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## The Social Construction of Jewelry



by Ron Chenail

Last month I went to a local jewelry store I have frequented quite often over the years. As I was browsing the different display cases the owner came over and started a conversation with me. He said I was quite unusual when it came to men buying jewelry. I said, “Unusual?” and he responded, “Yes, ninety to ninety-five percent of men who come into the store either buy exactly what their wives have instructed them to buy or the wives come in with their husbands themselves and pick out the piece they want. In contrast, you actually seem to understand what the person would like. I’ve seen the positive results, so how do you do it?”

I had to think about this a bit. I know a lot of people buy jewelry especially diamonds in very traditional terms by sticking to the 4 C’s of color, clarity, cut, and carat; others use the 1 C approach - you know, “cost.” I knew these categories of quality and quantity, but they didn’t seem to be the distinctions that I commonly used to pick out a ring, necklace, or earrings (you’ll notice no one seems to make broaches anymore by the way.) There seemed to be something more particular, more personal, more relational, and more contextual to my method.

Then it came to me and I said, “Every piece of jewelry is really a series of stories. There is the story of your relationship with the person, the story of choosing the piece, the story of giving the gift, and the story continues to evolve every time the wearer tells someone about the piece, the receiving of the piece, and the person who gave the jewelry.” I went on to say, “Everyone knows this when it comes to things such as engagement and wedding rings, but really all jewelry are stories. We continually add value to the jewelry as we narrate the meaning they come to take on in our lives.”

He smiled as I told him my little story and then asked, “Yes, but how do you know you’re getting the story right in the first place?”

I smiled, too, and said, “Being curious and recognizing that only she knows if the piece of jewelry was ‘right’ for her.”

“Curious,” he repeated.

“Yes, in every conversation I have with her, I am curious as to how we create meaning. She loves the water, kayaking, taking pictures of jellyfish and other critters on her trips. She likes silver and the only necklace I had seen her wear often was one she bought on a kayaking expedition. I’ve seen the pictures she’s taken, listened to her stories of these times, and sensed the strong feelings she has for the ocean. It’s a time of solitude for her as she can be who she wants to be on the water so when I saw you had a silver necklace with a beautifully rendered fish hanging from the chain, then I had a good feeling about the piece being right for her – it just seemed fitting when I realized there was another “C” at play here with her – the “Sea!” I wasn’t out looking for a fish necklace, but given the other pieces of our conversations, this piece just felt coherent with all the other parts of our story; it was about her sea. Now when I see her wearing it all the time, it has become a part of our ongoing story.”

We talked some more and he suggested I could come into the store any time I was ready to “add more chapters to this story” and I said I would.

As I thought about this conversation with the shopkeeper I was struck by the similarities between giving gifts and providing the types of services all of us in the Taos Institute community do. Whether it’s our time, talent, or treasure we endeavor to do so in concert with the ongoing conversations we have with our colleagues, students, customers, and clients. Jewelry like our work are all figures of speech in that we all try to figure out meaning in our conversations. Our work is our stories, the help we bring are jewels we gift those we help, and they in turn gift us with the feedback they provide allowing us to better customize the assistance we provide. Whether it’s a piece of jewelry or a consultation, we strive to socially construct meaningful stories with the help of the other members of our conversations. Our encounters are our stories and if we can relate our stories to our actions, then we all configure the kinds of gems that will generate new evolving stories beyond our own lifetimes. They become conversational heirlooms helping to construct creative alternatives with anyone who appreciates these works of art and craft – like a piece of socially constructed jewelry.