

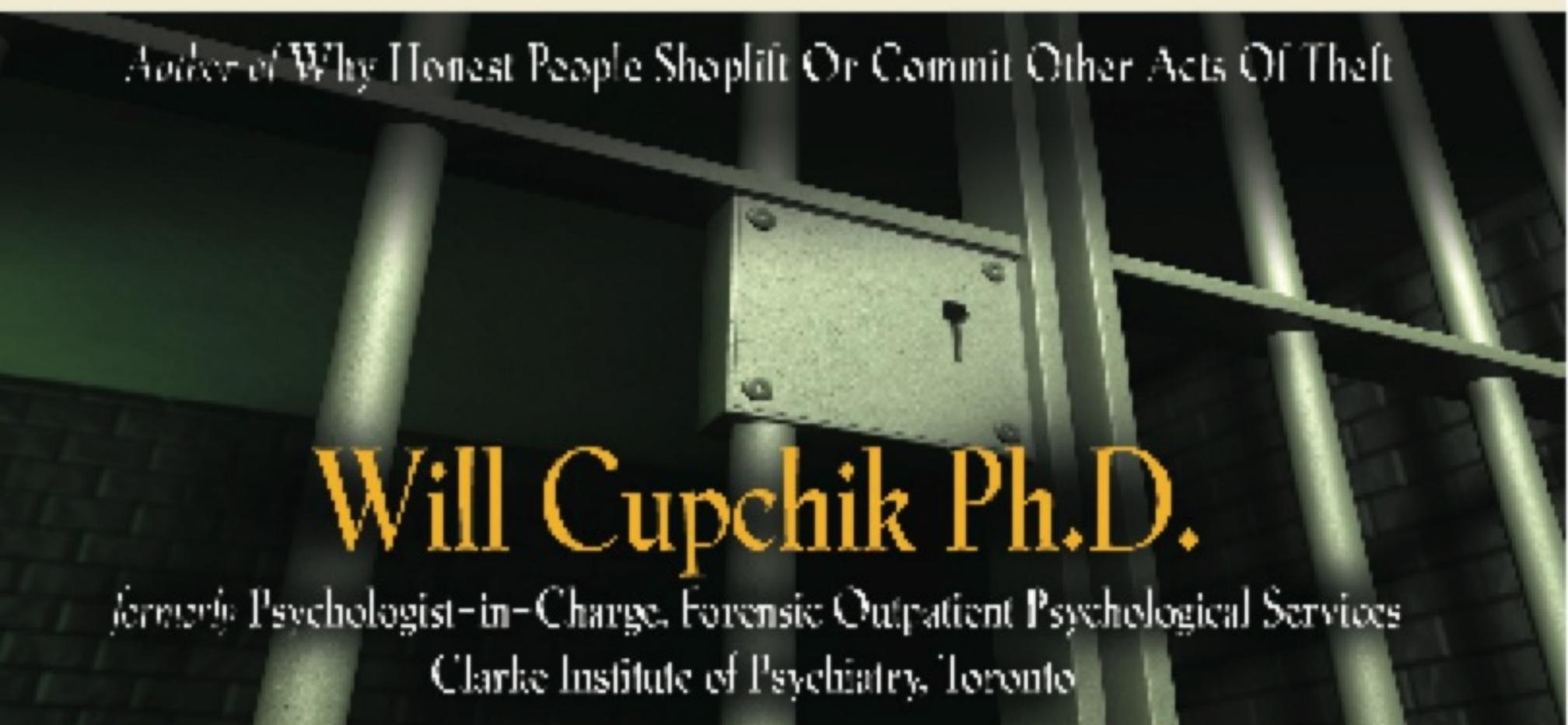
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# WHY USUALLY HONEST PEOPLE STEAL

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UNDERSTANDING, TREATING AND STOPPING  
NONSENSICAL SHOPLIFTING  
AND OTHER BIZARRE THEFT BEHAVIOR

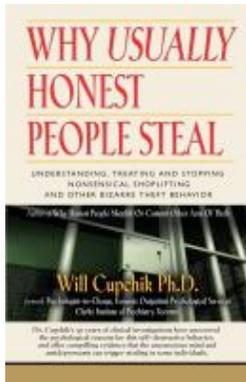
*Author of Why Honest People Shoplift Or Commit Other Acts Of Theft*



**Will Cupchik Ph.D.**

*formerly Psychologist-in-Charge, Forensic Outpatient Psychological Services  
Clarke Institute of Psychiatry, Toronto*

Dr. Cupchik's 50 years of clinical investigations have uncovered the psychological reasons for this self-destructive behavior, and offer compelling evidence that the unconscious mind and antidepressants can trigger stealing in some individuals.



*For over 39 years, psychologist Dr. Will Cupchik has investigated the atypical theft behavior (shoplifting, fraud, etc.) of usually honest and generally well functioning adults. This book includes his latest (2013) study's extensive findings that provide keen insights into the sorts of personal histories, personality traits and ways of operating in the world that can help precipitate theft behavior. Also included are unique, practical tools specifically developed to help successfully assess and treat these individuals.*

# WHY USUALLY HONEST PEOPLE STEAL

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**WHY  
USUALLY  
HONEST  
PEOPLE STEAL**

**Understanding, Treating And  
Stopping  
Nonsensical Shoplifting  
And Other Bizarre Theft  
Behaviour**

**Will Cupchik Ph.D.**

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## Chapter 1

### SOME SHOCKING EXAMPLES OF SHOPLIFTING PERPETRATED BY PROMINENT PEOPLE

At least several times a year, local and/or national media will headline articles about acts of shoplifting that have evidently been carried out by persons whom most of us know - or know of - and who would be among the last individuals we ever expected would have been arrested for stealing (especially items worth a relatively minor amount compared to those persons' readily available assets).

