

Sometimes Leaven with Levin¹: A Tribute to Sidney J. Levy on the Occasion of His Acceptance of the Converse Award

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If Nietzsche is right, the life of a great man can be captured in three distinctive anecdotes. Time and space constraints restrict me to just one, and because I am covering only the scholarly waterfront of Sid's life, I hope you find the one I have chosen resonant. I use the story simply as a ladle into the wellspring of Sid's contribution to our discipline.

Once upon a time, the winter of 1985 as I recall, from a perch in our departmental mailroom, I witnessed a corridor encounter between Sid Levy and Lou Stern. In those days, giants roamed the earth. We imagined ourselves to make research and policy statements from Mount Olympus. As a young, untenured, interdisciplinary interloper, I was already predisposed to watching the encounter through a mythic lens. Here was Zephyr whispering to Aeolus. Here Atlas responded to Prometheus. Here Hermes and Hephaestus held their ground. Where Achilles and Odysseus contend, there surely would I overhear great things.

¹My mentor, Demitri Shimkin, used to liken his role as an educator to the polishing of diamonds. "How do you polish diamonds?" he would ask us with a rhetorical flourish, and then he would answer, "By rubbing them against other diamonds." This, I imagine, was meant to comfort his apprentices, who, engaged in the no-holds-barred agon of intellectual development, challenged each other to the limits of their abilities, often to visceral effect. At the time, as my fellow diamonds ground against me, I paid little attention to the dust we generated in our industry. I've since learned that there is a word to describe this dust-producing grinding process: "levigation." Thus, I deliver this presentation with an intent to levigate. The thought of Sid sprinkling pixie dust on audiences to whom he speaks seems somehow apposite. Anyone who visits the Leverone Hall Marketing Department conference room at Northwestern University should be sure to study the mural created by alumnus Joe Anderson, which caricaturizes Sid as a magician. Thus my title, an arcane allusion to the occasional need for producing transformation by lightning bolt.

Lou had just returned from class, entwined in an extension cord, pushing the cart that held his carousel projector before him, and was headed to the mailroom. Sid intercepted him en route, hailing him with this jovial observation: "Lou! You look just like Laocoön!"

Imagine Lou's gruff Bostonian accent voicing this return greeting: "I do? Heh, heh, heh. Who's Laocoön?"

This being all the encouragement required, our semiotician *ordinaire* launched into an account of the Trojan priest Laocoön, whose vocal misgivings over the disposition of the great wooden horse left by the Greeks, ostensibly in tribute to Athena, before departing from Troy—his pronouncement "I fear the Greeks, even when they bear gifts," has echoed through the ages—caused Poseidon to send sea serpents to silence him. Laocoön, along with his two sons, was crushed to death by the serpents, his warning having fallen on deaf ears. The rest, as we say, is history. Or in this case, his story, which is, in effect, the stuff of myth.

Having been a rapt listener, Lou marked the story's end, as I recall, by grabbing hold of the coils of extension cord, borne like a bandolier upon his tweed sport jacket, and proclaiming plaintively, in his Boston bass rasp, "Sometimes I *feel* like Laocoön."

I remember thinking, from the discomfort of my covert ethnographic blind, "Jeez, maybe some days we *all* feel like Laocoön." This struck me as something of a revelation. What if the giants on whose shoulders we stand still rue the rack of academic life? I also recall thinking that where Sid had found Laocoön, I might have seen Sisyphus, or even Diogenes, but not without his priming of the mythopoeic pump. As they departed to the mail room, ending their corridor banter, these pillars of Hercules were surely unaware of the impact they had on me that day.

A Mythical Premise

Sid has always had the knack for looking beyond the empirical truth to the mythic truth. He has the poetic gift of seeing the similarity in difference. Recently, Wendy Doniger (1998) has used a delightful metaphoric conceit—the "implied spider"—to describe those baseline human, shared life experiences that storytellers use as the raw ingredients of narrative, the filaments they use to spin the webs of significance in which people suspend themselves. This implied spider spins the stuff of myth, the experience behind the myth. Despite his being situated in a predominantly arachnophobic research culture, Sid has had great success in coaxing this implied spider from the shadows and into the sunlight of rich interpretation. He is a *bricoleur* who finds, fixes, and recycles myths constantly broken in the retelling (Doniger 1998).

Accepting that myth is multivocal and polysemous, that it may shape, reflect, or subvert dominant paradigms, and that its traditional bearers are women (Doniger 1998), I would like to weave some of these strands together in the following section. It is a smallish web to support a leviathan, but it is a start. In his Converse address, Sid returns us to the hearth land. The household is the fundamental unit of consumption, yet it has been shamefully neglected in marketers' inquiries. Drawing on Sid's interests in households, female consumers, emotional ambivalence, and deep meaning, and combin-

ing them with Doniger's (1998) concern for the theological and political implications of traditional narrative, I view the household through a mythic lens. Let me pick up the story from the concluding paragraph of Sid's Converse address.

