

HEATHER MALLICK

## Cheap and convenient come at a cost

April 28, 2008

Last night I dreamt I went to [Wal-Mart](#) again. And I was happy there.

This worried me because the day before, I had gone to a Wal-Mart for the first time in my life, my real life, and I was badly frightened. I was checking out the store — sorry, industrial hangar exoskeleton — because developers want to build a Wal-Mart near my sort of cute, ramshackle, little-shops Toronto neighbourhood and I was there to see my future.

As it turned out, my future was my past. This Wal-Mart, a "Supercentre" the size of the Bermuda Triangle in a dire area called Scarborough, had flung me back in time to my youth.

Wal-Mart is a place I know in my soul. It is every Zellers in every small town I ever lived in; it is Woolworths in Kapuskasing writ large. (Note: the Woolworths in Kap is now a Wal-Mart.) I was thrilled to shop in cheap stores for tarty ratty clothes when I was young — I can still remember every polyester garment I ever purchased in Reitman's — but that's the joy of being a teenager in a small town. Everything is thrilling by definition. On weekends, we'd gulp homemade Harvey Wallbangers and vomit in a snowbank; that was our idea of a night out.

But the fact that something is pleasing to you says more about you than the thing itself. The fact that Wal-Mart is cheap ("Save money, live better!") and convenient (18,000 parking spaces! Free!) are two puny words against the torrent of invective I and any other Canadian interested in airy concepts like "quality of life" could instantly pour upon Wal-Mart.

I am not alone in this: over the years many Canadians, from Halifax to [Vancouver](#), have been vocal about which neighbourhoods do and don't want to plant a Wal-Mart.

### The price of cheapness

Wal-Mart is a giant American corporation (2006 revenue of \$315 billion) run out of Arkansas that devastates every town and neighbourhood in the U.S., Canada, Mexico, Brazil and Britain where it plants a store. I urge you to watch Robert Greenwald's famed 2005 documentary [Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price](#) to understand why cheap and convenient are adjectives of condemnation, not praise.

Yes, Wal-Mart is cheap. CEO Lee Scott's statement in the 2008 annual report is so obsessive about prices that he sounds like Howard Hughes on germs or Lou Dobbs on Mexicans. Here's a sampling of his phrases: "affordable, money-saving, price-leading, price-reduced, dollar-saving, budget-stretching, ends-meeting, driving down costs, reducing costs, saving money, spending less, low prices, price-leading, reduce prices, less money, save money, on par with price, lower costs." That's not cheap, that's psychotic.

I love to shop and I do shop carefully. But as I wander around Wal-Mart, it becomes apparent that their prices are low because much of their merchandise is — cheap. Whatever happened to "well-made" or "worthwhile"? Their own-brand clothing, curiously called "George," is made of thin fabric harsh on my fingertips, badly shaped and sewn, and style-free. Gap and H&M sell cheap clothes too, but they aren't this badly constructed, and those two chains make an effort at rendering the customer physically appealing to fellow human beings. George clothing actively works in the other direction.

### Disposable goods

I balk at buying cut flowers, which are farmed overseas under dreadful conditions. I buy silk fakes instead. In Wal-Mart, the artificial flowers are stunning, so amateurish that they don't resemble flowers, more like polyester extrusions. Their colours are previously unknown to humanity and the petals feel like starched toilet paper. But my god, they are cheap. When was the last time you saw a store sign blaring "98 cents"? Ask your parents.

Wal-Mart's name-brand goods may well be slightly cheaper than in other chains. Their style is pressuring manufacturers and squeezing smaller companies dry — why? because they can — but pinching blood from a pebble doesn't always pay off.

These goods are still designed as disposable. I've owned more toasters than I have toes. This is why we have a garbage crisis: repair shops no longer exist and we blow far more money buying repeat goods than one well-crafted product that will last for decades.

Of course Wal-Mart is cheap. Its ethos is to sell the lowest priced, not the most durable, goods. So we can change our descriptors to "convenient but temporary."

A cynic, Oscar Wilde said, is a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. Coming from a genius who was worth kingdoms but died penniless in exile, it's a quote for our times.