Frequently the items have allegedly been taken from supermarkets, department or specialty stores and we can be forgiven for thinking or saying aloud to our family or friends something like, "*Can you believe it? On the news it just said that \_\_\_\_\_ has been charged with stealing items that he (or she) could so easily have afforded to buy! Why, for heaven's sake, would he have done that? It will wreck his reputation, and perhaps he will even lose his license to practice his profession or get another job. He isn't stupid! In fact he is very bright and has more than enough money. So, what gives?!*"

To put the matter even more succinctly, we might ask, "*Why would someone risk so much for so little gain?*" That is the very question that this book aims to answer.

#### **Some startling examples of alleged shoplifting carried out by persons who would seem to be the last folks we would expect to behave in such a manner**

In early August of 2010, Rudy Giuliani's 20 year old daughter, Caroline, at the time a Harvard University student, was arrested for allegedly shoplifting several items worth about \$100 from a cosmetics store in New York City. Later that month she evidently struck a deal in court to get her shoplifting charges dismissed by being given 'an adjournment in contemplation of dismissal' in exchange for serving a day of community service and avoiding any further problems with the law for six months.

DR. WILL CUPCHIK

And consider the case (also mentioned previously) of President George W. Bush's former domestic policy advisor, Claude Allen, who resigned his position in February 2006, after having been apprehended for allegedly stealing from Target and Hecht's stores. In August of 2006 he pled guilty to one misdemeanour count of theft. Allen, a married man with four children and an evangelical Christian, was at the time apparently earning over \$160,000 a year.

I have previously mentioned the case of Winona Ryder, a prominent actress who was charged with shoplifting in 2002.

Older readers may recall that in 1988, media personality (and former Miss America) Bess Myerson pled guilty to shoplifting items worth about \$44 from a department store in Pennsylvania.

Several years ago I was contacted by two American television networks to comment on the case of the former attorney general (married at the time to another prominent lawyer), who attempted to get the valuable paintings she had stolen, *insured!* To do so required, of course, that she list the artists' names and the titles of the paintings. This she did, although she surely must have known that those exact works of art would likely be listed somewhere in a database of stolen paintings. So why would she have done something that virtually guaranteed she would be caught?

One could go on and on, recounting instances of prominent citizens who have been apprehended for shoplifting. In my practice over the years I have interviewed all manner of reputable and usually honest individuals who have stolen, including even some deeply religious individuals, among them a distinguished Catholic priest, a prominent member of a large Jewish congregation, and a highly respected and religiously observant Muslim, each of whom admitted to seemingly bizarre theft behaviour.

Now, of course, for every case of a usually honest individual who has committed an act of shoplifting or some other kind of theft, there are very likely dozens of other persons whose acts of stealing were carried out with the primary motivation being to not pay for the item, and without the slightest feelings of remorse or shame. As I have already mentioned, over 25 years ago, my colleague, psychiatrist Dr Don J Atcheson and I termed this latter group of individuals, who most of us would readily consider 'common thieves', *Typical Theft Offenders*. **In this book we shall focus**

## WHY USUALLY HONEST PEOPLE STEAL

**upon those individuals who truly are usually honest and law-abiding, who almost invariably detest the very idea of people stealing, but who, nevertheless have themselves committed acts of theft.**

Before going on let me state that I have chosen to mention cases of relatively prominent people who have shoplifted primarily because those are the cases that tend to make the headlines. When very wealthy or members of prominent families are apprehended for shoplifting we are taken aback, shocked or even disgusted. However, I can assure the reader that my clinical investigations clearly indicate that their acts of stealing are almost invariably due to the same kinds of underlying issues that have prompted less well known -but no less honest- persons to act out.



## Chapter 2

### WHY I BECAME INTERESTED IN THE THEFT BEHAVIOUR OF USUALLY HONEST ADULTS

Like many of the readers of this book, I have always been interested in how *things* and *people* work. In fact, as a young teenager, when I was trying to decide whether to go into psychology or engineering, I decided that I would attempt *both* professions. By age sixteen, I correctly concluded that engineering would likely be a harder path for me, and so, if I was going to try both professions, I should probably do engineering first. And so, the summer prior to my final school year in the five-year electrical engineering degree program at McGill University, specializing in electronics, in 1961, I did take my very first university course in psychology at what is now called Concordia University.

After graduation as a newly minted professional engineer, I was fortunate to obtain a job with an exceptional engineering company in Ottawa, Ontario called Computing Devices of Canada (CDC). This firm designed and built navigational guidance systems for the then next-generation of mostly military (NATO, including USA) aircraft. In my time at CDC I designed three alternate systems for ship-based, submarine-seeking helicopters, and I was, and remain, proud that all three designs were actually accepted and CDC remained at the forefront of such system designs for decades. At the same time, however, given that it was in the midst of the so-called Cold War (the Cuban missile crisis was only months away), and since my plan had been all along to also further my studies in psychology, after one year at CDC I decided to return to university full-time and completed my Bachelor's degree with a major in psychology at Carleton University, in Ottawa, in 1963.

