
PART

I

The Mission

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A Consumer Goes Global

The Mississinawa Valley High School class of 1997 voted me *Best Dressed Guy*. This isn't something I usually share with people. You should feel privileged I told you. Don't be too impressed; there were 51 members of the class of 1997, only 29 were guys, and rural Ohio isn't exactly the fashion capital of anywhere.

I would like to think that I won the award for my stellar collection of Scooby-Doo and Eric Clapton T-shirts, but I know what clinched it—junior high, when my mom still dressed me. Basically, I was *the* Bugle Boy. You might not remember the brand of clothing known as Bugle Boy, but you probably remember their commercials where the sexy model in the sports car stops to ask the guy stranded in the desert: “Excuse me, are those Bugle Boy jeans you are wearing?” I had entire Bugle Boy outfits.

As far as most consumers are concerned, clothes come from the store. Consumers don't see the chain of transportation and manufacturing that comes before they take the pants off the rack. Clothes came even later in the chain for me during this time—from gift boxes on holidays or birthdays or just magically appearing on my bed with Post-it notes hanging from the tags:

“Kels, try these on and let me know if they fit—Mom.”

I really didn't care much about clothes until they were comfortable—jeans with holes, black T-shirts faded to gray—and then it was about time to stop wearing them anyhow. If clothing made it to this extremely comfortable stage, I normally established some kind of emotional attachment to it and stashed it away.

My closet and drawers were museums of me.

In high school, I remember Kathie Lee Gifford, the beloved daytime talk show host, crying on television as she addressed allegations that her clothing line was being made by children in Honduras. I remember Disney coming under similar fire, but I didn't wear clothes from either of these lines. I had bigger problems in those days, such as, finding time to wash my dirty car or how I was going to ask Annie, the hustling sophomore shooting guard with the big brown eyes, to the homecoming dance.

Globalization was a foreign problem of which I was blissfully unaware. I did know that it existed, and that I was against it. Everybody was. My friends' fathers had lost their jobs and their pensions when local factories closed or were bought out. Huffy bicycles that were made in the *county* to the north were now made in the *country* to the south. Buying American was *in*. To do so, we shopped at Walmart—an all-American red, white, and blue store with all-American products.

It wasn't until college that I learned about the other aspects of globalization. Not only were Americans losing jobs to unpatriotic companies moving overseas, but the poor people who now had the jobs were also being exploited. Slouching at our desks in Sociology 201, we talked about sweatshops—dark, sweaty, abusive, dehumanizing, evil sweatshops. Nike was bad, and at some point, Walmart became un-American. I felt morally superior because I was wearing Asics. Thankfully, the fact that my apartment was furnished with a cheap, laminated entertainment center from Walmart wasn't something I had to share with the class.

A degree in anthropology and a minor in geology left me eager to meet people of different cultural persuasions who lived far from the squared-off, flat fields of Ohio. While my classmates arranged job interviews, I booked plane tickets. I had seen the world in the pages of textbooks and been lectured about it long enough. It was time to see it for myself. The first trip was six months long, and the second and third trip each lasted two months. I worked as a SCUBA instructor in Key West, Florida, in between trips.

A love for travel came and never went. It wasn't so much an itch as a crutch. I didn't need much of an excuse to go anywhere.

And then one day while staring at a pile of clothes on the floor, I thought, "What if I traveled to all of the places where my clothes were made and met the people who made them?" The question wasn't some great revelation I had while thinking about my fortunate position in the global marketplace; it was just another reason to leave, to put off committing to my relationship with Annie, the sophomore shooting

guard turned growing-impatient girlfriend of 10 years. I traveled, quite simply, because I didn't want to grow up.

I was stocking up on travel supplies—duct tape, tiny rolls of toilet paper, water purification tablets, and waders to protect against snakebites in the jungle—when I bumped into a classmate from high school working in the camping department of Walmart.

“So, I hear you're a beach bum now,” he said, his years of service marked beneath a Walmart smiley face.

What can you say to that?

“Where you heading next?” he asked.

“Honduras,” I said.

“What's in Honduras?” he asked. “More beaches?” I had fallen from the *Best Dressed Guy* to *Beach Bum*.

“No,” I said, “that's where my T-shirt was made. I'm going to visit the factory where it was made and meet the people who made it.” Then I told him the entire list of my clothes and the other places I intended to visit.

“Oh, you're going to visit sweatshops,” he said.

This was the response I received time and time again. When you tell a normal person with an everyday job, rent or a mortgage, and a car payment that you are spending thousands of dollars to go to a country because you want to go where your T-shirt was made, first they'll think you're crazy—and then they'll probably say something about sweatshops.