### In convenience

I don't find it convenient to have a 1,700-space parking lot near Lake Ontario, I find it repellent. It would be lovely to have picnic grounds or dog runs, restaurants, stores or something lively in an area where, magically, we can actually live well without owning cars. We have great public transit here. Why build a car magnet when gas is set to hit \$2.25 a litre in four years? Wal-Mart, purely designed for car owners, will lure thousands of polluting vehicles to a new paved parking lot in an area that already has so little open ground that when it rains, the earth can't absorb the water. Local basements annually fill with raw sewage runoff in a repeated horror that I will not describe.

I'm surprised that only 300 people showed up at recent protest against the planned big box power centre containing Wal-Mart — we'll call it Lubyanka for short. Passivity has infected every citizen.

So instead of walking down to main street for a shovel, nail gun, ice cream, prescriptions, head of lettuce, shrubbery, can of paint or pair of deck shoes, everyone will drive to Wal-Mart and come back with disposable things bought for next to nothing from dingy foreign factories. We will do this at a hidden cost to clean air, precious fuel, neighbours' basements, owners and employees of smaller stores, wages (Wal-Mart pays rock-bottom and keeps people part-time for years), the view of Lake Ontario, tax revenue, Canadian-owned manufacturers, esthetics and fitness.

I believe Wal-Mart is evil. But sometimes there's payback. The last time I saw Scott, he was [on video](#) patting the buttocks of pale male Wal-Mart executives dressed as big ugly women screaming and dancing at a corporate function. That video wouldn't be public had Wal-Mart not for decades hired Flagler Productions to record its corporate events. When the retail giant dumped Flagler in 2006, putting it out of business, Wal-Mart wouldn't negotiate a price for the video archive. So Flagler offered the videos to the free market, which now has amazing footage being pored over by wrongful death lawyers, etc.

I have to leave aside the viciousness of the company laid out in Greenwald's documentary: its blockade of the promotion of female employees, the murders, rapes and kidnappings in its cheapskate unguarded parking lots, its abuse of part-timers and non-white employees, outrages that include suing an employee brain-injured in a car crash for her private insurance payout, its secret altering of employee records to avoid paying wages, its notoriously lax [environmental safety](#) ... none of my sentences about Wal-Mart ends happily. They just build, like Wal-Mart itself.

## Letters

**I really enjoyed your piece on Wal-mart.** I live in a small town and we have a Wal-mart. I, unfortunately, do purchase there from time to time. I am getting better at finding what I need elsewhere.

One place I go to is eBay - I'm able to buy other peoples new or used goods for a lot less even with shipping. I'm an astute buyer however, and know what I'm doing on ebay - it is not that simple as you can get bamboozled easily. I rather buy used well made goods than buy new at Wal-mart.

A couple of weeks ago, I went to our local used non-profit store that specializes in furniture and after looking around, realized that it was too expensive to shop there for anything but books or plates. I had to go to Wal-mart to buy a cheap little shelving unit that cost me 30\$, (made in China; plastic and sawdust held together with lots and lots of toxic glue).

The used store had bashed up beat-up old shelves for 40\$ and more. I called them on it, but never heard back from them...I felt sad that day -that I felt I had no other option.

I'm on a very low budget from the Ministry as I am on a permanent disability and manage somehow; even though I have to put aside my ideals every now and then, to shop at, ughh, mall-wart!

Thanks for a great piece.

— *Pierce Sharelovee | Nelson, BC*

**I'm not understanding why you are blaming Wal-Mart** - or any other box store for that matter. The problem starts with us, the consumer.

We demand cheap stuff, who can blame retailers for giving us what we demand. I don't think anyone ever dreamed things would be the way they are today....as you say, stuff made in "dingy" countries lines our shelves and we buy it. (We demand vine-ripened tomatoes and lucious, ripe grapes and peaches in January which is a whole other can of worms, but has the same cause.)

I think your rant should be on us, the people who mindlessly buy. Go through your own house and take stock of everything you have that was made in a "dingy" country, then stop and think about what would happen to our country if China got pissed off with us and stopped sending us their crap.

There has to be a change in the way Canadians think about what they want, where they buy, and what they are willing to throw away.