**In retrospect, it is clear to me that I have always been interested in the relationship of one thing to another, one person to another, and/or even one person to an *object* or *machine* or *activity* (think *shoplifting*).**

As a professional engineer, I was focused on how to help a helicopter carry out its anti-submarine patrol, all the while keeping track of exactly where it was in relation to its mothership *and* the other helicopters that

DR. WILL CUPCHIK

were carrying out their own parts of the search pattern. Years later, as a doctoral student in counseling psychology I was vitally interested in gaining an in-depth understanding of the status and dynamics of an interpersonal relationship between two people.

In my forensic work as a psychologist, I was intrigued by the relationship between a theft offender and the items that he or she had shoplifted. This particular interest came about largely as a result of having been accepted, in 1974, as a psychology intern, on the forensic service of the University of Toronto-affiliated, Clarke Institute of Psychiatry. It was mere serendipity that, during that time period (1974-86), our outpatient forensic unit was having referred to it for clinical assessment and possible treatment, a very wide variety of primarily responsible (and even a few relatively high-profile) individuals, who had been charged with seemingly nonsensical acts of shoplifting. These individuals included a prominent lawyer, a senior engineer, an experienced nurse, a Dean of Law at a major university, elementary and high school teachers, business owners, a house-cleaning person and some homemakers, among others.

As I was at the time assigned to the team of professionals led by senior psychiatrist Dr Don Atcheson, he and I had occasion to commiserate about the slowly emerging, curious commonalities among this broad assortment of accused shoplifters. Over the years from 1976 through the early 1980s we collected and collated a good deal of data about these individuals and had our resulting article titled, *Shoplifting: An Occasional Crime Of The Moral Majority*, published in the prestigious, peer-reviewed professional journal, the Bulletin of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law, in 1983.

**A significant political and scientific event that occurred while I was in engineering at university and that impacted the ways in which I would come to contemplate the ways of the world.**

As I mentioned, my first profession in the early 1960s was as an electronics engineer. Actually I was in second year engineering at McGill University on October 4, 1957 when two momentous events occurred. One was the flight of the CF-105 Avro Arrow, at the time the most advanced fighter-interceptor aircraft in the world, designed and built in Toronto. The second event was by far more world-shaking, namely the flight of the first Sputnik satellite that was launched by the then Soviet Union and that

## WHY USUALLY HONEST PEOPLE STEAL

proceeded to circle the earth in a low orbit. As happened at most science and engineering departments at universities all over the so-called Western World, McGill's engineering faculty was shaken to its core. Soon afterwards, many universities' engineering programs were rapidly modernized, including in my chosen field of electronics, as we were introduced to numerous courses in so-called 'atomic physics' and 'semiconductor theory'.

I well recall that the following year our physics professor introduced the first so-called 'atomic physics' course we were to encounter, by saying that some of us might find it a very uncomfortable subject because, in ways, it would not appear to 'make much sense'. He said that the basis of atomic physics was mathematical, not what we had been brought up to consider as 'logical'. For example, while the 'old' Newtonian model of physics maintained that the weight of a pound of matter stays constant, no matter what, the newer 'atomic physics' proclaimed, in Einstein's famous formula  $E=MC^2$ , that if one could hurl a unit of matter at the speed of light, the pound of matter would be transformed into energy.

This same professor also told us a very interesting story that still has relevance today for all of us who would like to better understand the workings of the human and material worlds. He said that in the early 1900s, there was a most remarkable philosophy professor who taught at one of the prestigious Ivy League universities in the eastern USA. Evidently this professor relished in taking his first year students (all males, most of whom had been brought up in upper class, firmly religious Christian homes), and by the force of his profoundly rational and philosophical mind, he would essentially help his students *deconstruct* their religious beliefs to the point that, by the time they went home for Christmas vacation, many of these students were no longer certain of what they believed, including whether there was a God, if 'he' was a *Christian* God, etc... . (No doubt it made for very interesting conversations at their families' Christmas dinner tables that holiday period!)

The philosophy professor evidently also had the further, perhaps even more impressive, knack of helping his students *re-construct* their own, relatively thoroughly thought through, religious beliefs to the point that, by the *end* of the school year, they were well on their way to once again having firmly held, yet highly idiosyncratic beliefs about religion in general, and their own in particular.

DR. WILL CUPCHIK

One year, however, when the professor's students returned from Christmas vacation, they learned that their professor had died. As a result, many of them were left only with questions and uncertainties about their religious beliefs as well as many other issues. The 'punch line' of this story, according to our physics professor, was that these students, upon graduating, went on to produce more leaders in American business and other walks of life, than any other comparable graduating class from any other Ivy League university during that period. They had been left, upon graduation, with more questions and fewer answers. This state of ambiguity, of not-knowingness, can be a difficult one to tolerate, although it can open one up to vistas hardly imagined when one believes that one already has the major answers to life's mysteries as one enters adulthood.

I am convinced that this early intellectual training in atomic physics and allied subjects has allowed me to keep my mind open to alternate, even seemingly opposing, facts and ideas. The reason I have recounted the above story is to suggest, to the extent that you are comfortable in so doing, that *you* also keep *your* own mind open as we proceed to explore the data and ideas that will be presented throughout the remainder of this book. If you are able to do so, you will find that seemingly bizarre and nonsensical acts of shoplifting can indeed be understood and 'made sense off' as we come to realize that such behaviour usually stems from the perpetrators' responses to key issues and/or events in their lives.

