

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: Richard Rodriguez is a prolific Mexican-American author of books, essays, and articles. “Stuff” aired on the NewsHour with Jim Lehrer on April 27, 1998.

STUFF

I come often to this huge building to do much of my shopping. It's called Costco. There are warehouse stores like this all over the country where you can buy most anything you need and you buy it in bulk, cheap.

A revolution is going on in American shopping habits. Two generations ago Americans went to their corner store where everyone knew the name of the man behind the counter and where toward the end of the month our grandmothers would ask to charge the milk and the bread. And then the suburbs created the supermarket with its Muzak and its wide aisles and its 20 varieties of breakfast cereal. Now we don't go to the corner drugstore. Nor do we shop at a small nursery run by the lady who knows all about roses. We shop at places with names like Drug Barn and Plant World and Shoe Universe.

Every choice is available to us, and the prices are low, but no one knows your name and there is no Muzak. It's wonderful coming here to Costco. The well-to-do shop here along with immigrant families. Everyone's basket is full. You don't get a bottle of mineral water; you buy a case. You don't get a roll of toilet paper; you get a gigantic package that will last most families several months. You can buy tires at Costco, as well as Pampers and bananas. So people buy and buy and buy. And, yet, despite all the buying there is something oddly unmaterialistic about shopping in places plain as a warehouse.

We Americans often criticize ourselves for being materialistic. In fact, we take little pleasure in things, preferring to fill our lives with stuff. Only rarely do we dare a materialism that delights in the sensuality of the material world. In the 1950s, for example, we gave the world wonderful, wide-bodied cars with lots of chrome and fins like angels—the rare American instance of the materialism of the senses. We leave it, normally, to other cultures to teach us about materialism.

I remember years ago in London a friend of mine urging me to go into Fortnum and Mason's, the fancy food store, go in and buy just one piece of chocolate, he said, and think about that chocolate all day, and when you eat it tonight, eat it slowly, very slowly.

Americans don't eat slowly. We taught the world how to eat on the run, and we treasure food, convenience food, that doesn't take much thinking about, which is why in the end we don't have very much to say about the smell of a piece of chocolate.

To this day I remember the weight and the smells of the first books I ever owned. I can still remember the texture of paper in the first novel I ever got from the library. Now we can order our books on the Internet without first holding them in our hands or fingering the paper. Now Americans watch TV and order jewelry or dolls or whatever on the 24-hour shopping channels. People buy from catalogs without first trying the sweater on and testing its color against their skin.

There are no windows at Costco.

In an earlier, more sweetly materialistic America, our parents used to window shop. People would stop on a busy street, peer at the mannequins in the shop windows. Here in San Francisco there are still downtown department stores where one can see elaborate window displays, but who has the time to window shop?

Despite the many dollars we spend, I think we are less materialistic now than at any time in our history. We are not much interested in the shape of an orange or the weight of a book, or the dark scent of a chocolate. We buy appliances off a rack, and we throw them away when they no longer work. Nothing gets repaired in America. Nothing we own grows old. We buy in bulk. We are surrounded by choices. There is little we desire. We end up surrounded by stuff and regret. We take the huge bag of chocolates home, and we end up eating too many.

ESSAY TOPIC

Define, discuss, or contrast the two types of materialism discussed by Richard Rodriguez in "Stuff." Considering the advantages and disadvantages of each form of materialism, which type would you choose for yourself, assuming you must choose one, and one only? Your answer should be founded on an analysis and understanding of Rodriguez's discussion, but it should develop through a selection of original and specific examples taken from your personal experience, reading, and observation of others.