the marker will rub off, and at that time I suppose I will be willing to concede that we have approached something akin to need. John will need a new belt. In our privileged lives, this lack of something daily or essential may be as close as we will ever come to need. But it is still not need in the way we understand

food and shelter, or love and belonging, to be. A brown leather belt is not critical to a fulfilled life.

Entire fortunes and a tremendous amount of human capital are spent preventing us from remaining too long in this condition. Marketing professionals would have us lack for nothing—eradicating the practice of “making do” in favor of buying early and often. “Go ahead,” they would tell John, “Get that replacement belt. Do it now, while it’s on sale. And maybe get an extra one at half price while you’re at it.” To our ridiculous thermometer situation they would inquire in a solicitous tone, “Why do that to yourselves?”

Why indeed? It’s hard to come up with a defense for restraint. The best most of us can do is give a weak nod to environmental concerns...why add another digital thermometer to the landfill? But in truth we know that our new thermometer has already been made, shipped and stocked at our local pharmacy. As have 100,000 more like it. We’re already too late. If we don’t buy it, someone else will.

The case for attending to, and ultimately fulfilling, our desires is all around us. It’s omnipresent and incessant and drowns out most everything else. But if we listen only to this siren song, we will miss the good stuff—the stuff of the pyramid: relationship and love, self-efficacy and change. Maslow’s list of needs isn’t just psychological formulation; it is a recipe for meaningful life. It falls to us to resurrect the case for our real needs—to listen for them, to draw the conclusion anew for ourselves. In the dark of my sick child’s bedroom, what he needs—what we both need—is to simply hold tight to one another while we wait for the fever to pass.



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