#### **My years on the staff of the forensic service of the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry**

Without a doubt, among the most interesting dozen years of my working life were spent working on the forensic service of the University of Toronto-affiliated, Clarke Institute of Psychiatry. We regularly received for assessment and treatment, perpetrators of all manner of criminal activity. The more seemingly sensational or bizarre the case, the more likely it was that, sooner *than* later, these offenders would appear, either on the *outpatient* unit (for those who were deemed less dangerous, to themselves and/or others) or on the *inpatient* unit (where individuals who had been charged with serious physical or sexual assaults, and all manner of other major crimes, including murder, were confined during their assessments). In fact, it is literally true that I and other staff members would read the morning newspaper and/or hear the news on the radio on the commute to work, and accurately predict that the more seemingly remarkable or strange the crime, the more likely it was that it would be

## WHY USUALLY HONEST PEOPLE STEAL

only a matter of time until the alleged perpetrator appeared on our unit for assessment and, perhaps, treatment.

While it is true that many of the cases of rape, assisted suicide and murder that arrived at the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry's forensic unit were intriguing from a professional point of view, nevertheless for me, it was the seemingly outlandish *acts of theft* (usually but not always, shoplifting) by supposedly intelligent, relatively financially secure and professionally successful persons, that most drew my attention. I was fascinated to learn why it was that these particular individuals had risked *so much* (in terms of their personal reputations and working lives, ability to continue to practice their professions, etc...) for, frequently, *so very little* in monetary terms). Most of them, in fact, had shoplifted items worth a miniscule amount compared to their own readily available financial assets.

Consider, for example, the award-winning high school teacher with a Masters degree who deeply loved his job, yet who repeatedly risked being fired for stealing items usually worth less than five dollars from a store within two blocks of his school. Another example was the emergency room physician who occasionally stole pens and blank CDs from a local office supplies box store. A third case was that of an experienced nurse who worked in a long-term rehabilitation facility, who truly enjoyed going to work each day, and yet risked losing her nursing licence because of her repeated acts of shoplifting from a nearby department store. A fourth case involved a prominent physician who stole over-the-counter medications from his neighbourhood drug store. A fifth case involved a deeply religious individual who worked for his church's major charity but who made off with over \$500,000 from the church's coffers.

At the Clarke Institute we received them all, theft offenders who knew better, had no financial need to steal, and yet had admittedly committed these acts of theft -often in a remarkably blatant fashion- as if either they were either quite inept or very poor – neither of which was the case!

### **My own heritage piqued my interest in understanding illogical conduct**

Born during the early part of World War II yet safely ensconced in a small city in the province of Quebec in Canada, I was quickly made aware of my Jewish heritage, in part by some of my school chums and 'good

DR. WILL CUPCHIK

friends' who occasionally issued anti-Semitic insults as easily, and often as innocently, as if they were sitting at a dinner table saying, "Pass the butter!" One might forgive them because, in at least some cases, they assuredly knew not the import of what they were actually doing.

Of course, it was not only in my hometown of St. Jean sur Richelieu, some twenty-five miles from Montreal, that I encountered anti-Semitism. When I was a student in engineering at McGill University in 1956, I well recall the nearby fraternity house whose president informed us that his members were vehemently against holding a joint 'open house' with our members following an upcoming football game, given that we were "not of the same religious persuasion." As well, at the time it was widely believed that many universities in both Canada and the USA had a 'quota system' that applied to Jewish applicants to their medical and other professional faculties. As a result of these situations I was left to wonder why so many obviously intelligent people and members of institutions of higher learning could hold such prejudiced opinions and manifest such bigoted behaviours.

**The Holocaust also influenced my professional interest in atypical theft behaviour**

Decades ago the University of Toronto was the site of a conference at which the main speaker was, as I recall, the chairman of the U.S. President's Commission on the Holocaust. The most powerful point he made, as far as I was concerned, was that the Holocaust, surely one of the most diabolical, immoral and cruel events ever perpetrated upon other human beings, had been designed, orchestrated and carried out by some of the most educated and accomplished members of the professional classes (judges, lawyers, doctors, engineers, etc...) in German society. They were in a sense, some of the best and brightest citizens of Nazi Germany.

Furthermore, the 1961 trial of ex-Nazi SS Lieutenant Colonel Adolph Eichmann in Israel turned out to be, in part, an exercise in the study of 'the banality of evil' (a poignant term that was part of the title of German-American political theorist Hannah Arendt's book on Eichmann's trial). **In this trial, a very ordinary member of society (Eichmann) showed that he was capable of carrying out immoral acts of the worst and most far-reaching kinds.** He was considered a major functionary in arranging the transport of Jews from their homes, first into ghettos, and then to the concentration camps.

## WHY USUALLY HONEST PEOPLE STEAL

I also became aware of the January 20, 1941 so-called Wannsee Conference, which was a meeting of some of the key personnel in the Nazi Germany hierarchy aimed at coordinating the capture, transport and extermination of Jews. The 1984 German television film *Wannseekonferenz* (*The Wannsee Conference*), produced as a recreation of the meeting, and ran 85 minutes—exactly the length of the conference itself, with a script derived from the minutes of the meeting.