I understood that the people who made my clothes were probably not living a life of luxury, but I didn't automatically assume they worked in a sweatshop. In fact, I found this automatic assumption to be rather disturbing. The majority of people I talked to, and even members of a nationally syndicated program that reports on the world's poor, assumed all of my clothes were made in sweatshops. It seemed to be a given: The people who make our clothes are paid and treated badly. Since few of us make our own clothes, buy secondhand, or are nudists, it appears that there is nothing we can do about it, we really don't give a darn. Besides, we saved a few bucks.

In beach bum terms, my trip to Honduras was wildly successful, but in terms of my excuse for going to Honduras, it wasn't. I went to the factory and met a worker, but I wasn't comfortable learning about his life and chose to abandon the quest. I returned home, every bit the beach bum I was before the trip. I tried to forget about Honduras, the worker I met, and my pile of clothes and their MADE IN labels, but I couldn't. A seed had been planted.

Events changed me. I got engaged to Annie, the growing-impatient girlfriend of 10 years turned fiancée. I bought a home. I started to become a normal American—a consumer with a mortgage, a refrigerator, and a flat-screen television. I began to settle into my American Dream, and comfortably so. However, the pile of clothes appeared once more, and I became obsessed once again with where my stuff was made.

I started to read books about globalization and the history of the garment industry, but I felt that they all missed something. I didn't just want to know about the forces, processes, economics, and politics of globalization; I had to know about the producers who anchored the opposite end of the chain. The lives, personalities, hopes, and dreams of the people who make our clothes were lost among the statistics.

I decided to resume my quest to meet these people. To finance it, I did perhaps the most American thing I've ever done—I took out a second mortgage.

It's probably obvious to you by now that I'm not Thomas Friedman, the *New York Times* columnist and author of best-selling globalization books such as *The World Is Flat*. I don't have an intricate understanding of the world's economy. No one met me at the airport when I arrived in the countries where my clothes were made. No company CEO was expecting me. I didn't have an expense account. I had no contacts, no entourage, and no room reservations. However, I had plenty of mental ones.

I was simply a consumer on a quest. If you asked me what I was doing, I would have told you something about bridging the gap between producer and consumer. You probably would have thought I was a bit off, recklessly throwing time and money to the wind when I should have been at home paying off my mortgage and putting my college degree to work. And I don't blame you.

But I did have priceless experiences that changed me and my view of the world. I went undercover as an underwear buyer in Bangladesh, was courted by Levi's in Cambodia, and was demonized by an American brand's VP in China.

I did my best to find the factories that made my clothes. If I wasn't allowed in to see the factory, I waited outside for the workers. I took off my shoes and entered their tiny apartments. I ate bowls of rice cooked over gas stoves during power outages. I taught their children to play Frisbee, and rode a roller coaster with some of them in Bangladesh. I was challenged to a drinking game by a drunken uncle in China. I took a group of garment workers bowling in Cambodia. They didn't like the

game—which was just one of many things I discovered we had in common.

Along the way, I learned the garment industry is much more labor intensive than I ever thought. It is at the forefront of globalization in constant search of cheap, reliable labor to meet the industry's tight margins. Activists tend to damn the industry, but it isn't that simple. Some economists refer to it as a ladder helping people out of poverty, empowering women, but it isn't that simple.

The reality of the workers' lives is harsh.

It's true the workers are glad to have jobs, even if they only receive \$50 a month. And they don't *want* you to boycott their products to protest their working conditions. (I asked.) But they would like to work less and get paid more.

Family is everything, but feeding that family is more important than actually being with them. And I saw things that made me think the unthinkable: that maybe, given certain circumstances and a lack of options, child labor isn't always bad.

There is a long chain of players from producer to consumer. It is made up of workers, labor sharks, factories, subcontractors, unions, governments, buying houses, middle men, middle men for the middle men, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), importers, exporters, brands, department stores, and you and me. Each takes a cut. Some play by the rules; some don't. Exploitation can occur on any level, except one—the workers aren't in a position to exploit anyone.

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James Bond fought communism. So did my grandpa's underwear.

Following World War II, the US War and State Departments decided to rebuild the textile industry in Japan—because when you drop a pair of atomic bombs on a country, it's a good idea to avoid helping them rebuild industries that could easily be converted to the production of weapons, since the people of that country are probably still a bit peeved.

It was important that the United States establish strong relations with Japan; if we didn't, it was likely that the commies would. So we shipped them our cotton, and they shipped us our underwear. And that meant that Grandpa was able to buy his cheap.

Trade liberalization in Europe and Asia was seen as a way to win people over to democracy and prevent the spread of communism from China, Korea, and the Soviet Union. This was not an economic decision, but a political one.