A Feminist Frame

Marketers have just recently begun to take the possibility of consumer-driven drawdown and ecological collapse seriously. Some have questioned whether the staving off of dystopias is a worthwhile pursuit in the absence of a utopian vision that is both compelling and achievable (Sherry 2000). Feminist inquiry in marketing and consumer research (Bristor and Fischer 1993; Hirschman 1993; Stern 1993), though still in its infancy, is one such promising revisioning agenda.

Among the most scolding critiques of neoclassical economics to be pitched in recent years (for a garden variety version, see Miller 1995), feminists' exposure of androcentric bias in the enterprise is an especially interesting endeavor. The gendered nature of economic theorizing has for too long gone unexamined. England (1993) has skewered the notions of the separative self and intrafamilial altruism that support conventional theory about existing power imbalances. Strassman (1993) has read closely the master narratives and foundational stories of mainstream theory to reveal their fundamental shortcomings. McCloskey (1985) has extended his magisterial analysis of economic rhetoric beyond a critique of dualism in economic understanding to propose a "conjective" economics (1993) that is embrative of feminist methods and perspectives. His call for such an amended economics that would acknowledge and celebrate feminine viewpoints might even be read as a mythic presaging of his own transformation from Donald to Deirdre (McCloskey 1999), a heroic journey calling attention to the embodied nature of cognition (Lakoff and Johnson 1999) (for an extended treatment of the mythic stature of "economism," see Jennings 1993). I extend these feminist musings a bit further.

Feminist communitarianism is an ethical posture that seeks to accelerate female autonomy and male connectedness by acknowledging that community is both ontologically and axiologically prior to the individual and by reminding people that moral agency unfolds in a social context that is increasingly pluralistic (Christians 2000). This posture strives to engender moral reasoning and encourages social science to facilitate the prospering of community. In this view, "researchers participate in the community's ongoing process of moral articulation," which fosters social criticism, resistance, and reconfiguring of power that is relational, mutual, and reciprocal (Christians 2000, p. 147). Feminist communitarianism can be understood as a revitalization movement (Wallace 1956) whose goals are only apparently utopian, but whose vision is thoroughly pragmatic. What if an activist researcher, or organic scholar (Gramsci 1973), cast about for a mythic charter to energize such a progressive regime? How might theology catalyze politics? What happens when mythopoeia and marcology (Levy 1999) collide?

Myth, Feminism, Households, and Economics

From my own recent work on "servicescape" ambience (Sherry 1998), I have become more alert to what Casey (1993, p. 133) has called the two "aboriginal senses" of dwelling—the hestial and the hermetic—that shape and reflect people's experience of the built environment. These are mutually implicating, complementary ways of being in place. Hestial dwelling is domestic, containing, and inward-looking. Hermetic dwelling is public, mobile, and outwardly focused. The former mode is characteristic of domestic economy, the latter of political economy. Hestia informs the household, and Hermes the marketplace (and by extension, the polity). Each mode has wound a distinctive ideology around itself. Hestian experiences have assumed a feminine character, and hermetic ones a masculine character. In the interest of concision, I briefly and exclusively consider Hestia's domain.

Hestia is the goddess of the hearth and the symbol of home. Unpacking the meaning of "hearth" would require an article of its own, so my terse effort here should not deter the reader from a more appropriate, leisurely, holistic elaboration at a later time. The hearth is the very heart of culture. It is the essence of domesticity. The hearth symbolizes female productivity and generativity, vigilance and diligence, stability and presence. The hearth is a beacon and an anchor. The hearth animates and vivifies. It is a uterine crucible in the polysemous glory of those terms. In ancient times, an infant ritually joined the family by being presented before the hearth. Meals emerged from the hearth, and prayers were offered before the hearth to begin and end each meal. Each Greek city had a public hearth, carefully tended so it would burn forever, that was sacred to Hestia. Coals from the hearth of a mother city were carried by colonists to ignite the public hearth of a newly founded city (Hamilton 1969). The soul of polity, its generative impulse, is the hearth.

For such a fundamental deity, Hestia has surprisingly little mythology or iconography associated with her. It is almost as if she were the abiding essence or a *genus locus* of the condition of domesticity, to be embodied in the practice of household making. She is a virgin, presumably to embody the female sovereignty of the practice of fructifying, of interior world building, of cultivating in the sense of bringing culture into being. Also, rather than signifying simply *wholeness-in-itself*, this virginity serves as a calling out to the hermetic impulse to carry interiority into the outer world, whether in the symbolic form of coals or starter dough or materially in the form of progeny. The loss of the aboriginal sense of the domestic economy, the marginalizing of domestic economy and elevating of political economy in contemporary times, is a source of great trauma. Understanding how these gender-intensive spheres have evolved, have become misarticulated, and might be either integratively reconfigured or holistically decoupled is perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing activist researchers (Thompson 1992).