[For further information about this grotesque, organized gathering I would recommend that readers find one of the films made about this ‘conference’ and/or read the detailed summary of the meeting as described on Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wannsee\\_Conference](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wannsee_Conference). Again, it was the sheer ‘ordinaryness’ and bizarreness of the meeting that made it clear that intelligent, educated and high functioning individuals were fully capable of orchestrating and carrying out the most heinous acts imaginable.]

From the above facts and experiences I came to be particularly interested in instances where intelligent, presumably thoughtful people do seemingly stupid, thoughtless things. It was, and remains, intriguing for me to attempt to understand why usually moral, ethical persons would offend against their own standards, and in particular when they themselves would be quite unable to reasonably explain or justify their misdeeds.

During my twelve years on the staff of the forensic service of the Clarke Institute, it hardly surprised me that relatively disadvantaged individuals who had been brought up in environments of deprivation and/or violence, and/or were living on the fringes of society, would act out in criminal ways. **But it was most unexpected to find an ample supply of educated, successful persons who committed acts of theft that even they and their associates would undoubtedly find abhorrent, were they to have been committed by someone else, perhaps one of their own friends or colleagues.** And between 1974 and 1986 (the years when I worked on the forensic service) many of the acts of shoplifting that had been perpetrated by members of this latter, privileged group, led to them arriving at our forensic unit for assessment and treatment, allowing my colleague, senior psychiatrist Dr Don Acheson and myself to examine this phenomenon and the perpetrators particularly closely.

DR. WILL CUPCHIK

After having developed a reputation as a specialist in uncovering and being able to articulate plausible and probable explanations for atypical theft behaviour, after I left the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry in 1986 to go into full-time private practice I continued to receive very many referrals of reputable (and sometimes quite prominent) individuals who, nevertheless, had placed themselves in considerable personal and professional jeopardy as a result of committing their seemingly nonsensical acts of theft.

I am, at this time, usually in a position to offer an comprehensive, detailed list of non-mutually exclusive, but highly probable explanations, for the atypical theft behaviour of the usually honest individuals whom I have thoroughly assessed. And as important, I have developed powerful approaches to effectively treating many of these persons. It is important to appreciate that the aim here is most definitely not to excuse, but rather to uncover, understand and, in laypersons' terms, explain why the individuals in question have committed their acts of theft – and to assist them to stop their ultimately self-destructive behaviour.

## Chapter 3

### WHY THE SHOPLIFTING BEHAVIOUR OF PROMINENT AND/OR WEALTHY AND/OR RELIGIOUS PERSONS INTRIGUES US ALL

What so grabs our interest when an supposedly deeply religious, professionally successful, financially well off, and/or prominent person shoplifts (especially items worth a relatively paltry sum compared to that individual's readily available assets) is the fact that there is no blatantly obvious need for that person to have bothered stealing the item(s) in question. We are astounded that someone who has so much -and so much *to lose*, if caught- would potentially risk it all, especially for so little in monetary gain. And some of us might understandably experience resentment or even anger when it appears that someone who already has a great deal, seems to be reluctant to part with a relatively small sum in order to acquire an item that most of the rest of us would feel obliged to *purchase*, were we also to want to have the item(s) in question.

When we learn that persons who know better, nevertheless attempt to get away with something by disreputable means, we are offended. We may think, "*It is not fair; it is downright wrong, and I hope they get their comeuppance!*"

**The most common sort of theft (i.e., shoplifting) has likely always intrigued us.**

A recent Internet search of the word 'shoplifting' produced nearly *ten million* results while a search for the word 'paranoia' was about 7 million and the word 'stomach-ache' produced only 4 million. An Internet search of the *New York Times* database likewise results in a listing *hundreds* of articles when using the keyword, 'shoplifting'.

**What happens when the wealthy try to get away with more (especially if it is just a *little* more)**

Over a century ago, in its December 2, 1904 edition, the *New York Times* published a most interesting article that recounted the appearance in court of a woman "known as Mrs. Hobert," who appeared before a Magistrate Whitman in Jefferson Market Court. Unfortunately for Mrs.

DR. WILL CUPCHIK

Hobert, when the manager of the store in which she was arrested himself asked for the charge of shoplifting to be withdrawn, on the grounds that he had learned, after an investigation, “that this woman is a member of one of the best families in the city, and moreover, that she has been suffering from severe illness” for three years, the Magistrate refused.

The stated grounds upon which the Magistrate refused to have the case withdrawn were interesting in and of themselves. On the one hand he is quoted as saying that “I can't see that this case differs from any other that has come before me.... I have a duty to perform as a public officer. There should be no discrimination, and there will be none in this court whether the accused be poor or which, socially prominent or unknown.” While holding such a view appears to speak to an equality before the court that most might consider admirable, the very next sentence uttered by the Magistrate (assuming the newspaper article reported and quoted him accurately) suggests that he was, in fact, going to hold Mrs. Hobert to a *markedly different standard* than a less financially well off shoplifter would have been. Magistrate Whitman is quoted as saying, immediately after he spoke of the admirable quality of “blind justice”, that “The fact of this woman being wealthy and socially prominent only makes her crime the more flagrant, and she should be punished in the most severe manner.”

Magistrate Whitman would certainly find many individuals in current day America and elsewhere to be very simpatico with his ‘double standard’ of treating the rich more severely than the poor, for the very same crime of theft. Some of us can at least appreciate, if not entirely concur, with the Magistrate’s views of over a century ago. After all, it may irk us that someone with so much already (in monetary or social terms) would attempt to get something more ‘for free’, even if it is only a ‘little more’.

