

## Values towards action Jonno Revanche

There comes a time in every child's life that they realise, sometimes gradually and sometimes abruptly, that the adults in their life are not omniscient. In a subconscious way we can recognise our own smallness and vulnerability even while young and put in place instincts to protect ourselves, but it might only take a small trigger to undo a whole framework of belief. Buttons on a jacket become undone all at once, much like our faith becomes shaken from its foundations. Perhaps out of a need for self-preservation, a survival mechanism even, this attitude will be quite firmly ingrained. This belief remains stable even if your parents have not been totally successful in protecting you - they might have even been the cause of danger.

But I don't think I ever had that disappointment with my grandmother for some reason. I think this is because I recognised from the fore that she never pretended to be all knowing, even if she was sometimes all doing. Despite how pedestrian or regular she might have seemed to those who do not know her, who might have judged her from the way she looks, her insight came from a more subterranean place. She remained able and competent but never spoke down to her grandchildren, acknowledging their pure idealism. This was cemented in a succession of harsh trials and experiences within her life and an acknowledgement from the get-go that, even in her mid 60s, she didn't know everything and never pretended to. But reaching that point ironically meant that she had already figured most things out. There was something about her tirelessness and constant attentiveness that struck me as both deeply admirable and deeply unfair even when I was young. There were different rituals that embodied this - the way she could care for a child and wash them and then clothe them (this detail seems most important to me for some reason) and also the ritual of fixing torn or damaged threads.

It is with hesitance that I celebrate or totally valorise this work beyond her intricately complex inner life. She is a painter, a hiker, a brilliant socialiser, a reader and sometimes inventor. But glossing over the sweat and blood that pools into the larger understanding of "women's work" - which can extend to be seen in modern times as also femme and/or queer work - does nothing in terms of moving forward. Every time Mary will take the trousers from me that I had bought just weeks earlier and look over them, furrowing her brow. Those initial moments of disgruntled assessment and judgement. Then come the questions. "How could you possibly have torn it here?!" These are said with a curl in her mouth, a rhetorical statement without any expectation of answer. Then she will position a small light over the piece of clothing, manoeuvre her sewing machine, put on her glasses and get to work.

My grandmother is peculiar in the sense that she likes using the phrase "I don't believe in \_\_\_" to describe something she doesn't support or co-sign. I am convinced this is a generational thing, because generally when I hear someone of my own age say "I don't believe in \_\_\_" it is said with a propensity to mean that you have reasonable evidence to prove that it does not exist, that you genuinely have no faith in its tangibility. To hear someone say "I don't believe in catholicism" you may rightly assume that they have had no personal contact with a divine entity. It is significantly harder to believe that bananas or rhododendrons are cultural constructions, objects that cannot be validated through collectively witnessing it and understanding its properties. Most people can acknowledge what they look like, taste like, even smell like, and how much they generally cost at a supermarket. Their existence is not as subjective as a cultural ideology, for example. So when Mary says "I don't think you should but something new just because your old \_\_\_ broke. I don't believe in it" I understand what she means. Her code of ethics remains unwavering, only becoming decentred when it absolutely needs to be, for her to adapt or to learn.

But to move away from "buying" and toward "fixing" is unrealistic for most people - we have become alienated from the prospect of useful home skills and abilities, because this is encouraged by mass culture (and also, hardly any of us have time.) In her article on conscious consumption for qz.com, Alden Wicker argues that, "conscious consumerism is a morally righteous, bold movement. But it's actually taking away our power as citizens. It drains our bank accounts and our political will, diverts our attention away from the true powerbrokers."

We believe that by creating a demand for alternatives, we can push the more toxic options out of the market, but this is extremely slow and those more harmful choices continue to exist and do their nasty

work. So we need to halt or resist big corporations and giants before we rely on alternatives - Wicker has some suggestions:

- Instead of buying expensive organic sheets, donate that money to organizations that are fighting to keep agricultural runoff out of our rivers.
- Instead of driving to an organic apple orchard to pick your own fruit, use that time to volunteer for an organization that combats food deserts (and skip the fuel emissions, too).
- Instead of buying a \$200 air purifier, donate to politicians who support policies that keep our air and water clean.
- Instead of signing a petition demanding that Subway remove one obscure chemical from its sandwich bread, call your local representatives to demand they overhaul the approval process for the estimated 80,000 untested chemicals in our products.
- Instead of taking yourself out to dinner at a farm-to-table restaurant, you could take an interest in the Farm Bill and how it incentivizes unhealthy eating.

A symbolic choice doesn't necessarily have to be a useless one - it can help wake us up to the larger scale of mindless consumption. It's common to hear absolutist, fatalistic statements like "there is no ethical consumption under capitalism" from people with a high financial political investment in discussion around late society, social politics, and consumption, and I'm not exempt from this group. However, I think there's a certain kind of hopelessness in these phrases which serves to assuage the guilt of the speaker rather than to stimulate any sort of action or offer a pathway. The flipside of these statements is that to destroy destructive structures is to create and support new modes of thinking and making. I don't think recognising possibilities beyond complete system overhauls (which would be good but realistically aren't going to happen next week) are silly. There is no opting out of the ethics of all choices simply because a good one does not exist yet. I feel that it's important, firstly to understand how we can understand how much energy and resources we have as humans. How much power can we invest towards these issues and how do we distribute them intelligently and usefully, instead of giving up before we start?

I feel like looking at our "values", something that Mary still holds on to, has given me a lot of perspective about the way we can head. Our ideas of the world and our value system arguably determines our actions more than political belief, which can often be superficial or performative, especially if those politics aren't directly affecting your life and material position.

Over the last few months I have been exploring these ideas with my friend Nina Dodd, an artist/videographer/photographer, interviewing different people about their relationship to textile and clothing through memory, association and connection to people and place. I've begun to draw many conclusions from these interviews, like the fact that our society has shifted towards understanding clothing less as a protective, practical or necessary thing and more about what brands can do to support "identity" or grant us class mobility or cultural capital. When we see threads as merely being embellishments, adornments and symbols as much as they are intricate carriers of memory, where the source is compromised or unrecognised, we enter into a mandate with a consumer mentality. And it doesn't feel satisfying to define your personhood or importance based totally on your sartorial or aesthetic choices.

My grandmother has developed these attitudes simply by being poor for a good deal of her life, but also by sticking by her values and beliefs, and thus her abilities. Ideas of "coolness" are totally alienating to her and foreign to her, and one big issue we agree on is how these cultural ideas of certain styles simply encourage us to revert back to more traditional ways to thinking. Rather than reinforcing ideas of "identity" and how what we wear defines our worth and importance, pulling back from those notions and centring our values around gratitude and mindfulness may encourage us to view consumption as part of a larger framework. Nina and I realised that the most substantial or interesting things about clothes were how the motifs, materials or conditions of its making inspired greater conversations about culture or memory. For now, I'm still developing my thoughts, but I think a shift away from "coolness" could really open up greater, more sophisticated understandings of consumption and how to value physical objects.