Household Cosmographics

Let me return to my opening anecdote. I depicted Lou Stern transformed into Laocoön. Now imagine Laocoön transformed into Gaea (Mother Earth). The sea serpents that were once the coils of Lou's extension cord are now the

distribution channels of marketing philosophy and practice. Envision the kind of umbilical strangling that happens when our primary experience of the world is a mass-mediated one, when consumption becomes our reason for being and life itself has been commodified. As Kotler and Levy (1971) noted long ago, the problems that marketing has helped create may also be amenable to marketing solutions. If marketing is to help redress the psychological, social, and cultural grievances of the ecological catastrophe it is conspiring to provoke, marcologists must devote their attention to cosmography (Sherry 2000).

Thomas Berry (1999) has urged marketers to work toward a transformative future he calls the Ecozoic Era. Marketers might launch this transformation by focusing on several of the current marketing hot buttons: customer intimacy, relationship marketing, and experience economy. Berry (1999, p. 79) exhorts educators to guide students "toward an intimate relationship with the Earth," because religions are too "pious," corporations too "plundering," and governments too "subservient" to halt the meltdown that is bringing the Cenozoic Era down around their ears.

Elsewhere (Sherry 2000), I have described the fervor with which increasing numbers of practitioners of both the dismal and the subversive sciences have rediscovered the etymological roots of their enterprises. Both economics and ecology share the common root *oikos*, which signifies "household." The rapprochement of these disciplines suggests that stewardship is currently the least damaging and potentially the most productive orientation that marketers might adopt toward their role as planetary change agents. If marketers begin to imagine segments in terms of households, it encourages them to contextualize managerial interventions more humanely. If marketers begin to conceive of ecosystems as households, as a first step in relinquishing our anthropocentric view of nature, it encourages a macromarketing view of managerial interventions that is sensitive to unanticipated and unintended consequences of unfettered consumption. An ecocentric notion of marketplace behavior is inherently hestian.

Although managerial theorists striving to create a "natural economy" by synthesizing the platforms of free marketers, socialists, and green activists (Hawken, Lovins, and Lovins 1999) acknowledge the formidable policy hurdles to be cleared before marketing practice can be revised, they generally have been quick to advocate pragmatic infrastructural changes. Although the intention is laudable, the effort feels to me like closing the political barn door after the theological horse has escaped. I believe that marketing educators' first and finest effort should be mythopoeic. They need to coax the right implied spider into the light of day. They must espouse a hestian economics and an ecotheistic ethics.

Recalling again that households, not individuals, are the fundamental units of consumer behavior; that activities other than decision making constitute the bulk of consumer behaviors; and that consumption is an active, creative, productive enterprise that is less about material sustenance and provisioning than about *being-in-a-world-humans-are-building* (a notion I have occasionally called "brandscaping"), it is time for the marketing discipline to begin rethinking the household. Perhaps the easiest way to launch this new enterprise is to augment "economistic" theories with humanistic ones. Miller's

(1998) theory of shopping as a devotional ritual is one such endeavor. Thompson's (1999) notion of a hestian economics is another.² Building on Sid's cosmological considerations of marketplace behavior, I offer a third, more grandiose proposal for (re- or para-) humanizing this inquiry.

Marcology, Mythos, and May Hymn

As I write this essay, Earth Day has just come and gone. We have passed the first Sunday after the first full moon of the vernal equinox, and May Day looms on the horizon. Nature conspires to reinforce the themes of my address. I hope to emphasize the leitmotif of rebirth in the revision. I also make a ritual bow in the direction of technopagans everywhere (Davis 1998), who are busy rewiring totemic circuitry in a rapturous burst of back-to-the-future, paraprimitive enthusiasm.³ It is to these issues of reanimation, communion, and ecstasy that the marketing mythographer must return if policymakers are to stand a fighting chance of restoring the ecosystem.