**So, why do they do it?**

At the same time, we are left with our questions as to why Mrs. Hobert did it? At the least it piques our curiosity and, not knowing the answers to the questions that we have, we are left to contemplate the most seemingly obvious facts; here is someone who already has ‘a lot’ yet apparently tried to get away with a little more. Does it remind us of the sibling, co-worker, or acquaintance who was always trying to get a bigger slice of the pie than us, literally or figuratively? Perhaps it is not uncommon for some to still have lingering resentment in regard to the

## WHY USUALLY HONEST PEOPLE STEAL

perceived unfair pieces-of-the-pie distribution of love, affection, attention, etc..., that was doled out by one or both parents. (Older readers may recall the Smothers Brothers television program, where Tom Smothers would often accusatively say to his brother, Dick, “Mom always liked you best!”)

Another reason the topic of shoplifting may interest us is that, after all, most of us have to *work* to earn money and we *pay* for the things we get. We call this latter activity, ‘buying’. ‘Buying’ something means paying for that which we wish to acquire. Of course, buying something that is ‘on sale’, i.e., paying less for the same item than if it were not on sale, is also entirely acceptable in our society. Witness the shopping tradition called Black Friday that occurs the day after American Thanksgiving, or the so-called ‘Boxing Day’ sales that take place in Canada the day after Christmas day.

On the other hand, ‘shoplifting’ is stealing, getting something for *nothing*, and it is not only illegal but, according to the ten commandments and most other religions’ tenets, it is morally wrong.

### **The difficult-to-comprehend inherent complexity of some corporate crimes**

Most laypersons don’t fully understand the details of the sorts of deceptive or illegal practices that some businesses employ, except in the broad strokes. When companies and/or their executives use various complex nefarious means (devious accounting practices, inappropriate expense account filings, etc...) to underhandedly acquire funds, we have the impression that something wrong has been done, but many of us do not truly comprehend the exact nature of what was done.

**Remember the ‘credit default swaps’ that were part of the 2008 financial crisis?** The following is from Wikipedia (retrieved on October 26, 2012, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/credit\\_default\\_swaps](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/credit_default_swaps)) and describes a ‘credit default swap’ (CDS) as being “*a financial swap agreement that the seller of the CDS will compensate the buyer in the event of a loan default or other credit event. The buyer of the CDS makes a series of payments (the CDS "fee" or "spread") to the seller and, in exchange, receives a payoff if the loan defaults. In the event of default the buyer of the CDS receives compensation (usually the face value of the loan), and the seller of the CDS takes possession of the defaulted loan.*

DR. WILL CUPCHIK

*However, anyone can purchase a CDS, even buyers who do not hold the loan instrument and who have no direct insurable interest in the loan (these are called "naked" CDSs). If there are more CDS contracts outstanding than bonds in existence, a protocol exists to hold a credit event auction; the payment received is usually substantially less than the face value of the loan."*

How many lay readers fully understand what the above description of a credit default swap really means? Probably, not many!

But *shoplifting!* Now *there* is an act that is seemingly entirely obvious (especially as compared to a credit default swap!) and we can usually easily comprehend the details of *what* was taken, by *whom* and as importantly, *how*. As a result, we can follow the consequences of a simple act of shoplifting with ease, and dare I suggest, perhaps even satisfaction – especially when the guilty party gets his or her due.

Most of us have a keen sense of fairness versus unfairness, of right versus wrong, of good versus bad. And acts of shoplifting can stir these senses and elicit strong feelings. We are, after all, dealing here with one of the Ten Commandments; in fact, number eight: "Thou shall not steal." That is a very clear and unequivocal injunction. While the shenanigans that led to the 2008 stock market and housing mortgage meltdowns might be complicated and make it difficult to ascribe clear and definite blame, an act of shoplifting is usually much more straightforward and blame and responsibility can easily be laid.

I have often told reporters for various media who have contacted me that it is very interesting that, given the choice, say when having friends over for dinner, between inviting someone with a known drinking problem and has had convictions for driving while inebriated *or* inviting an individual who was been convicted of stealing, a substantial proportion of hosts would be more inclined to invite the 'drunk' than the 'thief'.

In this book I reveal the several non-mutually exclusive answers to the following question: Why is it that some usually honest, ethical persons shoplift? These answers have been gained from decades of my own clinical investigations into atypical theft behaviour, and I offer a number of examples, using composite cases garnered from my own files. Of course,

## WHY USUALLY HONEST PEOPLE STEAL

to preserve confidentiality, I have altered possible identifying features and details. At the same time, however, as dramatic as the examples I will offer will be, I want to assure you, the reader, that the true facts in these cases were even more remarkable than those that I present for your consideration.

From reading this book you can expect to gain considerable insight into the reasons why some acts of shoplifting (and other kinds of theft) are committed by those persons who usually live their lives with honesty and integrity, who should and do know better, and who really have no objective reason to steal, but do so anyway – sometimes, time and again.

### **Atypical Theft Behaviour by Usually Honest Persons**

To continue our investigation of atypical theft behaviour, I have already offered for your consideration the case of Victor, the wealthy retired gentleman from Los Angeles, who committed a totally unnecessary, single act of theft. I have already pointed out that his story has much to inform us about life, the unconscious mind and atypical theft behaviour.