— *Loreen | Champion, Alberta*

**I agree with Heather's position in her article** "Cheap and Convenient Comes at a Cost" that Walmart and other big box retailers have hidden costs well beyond what is visible to the typical suburban customer.

One position taken by your reader was that if you didn't like it, you don't have to shop there. This person missed the point. The basis of her article was to explore Walmart in more detail and learn about a potential retailer coming to HER neighbourhood. She is inferring that if we want corporations like Walmart to form the focal point of our NEIGHBOURHOODS, we better take good precaution to understand who these companies are, what their ethical and moral values are, and who really benefits from their arrival.

Your other reader who chastise those who don't accuse other corporations like Zellers or Canadian Tire of their irresponsibility should realize that at the very least, these companies are closer to 'buying local' than Walmart.

Having read many books covering the ethical and moral practices of Walmart and other such corporations, I for one do not want Walmart or any big box retailer to form the core of the neighbourhood I have chosen to live and raise my children in.

— *Phil Schmidts | Vancouver*

**Yes, Walmart has its up and downs** from the dissipation of mom/pop stores and its effect on the environment/community but with our economy people are living to get by.

We're in an economy where retailers are able to increase their prices and the consumer's incomes are stagnant. In terms of convenience when you have people working and have little time to make trips to various stores, they're going to opt for that big box store.

In terms of quality, very few brands or goods have the longevity it use to (late 80s/early 90s). If you think about it corporations are still in business because their goods last for 5 years and then you're obligated to purchase that item sooner rather than later.

— *Joy B. | Mississauga*

**Thank-you, Ms. Mallick, for putting a lively and entertaining spin ( at least at the outset) to what we see in this end of Toronto as a Trojan Horse retail megaplex.** WalMart isn't the only tenant, in fact there's no certainty they will become part of the "Foundry District", as the development fancies itself, at all.

In some respects, it hardly matters. The 650,000 square feet of retail,if it's built, will be occupied by many other Big Box minded retail giants ,regardless. They all read from the same songbook: volume, selection and pricing that drives small local vendors away. WalMart just makes the whole shebang FEEL shoddier.

In the end, if this development is approved, it will mark the end of a decade of regeneration. The run-down strip of Queen Street that has become a vibrant, community-conscious artery will turn back to its roots: run-down and marginal.

There are so many reasons why this is the wrong solution for any brownfield redevelopment in the city...Leslieville or the Kodak lands to the west. People should think more about the long term effects of this kind of development rather than what they'll save on tube socks.

— *Tim Kirkwood | East Toronto*

**Gee Heather, Perhaps you should really visit a Wal-Mart before you write an article about it.** The majority of products in a Wal-Mart are well-known brands that can be purchased at other retail stores. In case you haven't been paying attention, here in the U.S and in Canada almost everything we purchase is now made in a third-world country. As for me, I'm going to continue to purchase milk at Wal-Mart for \$3.60(US) a gallon rather than run to another grocery chain and pay \$4.38.

As far as cheap clothes go. Have you been to Macy's lately? The Macy brands aren't made all that well either.

## This Week

Clay Shirky's book on the uniting and organizing power of modern communications is quite astounding, although he's chirpier about it than I ever would be. [\*Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations\*](#) is of value to everyone with a computer and a cellphone. It is especially useful to those who have neither. We have immense power in our texting fingers, if only we knew it.

While we're on the subject, as all of you Wal-Mart mashers pound away, Macy's Inc. has been running around gobbling up smaller department store chains all around the U.S. If they aren't in Canada, they will be soon. So, get ready.

In the near future, Macy's Inc. will have control over what clothes you wear, what perfume and make-up is available to you, they'll make and break designers. Now that's something to worry about.

– *Bonny | Orlando*

This is not an irresponsible article by any stretch. Heather Mallick's simply reminding us of the existing, proven record of the company and adding her own opinion and self-judgement for good measure.

**For the record: I consider Zellers an improvement over Wal-Mart** by at least two orders of magnitude, flaws and all. And I also believe in getting stuff repaired whenever and wherever possible. I grew up in a house with a stereo that lasted four decades before it gave up the ghost and a refrigerator that lasted five decades.