In the aforementioned *The World Is Flat* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2005), Thomas Friedman describes this thinking in present-day terms with his Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Prevention:

I noticed that no two countries that both had McDonald's had ever fought a war against each other since each got its McDonald's . . . when a country reached the level of economic development where it has a middle class big enough to support a network of McDonald's, it became a McDonald's country. And the people of McDonald's countries didn't like to fight wars anymore. They preferred to wait in line for burgers . . . as countries got woven into the fabric of global trade and rising living standards, which having a network of McDonald's franchises had come to symbolize, the cost of war for victor and vanquished became prohibitively high.

In other words, capitalism and garments spread peace and cheeseburgers around the world.

Eventually, though, economics took over. Developing nations wanted our business, and we wanted their cheap products. The garment industry within our own country was apt to go where labor was the cheapest and regulations the least, as evidenced by the flow from the North to the economically depressed South in the 1960s. So it is no surprise that as international trade became freer, and our own standards of living higher, the industry hopped our borders and sought out cheaper conditions abroad.

Despite protectionists' efforts of fighting to keep the industry in the United States, a race to the bottom began. *Sweatshop* became a buzzword that fired up activists, caused consumers to hesitate, and made brands cringe.

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Globalization affects us all. It forces change into our lives whether we are ready for it or not. Globalization is both good and bad. It's a debate taking place in books, politics, boardrooms, at universities, and in shoppers' minds. And it isn't going away.

The Decent Working Conditions and Fair Competition Act was introduced in the Senate in 2007, backed by senators on both sides of the political aisle, including my home state senator, Sherrod Brown (D-OH). The bill, also known as the antisweatshop bill, proposed banning the import, export, and sale of sweatshop goods. Just as the

bill's predecessor introduced in the previous congressional session, it died in committee.

The debate rages on in Congress.

Most companies have developed codes of conduct for sourcing their products abroad. Some align themselves with monitoring agencies and labor rights groups. They struggle with what is right and what is profitable. But hardly any company wants its customers to think about where its products are made—because brand images are built on good times, sunny beaches, dancing, cold beer, and freedom, not factories, poverty, and separated families. Other companies don't shy away from the realities of their production. Levi's welcomed me as a concerned consumer. Patagonia has videos posted on its website of the factories from which they source and interviews with the workers who make their products.

The debate rages on in boardrooms.

Labor rights activists make companies accountable to their codes of conduct. If a brand isn't meeting basic worker's rights, they pressure the company to change. If they pressure too much, the company might cut and run, taking with them the jobs of the workers for which the activists were fighting. So how much do they ask for? How much do they push?

What are we as consumers to do? If we buy garments made in some developing country, we are contributing to an industry built on laborers whose wages and quality of life would be unacceptable to us. But if we don't, the laborers might lose their jobs.

My conclusion, after visiting the people who made my favorite clothes, is that we should try to be *engaged* consumers, not mindless pocketbooks throwing dollars at the cheapest possible fashionable clothes we can find. Companies should give us some credit for being twenty-first-century humans. We can handle knowing where our clothes were made. We will buy from companies that make a real effort to be concerned about the lives of the workers who make their products. We need activists and labor organizations to work with the companies and to tell us which ones aren't.

Walk into Target or Kohl's or JCPenney or Macy's, and you'll find that some of the clothing was made by hardworking individuals who, in terms of the context of their country, were paid and treated fairly. They are supporting their families, trying to save up money to attend beauty school or to pay off a debt. Other products are made by workers who aren't treated and paid fairly. After my quest, I want to know which is which (but preferably without having to dig through

websites and lengthy reports). Money moves faster than ethics in the current global marketplace, and will probably continue to do so until companies, activists, and consumers advance the discussion by asking the money to slow down and explain where it's been.

The people who make our clothes are poor. We are rich. It's natural to feel guilty, but guilt or apathy or rejection of the system does nothing to help the workers.

Workers don't need pity. They need rights, and they need to be educated about those rights. They need independent monitors checking the factories, ensuring the environment is safe and that they are treated properly. They need opportunities and choices. They need consumers concerned about all of the above. They need to be valued.

This book follows me from country to country, from factory to factory, from a life as a clueless buyer to that of an engaged consumer. Although it's mind-boggling to compare the luxuries of our lives to the realities that the people who make our clothes face every day, on



Figure 1.1 The author in front of the abandoned factory in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where his blue jeans were made.

occasion I reflect on my own life—so that neither you nor I lose sight of how good we've got it.

In the past, I didn't care about where my clothes were made or who made them. And then I met Amilcar, Arifa, Nari, Ai, Dewan, and Zhu Chun. Now I can't help but care. And I'm certain that the more you know them, the more you'll care too.

Please, allow me (Figure 1.1) to introduce you.