Most readers, I believe, will find that the story of Victor offers very powerful evidence that his act of atypical theft behaviour warranted at least some compassionate consideration before concluding that ‘since he did the crime, he should do the time’.

It has been my clinical experience that, while many cases were not necessarily as ‘pure’ or dramatic, there exists very similar psychodynamics; i.e., most of the usually honest persons I have assessed and treated, have acted out by stealing in response to having their unconscious or subconscious minds stirred by some external events or circumstances.

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Let me offer you another example of atypical theft behaviour, this time carried out by a usually outstanding member of her working community.

### **Case # 2: Melanie: The Frequent Employee-of the month Who Had Stolen From Her Employer – for Years**

DR. WILL CUPCHIK

*Melanie had been a seemingly dedicated employee of a high-end specialty store for over fifteen years – until the day her theft behaviour was exposed and she was fired. Just over 38 years old at the time she contacted me, she had great difficulty talking about her problem without crying wrenching tears of shame, and could not explain to me how it was that she had stolen from the employer who, she stated, she greatly admired and personally liked. A clearly highly intelligent and intuitive individual, she had, within three years after she began her employment at the store, been put in charge of selecting and ordering the more high-end items that her company sold. Since taking over that job, the company's profits had greatly increased, and Melanie's salary had steadily improved, as well. She was a very highly trusted, valued and well-paid employee.*

*Brought up in an upper middle class home with a mother she described as extremely fragile and a father who had great difficulty expressing emotion (she could not remember him ever once having hugged her or told her that he loved her), she could not explain to me why she had, over a period of seven years, stolen from her employer a great many specialized items that were worth, usually, anywhere from a few dollars to over \$500 each. She kept the items (worth over \$15,000 in total) in her apartment; they were never sold, given away, used or worn, but Melanie said that she felt gratified at merely having them in her possession. Since her parents were very generous financially, she was certain that they would have given her the funds to purchase all the items she had stolen, without a moment's hesitation - but she had never asked them.*

*Another remarkable feature of this case was that, over a period of a few sessions, it became abundantly clear that Melanie was truly exceptionally bright and verbally highly proficient. She often used highly apt metaphors to describe her thoughts, feelings and experiences, and it was obvious that she had a great facility with visual imagery (a subject with which I am especially familiar, given that it had been a major part of the topic of my doctoral dissertation). Week after week, when she came into my office, she would take out her 3-ring binder and share with me the powerful insights she had gained since our previous session, in words and images that were, at one and the same time, brilliantly simple and profoundly elegant.*

*Melanie had informed me in an early session that she dropped out of university just prior to the final exam of her final year in economics. In*

## WHY USUALLY HONEST PEOPLE STEAL

*sessions that followed it seemed that she had a long-time habit of not completing studies, projects or relationships. In reference to the latter, Melanie told me that as soon as a promising relationship was on the verge of becoming sexually intimate or otherwise close, she would find some excuse to stop seeing the individual. Our in-depth investigation of this pattern revealed a strong sense of very low self-esteem. Melanie was continually afraid that she could not satisfactorily 'finish' almost anything!*

*At the beginning of our eighth session, Melanie entered my office with an expression that could best be described as highly vulnerable, terribly embarrassed and very angry. She seemed on the verge of 'exploding' verbally and emotionally. Instead, she slowly and quietly began to share with me something that she had never told another person, namely that, beginning when she was twelve years old, an uncle had repeatedly sexually molested her. She said that, on the one hand, she had been terrified, but on the other she found that she craved physical 'affection' as that was something her parents had never given her, but that her uncle began to provide for her. Given that her mother had more than once been institutionalized for a 'nervous breakdown', Melanie was certain that she could never cope with being told of her brother's sexual misconduct. At the same time, Melanie's father was so remote and punitive that she was terrified that he would blame and punish her for her sexual encounters with her uncle.*

*Over a period of several months in therapy Melanie was able to deal with her complex feelings towards her (by now, deceased) uncle, and she came to understand why she so feared letting anyone else physically or emotionally close to her. She also slowly came to appreciate that her avoidance of completing tasks were a means of keeping herself 'stuck' in a job that was considerably below her intellectual capacities. As she continued to examine her thoughts and feelings, and to allow herself to consider what kind of work she might like to do, she started to crystallize an image of herself becoming a nurse. She investigated what courses she would need to take to complete her Bachelor's degree, took them, and then entered a Masters of Nursing program.*

*In considering this case in detail, my own conclusion was that Melanie's theft behaviour was the means that her own unconscious had of moving her out of the dead-end job she had been in for years, and of prompting her to deal with her earlier sexual abuse and other emotional*

DR. WILL CUPCHIK

*issues. For all of her working life she had simply gone to work, come home and then spent very many hours watching mindless television programs until she was tired enough to go to bed. When she was not either working or watching TV she exercised fanatically and became a competitive marathon runner – all activities that she used to keep her from getting in touch with her feelings and contemplating her future.*

**The unconscious mind may help trigger atypical theft behaviour as a means of forcing the offender to seek help in dealing with important unresolved or undealt with personal issues**

It has been my observation for many years that acts of atypical theft behaviour have sometimes likely been perpetrated from the unconscious level of the individuals' psyches as a means of forcing major changes in their personal or working lives, as well as in acquiring professional psychological help. Many Atypical Theft Offenders have stolen in order to force changes, or at least focus attention on, their unsatisfactory vocational, interpersonal or marital situations. It is almost an truism that when a very intelligent person commits a seemingly very stupid act, attention should be paid to the possible underlying reasons why! Of course, many of us are likely able to avoid uncomfortable facts or situations that might disrupt the current state of affairs in our lives, for a very long time. However, if the 'help' we eventually acquire is not sufficiently expert, we might continue to avoid identifying and facing those aspects of our lives that need to be addressed, thereby eventually possibly emboldening our unconscious minds to trigger increasingly blatant, bizarre and/or nonsensical acts of theft and/or other inappropriate behaviours.