Across time and cultures, there has been a strong, but not universal, tendency to identify women with nature, to see ecology as quintessentially feminine (McDowell 1999). Despite its apparent emergence from the power imbalance between the genders that has promoted an androcentric view of culture, I think this identification is being repositioned, reinterpreted, and reaffirmed as the dialectics of social construction are better understood. Certainly, women are important mediators between nature and culture (Curtin 1999), and the mediation grows increasingly proactive. Without reducing female embodiment to any particular body, practice, or performance or accepting that place must inevitably be a gendered phenomenon, I believe that a hybrid ethic marrying deep ecology to ecofeminism provides the kind of mythopoeic charter marcologists will need to help reenchant the world. I also believe that hestian activism is the force most likely to translate Suzuki's (1997) lyrical meditation on people's inherent earthiness into actionable policy, especially in light of Sanjek's (1998) landmark urban ethnography that illustrates women's bootstrapping of polity through pluralistic networking. It is also perhaps worth noting that because feminist research methods most often correspond to the ones favored by postmodern consumer researchers (McDowell 1999, pp. 235–38), a multimethod agenda of inquiry

²Let me offer a narrative aside that seems to embody many of the issues I raise here. I became aware of Pat Thompson's work only during the preparation of my panegyric to Sid. I had difficulty securing access to her work, as the wheels of interlibrary loan often grind slowly. Prolonged telephone tag eventually resulted in a delightful, if rushed, exchange of ideas, and Pat shipped to me some recent work immediately before she stepped on a plane to begin a project in Russia. She alerted me to an upcoming conference in Chicago that she plans to attend and invited me out for a meal to pursue the discussion at that time. Such rapid response and the prospect of collaborative theory building over food strike me as especially hestian.

³During his military service, Sid claims to have argued forcefully but futilely to have the religious preference "Druid" stamped on his dogtags.

and praxis, science and humanism, and logos and mythos will be required to carry the day.

Not surprisingly, the household has been neglected in political theory, which has traditionally focused on polity and organized itself around the issue of dominion (Thompson 1999). Using the Hestia/Hermes mythogems to unpack homeplace/marketplace dynamics as a dual-systems paradigm, in which each perspective grounds aspects of normative and ideological concerns in ways people typically fail to grasp, Patricia Thompson (1999) explores the "paralogics" of private and public life. (In an ironic postmodern twist, Craig Thompson [1996] has initiated inquiry into the "juggling" lifestyle that dual participation in hestian and hermetic economies demands of women.) By correcting the fundamental distortion that ignoring the household has created in our theorizing, Patricia Thompson (1999) hopes feminist researchers will clear the way for a broader humanism in both interpretation of and policymaking for the hestian domain. I cannot imagine a more potent mandate for reclaiming the household as a focus of consumer research.

Curtin (1999) sees the feminist ethic of "caring for" as shaped by the oppressive demands of the development of a globalizing economy, which gives rise to a critical pluralist view of material culture. He politicizes his own variant of this ethic as "ecocommunitarianism," an authentic reinhabitation of local places. I argue one last time that this is a hearth-based philosophy and remind the reader that charity begins at home. I have lobbied for a marketing-driven revitalization movement, a nonteleological ecotheism celebrating hylozoic animism, that would nudge materiality from matériel back into matter (Sherry 2000). This, too, is a hestian enterprise, requiring greater insight into the household gods. Even if a non-zero-sum condition (Wright 2000) turns out to be the point of evolution, a mythopoeic wake-up call will be needed to make people realize it.

The nascent repositioning of home economics as the discipline of everyday life attuned to the sacral character of much of the (human, not solely female) work required of *being-in-the-world* (and of *being-in-relation*) is heartening on several levels. Fundamentally, the development of a hestian hermeneutics is driving an increasingly sophisticated and actionable discourse of domesticity (Thompson 1988, 1992). Archetypally, or cosmologically, the recovery of a geomantic sense of place that posits a *hestia* or planet-fire at the center of the earth can inspire people to care more conscientiously for the terrestrial household (Paris 1986). The consciousness of connection that a household-level view of everyday life enjoins is a fertile field into which the seeds of an ecotheistic sensibility can be sown.

Theology may well be a corrective for the kind of myopia that is impairing marketers' moral vision (Shabecoff 2000). At the very least, non-Western cosmologies pose a challenge for ineffectual dualism (Descola and Palsson 1996; Little 1999), and in particular, animism challenges the anthropo-apical construction of nature (Descola 1996).

Asking marketers to proselytize against their own short-term interests in the service of everyone's long-term quality of life—in essence, to privilege macro-marketing over micromarketing—will likely earn marcologists no friends in their home discipline. Such behavior is as easily labeled delusional as heroic. Surely, it qualifies as converse. But it is also mythopoeic. The current triumph of convenience over conservation in consumer culture (Neff 2000) is partially

due to a lack of felt presence, a want of immediacy, of a mythic charter for green activism. Marcologists who understand the utopian and dystopian consequences of consumption and who are facile with marketing's technology of influence represent the best hope for a mythic reawakening. They are a source of sumptuary semiosis. To paraphrase biologist Lynn Margulies, we know that Gaea is one tough bitch; marcologists must divine the wisdom not to contest that toughness. As Sid seems to suggest in the closing sentences of his address, people must always beware the implied spider they lure into the daylight. Spider is a "sly cousin" of Trickster (Hyde 1998) and surely is not averse to raveling webs of significance, much less the web of life.

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