Workmanship is worth something.

– *Dwight Williams | Orleans, ON*

**Small towns are bringing in Wal Marts because they are a draw**, people from other small towns don't go shopping in their own towns, they go to the Walmart town. I read a study and it said the nearby towns suffer from stores closing. The towns with the Walmart see a net increase of stores.

P.S. Please show me the stores that are selling quality goods I would love to shop there, even the Mom and Pop places are selling disposable appliances made in China.

– *T Thomson | Prince Rupert, B.C.*

**One line: "WalMart, a giant American company" tells you all you need to read of this nonsense.** Heather Mallick accuses a WalMart executive of being psychotic. Given that Mallick has never met an American idea, company, policy or product that she hasn't hated without any reason except its origin, and you have an equally psychotic performance.

Why the CBC continues to give this sad excuse for a journalist space---and at the taxpayer's expense---is beyond me.

– *Patrick B | Calgary*

**Usually, I find myself nodding along with Ms. Mallick's opinions.** However, this time, I gotta say... not so much.

I work at a Wal-Mart, you see. I work part-time, and that's pretty fine by me, especially since the Wal-Mart that I work at pays well more than the minimum wage in New Brunswick. It pays as well as many of the local call-centres, which for quite some time have been seen as the "high-pay" places, especially for young people who don't want to go out West. And it sure as heck pays better than my last retail job, which was within the Indigo corporation.

There's more to it, too, more than just the wage, but never mind that.

You can complain about the shoddiness of the goods, but remember that many of those goods are brand-name, the same thing you can get at Zellers or Canadian Tire, just at a lower price at Wal-Mart.

Complain to the manufacturers, not the sellers. As for the George brand of clothing... I've seen similar styles at other stores. Are those any better? They're all made in China and Bangladesh, too.

–*Catherine Thompson | Kingston, NB*

**The story (personal rant) about Wal-Mart is a completely irresponsible story.** And I hate Wal-Mart, so imagine how bad I think this story is. I hate Wal-Mart because I don't like going there and I agree that the stuff is crap. BUT, Wal-Mart is not holding a gun to anyone's head to go shop there. Humans with free will can CHOOSE to drive, walk, ride, bike to Wal-Mart and shop there. These same people can also shop elsewhere, but they like the prices at Wal-Mart, so they shop there.

CBC, please stop publishing articles like this, it is very irresponsible since most Canadians take the info you give them as the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. You will transform them into lazy, socialists who talk, talk, and then talk some more and think that it is their right to go on vacation 3 times per year and that corporations are big and bad.

I live in Brussels and I see the huge downside of socialism, it is not a place Canadians want to go.

– *Nicola | Brussels*

**Loved the opinion editorial on Wal Mart.** Congrats at bringing in the topics of lifestyle over life's stuff. I wished we would see more focus on stories over changing values, both editorial and documentary.

– *Gord Baird | Victoria*

**Heather makes some valid points about Wal-Mart;** parking, quality and cheap prices. But, where is the balance? Try buying from Canadian Tire (which nobody seems to bash - probably because it is Canadian)! CT is stocked with products 'Made in China' and with even poorer quality than Wal-Mart(I say this from experience!!!!).

The only difference I can see between CT and Wal-Mart is that CT don't pass on savings to the customer. How about giving us a balanced review of the big box stores and stop anti-Americanism disguised as a Wal-Mart exposee?

– *Anne Charles | Guelph*

**Heather, I can't help but feel your condemnation of Wal-Mart was a little too facile.** I certainly recognize the need for holding large corporations to ever-rising standards, be they social, environmental, economic etc... It's true, a corporation is, by definition, incapable of taking those steps without outside pressure. But I think Wal-Mart really gets singled out merely by virtue of it's scope; it's a big, thus easy, target.

Let's be honest, there's a reason beyond "They're Evil" for why Wal-Mart has succeeded; they offer a great deal (no pun intended) to citizens. They represent a natural evolution of the retail model, and I'm not certain we should dismiss it so casually. Nor, apparently, are most other retailers in Canada who have spent the last decade restructuring to match it. But somehow, I read very few articles decrying Canadian Tire, Zellers, Loblaws etc...