It bears noting that a substantial minority of the Atypical Theft Offenders I have assessed over the years had experienced sexual and/or other kinds of abuse during their childhoods. Being children, they were not able, on their own, to process these traumatic experiences. One might appropriately say that these children had their innocence *stolen* from them. It has been my clinical experience over more than four decades of conducting psychotherapy, that *some* adults who had their innocence 'stolen' from them would turn to stealing as if they were attempting to compensate themselves for that which they had so unfairly lost.

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## WHY USUALLY HONEST PEOPLE STEAL

### **Case # 3: Brenda: The Politician's Wealthy Wife Who Stole A Pair Of Shoes in full view of a clearly marked security camera**

*Brenda was a beautiful woman in her early fifties whose husband's twenty year long political career at the state level seemed destined for national heights, until she brought his ascension to an at least temporary 'hold' after she was arrested while leaving a store in a high-end shopping mall in Bal Harbor, Florida, with a pair of unpaid-for \$800 shoes in her large handbag.*

*Her theft seemed particularly bizarre, given that she was the sole heir to the \$10,000,000 fortune her recently deceased father had left her. Given her occasional tendencies to act out rather bizarrely at political and social functions over the years, many in her home state had become almost desensitized to hearing of yet another one of her apparently 'weird' capers. And many more silently sympathized with her husband, Rob, who soldiered on despite his wife's many efforts that appeared aimed at derailing his political ambitions.*

*While Brenda was let go with a warning and a small fine for stealing the shoes (since this was her first criminal offence in the state) her other antics continued unabated for another two years, until a woman whose name was 'Carol Smith' (about twenty years of age) came forward and claimed that Brenda's husband was in fact her father! Furthermore, she exclaimed, Rob had been carrying on a decades-long affair with her mother. While such claims are not that unique for celebrities to endure, the fact that Carole looked remarkably like Brenda's husband when he was about the same age, left little doubt in many people's minds but that the younger woman was possibly speaking the truth.*

*It turned out that Brenda had not been consciously aware of her husband's 'second family', but it would appear highly probable that at some deeper level within her psyche, she was responding to her husband's long-time and however well hidden duplicities. Brenda's bizarre behaviour over the years could now be seen in a much different light - not as those of someone who necessarily had major psychiatric issues, but rather as reactions to however faint realizations that something was indeed deeply wrong in her marriage. Having failed, for many years, to gain her husband's agreement to enter marital therapy, Brenda's anguish and anger had led her to act out in ways that he could scarcely continue to dismiss or ignore.*

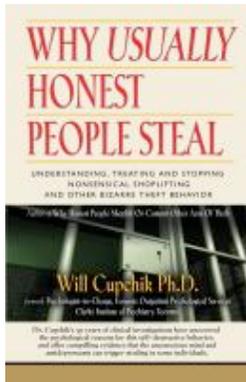
DR. WILL CUPCHIK

**What might be considered, at least in part, attempts at retribution or vengeance, are not infrequently aspects of atypical theft behaviour.**

The spouses or children of law enforcement officials, religious leaders and other prominent individuals recognize, at least unconsciously, that if they commit acts of theft, such behaviours would not reflect well upon those whom they would embarrass. Several years ago I appeared on a network television program about shoplifting along with a young man who was the son of the police chief in his hometown. Needless to say, 'advertising' on television the fact that his father had a thief for a son, likely did not play well with the local citizenry, who would soon be voting on whether to re-elect his father to another term.

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The above three examples, of Victor, Melanie and Brenda, offer important glimpses behind the curtain regarding acts of atypical theft behaviour. Our initial interest may have been piqued by the fact that these persons (or their relatives) were supposedly exemplary and/or prominent persons; a closer examination of the reasons for their theft behaviours has made clear that we should perhaps not be too quick to form 'a rush to judgement' in viewing atypical theft behaviour as always deserving the harshest condemnation. Instead, it is worthwhile asking, over and over again, "Why *would* someone risk *so much* for (usually) *so little* gain?" After having finished reading this book I am confident you will very likely agree with me that acts of seemingly bizarre and nonsensical theft behaviour usually have entirely understandable (though, of course, not entirely 'justifiable') reasons. **Just keep in mind that the purpose here is not to excuse, but rather to *understand* and *explain* the reasons behind such seemingly strange theft behaviour.**



*For over 39 years, psychologist Dr. Will Cupchik has investigated the atypical theft behavior (shoplifting, fraud, etc.) of usually honest and generally well functioning adults. This book includes his latest (2013) study's extensive findings that provide keen insights into the sorts of personal histories, personality traits and ways of operating in the world that can help precipitate theft behavior. Also included are unique, practical tools specifically developed to help successfully assess and treat these individuals.*

# WHY USUALLY HONEST PEOPLE STEAL

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