I'm actually on the market for a house in Leslieville, and a potential Wal-Mart in the area is, to be quite frank, a selling point for the neighbourhood. I'd rather have big box stores in the neighbourhood than crumbling movie studios, and shady car "garages". As for driving quaint mom & pop stores out of business, I must have been looking elsewhere. The overwhelming number of family businesses I see in Toronto have highly dubious customer service, inflated prices, and highly inconsistent quality of goods and services.

Honestly, the (admittedly) cheap quality of Wal-Mart goods isn't any worse than what you'll find at any other smaller retailer in a mall. How come we don't hear about the Eaton Centre destroying downtown Toronto? The clothes at American Eagle/Gap/Old Navy/Urban outfitters etc... are no better than George brand. Or how about how IKEA and Leon's have forever destroyed the lives and workshops of hardworking furniture craftsmen, and forced Canadian society to settle for cheaper, manufactured, prefab furniture?

Let's face it, most of the anti-Wal-Mart rhetoric in Toronto is just dressed-up snobbery from people who would like to conspicuously consume from branded boutiques, but also aren't afraid to furnish the cottage from Wal-Mart either. Which isn't to say let's give them a blank cheque. Sure, let's insist that their stores aren't unwanted eyesores looming over the neighbourhood like some hideous spawn of the Michael Lee-Chin Crystal. Sure, let's do like Philly and insist the workers are paid well. However, enough with the lazy potshots.

– *Phil Maheux | Toronto*

**My thoughts about the Walmart issue is close to yours.** Here in the little city(town) of Flin Flon, Walmart did major damage to the local economy. Many Main Street businesses closed in short order following Walmart's opening. BUT, at the same time, made the larger venues rethink their market strategies and became more flexible and competitive.

In Flin Flon, it was always the norm for the local grocery stores and market to raise their prices every time H.B.M.& S. Co., the largest employer, raised the wages. Now the local businesses have to be more cautionary in pricing. Instead of watching H.B.M.& S., businesses watch Walmart to see if they raise their prices first, before anyone else does the same ! Oh, and I have to add this little note ! For over a year now I have been observing a "price roll-ahead" not Walmart's typical "roll-back" as advertised on TV.

What do I mean? Well, over 75% of the stock that hits our Walmart will be at a set price. Their Walmart pricing sticker on every item is removed and a general pricing label on the shelf is applied. As time goes on, I've watched an item's price slowly go up, yes UP not down. Then when the item has reach it's "magical shelf life", as I put it, they mark it down during a 'red tag special' placing it back to original price.

I was told by an ex-employee that our Walmart was now a "Northern Store". That it's 5 year contract with the city was up and that the pricing here was different from every other Walmart across Canada. First I'd ever heard of this, and I've watched all the special broadcasts about Walmart.

I just looked at it as little town Flin Flon being bent over by Corp America, again ! And now that H.B.M.& S. Co. is paying out a substantial profit share cheque every spring, the locals are noticing, yet again, a pricing jump in the local market place. Less than 10% of the local populace works at H.B.M.& S., and the other 90% suffer for it !

– *Michael Besler | Flin Flon, MB*

**Wal-Mart. I haven't set foot in there since reading Barbara Ehrenreich's "Nickel and Dimed" five years ago.**

It's a documentary (although it's a book) in which she sets out to see whether a single person could live on the official minimum wage in the USA. I think the depressing conclusion would be the same here in Canada.

In various parts of that great country she becomes a waitress; a house cleaner; a home-depot worker; and of course, she gets hired by Wal-Mart. My god, the indignity. Urine tests, the works.

She's a good writer so the book is often funny as well as furious, and for me, a life-changing read. (One small example: I now tip very generously in cheapo restaurants. In cash.)

– *Rita Johnson | Picton, Ontario*

**I am quite offended by the article "Cheap and convenient come at a cost".** The line "On weekends, we'd gulp homemade Harvey Wallbangers and vomit in a snowbank; that was our idea of a night out." is very offensive to me, and promotes a way of life to young people that is not appropriate.

– *Joe Caverly | St. Thomas, ON*

