

Don't shop at the Safeway!

By [Jamie Calloway-Hanauer](#)

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"Don't shop at the Safeway!"

This is what my husband and I heard time and again when we told people where we had purchased our new home.

We heard this from bankers, realtors, doctors, nice people, smart people, goofy people, and everyone-in-between people.

Why, we wondered, did everyone keep telling us this?

Our neighborhood and the immediately surrounding neighborhoods are very nice. Exceptionally nice, I might even dare to say. Children ride their bikes on the streets and freely knock on neighbors' doors in search of playdates. Adults host block parties and on Halloween they put fire pits in their driveways for hand-warming, marshmallow roasting, and so our son Aaron has something to attempt jumping into.

It is also true that the only way to get to our neighborhood—which is located a little off the beaten path—is through a poor neighborhood. It is, as one person euphemistically put it, a *dark* neighborhood.

"Ohhhh. Is there a bad drug problem there? Like meth houses and such?"

"Er, no."

"High crime rate?"

"Not exactly."

"Well . . . it doesn't sound bad to me. As long as it's safe, we're fine with it. We really love that house!"

"Yes, but it's . . . dark. Oh, and you wouldn't want to shop at the Safeway."

"Bad produce?"

“I wouldn’t really know. I don’t go there.”

Upon first meeting my primary care doctor and giving her our address she immediately said, “Don’t shop at the Safeway!”

When signing the closing papers on our house, the facilitating broker said, “Well, you’ll just have to drive down to the Whole Foods or Trader Joe’s. You sure won’t be shopping at that Safeway!”

Well, let me tell you a secret: *we shop at the Safeway.*

There are armed guards, locks on the bathrooms, and only one point of entry/exit (easier to monitor). To enter the store I often walk through a plume of cigarette smoke and conversations that I, prudishly, might call inappropriate.

But I go there anyway. And I’ve never, ever, not even once, felt scared, threatened, under attack, or uncomfortable in any way, shape, or form. (Unless you count the fact that its Starbucks doesn’t heat its chocolate croissants before serving them. That is just not okay.)

Today, though, I went to Whole Foods.

I don’t often go to Whole Foods. In fact, I haven’t been there in about a decade. Why would I buy overpriced organic health food at Whole Foods when I can get the same food at a better cost at almost every other store in the fantabulous-to-shop-for-food-in Berkeley?

But alas, those days are gone, and we are the furthest of far from the land of farmers’ markets and Alice Waters.

Because my husband and I want to eat healthy, organic, grass-fed, and hormone-free food when possible (though let’s face it: most nights we just have Annie’s mac-n-cheese), we’ve decided to supplement our Trader Joe’s and Safeway excursions with trips to Whole Foods. Today was one such day.

No cigarette smoke greeted me as I walked through the door. Instead, I entered through a well-lit foyer with handsome displays of nice looking things that made me want to buy them.

It was overwhelming.

It was like Ikea, but without the free meatballs.

It was also a bit like a fancier Wal-Mart: I couldn't decide whether to buy coffee from the coffee bar, soup from the soup bar, bulk grains from the bulk grain bar (conveniently located by the salsa bar!), or get a facial.

The cashier had so little sense of humor I had to explain that one of my many jokes was a joke. To this she replied, in a tone slightly too defensive to call deadpan, "I was just teasing back."

The woman behind me in line was clearly the blue-ribbon holder of the local stroller wars.

And the super-toned, Lululemon-wearing, iPhone-talking woman in the produce aisle clearly, *clearly*, had gone shopping that day only to make me feel gross and lazy.

And that's fine. All of this is fine. The cashier is probably overworked and tired, and I bet I'd be friends with the woman behind me in line. (In fact, I bet I'd even be friends with the guilt-inducing super-fit mom from the produce aisle.)

I shelled out the big bucks for my few items then headed to Safeway to get the rest.

And there they were: smokers smoking, talkers talking, and yes, even deadpan cashiers.

And you know what? *I felt equally safe in the aisles of Safeway as I had in the maze of Whole Foods.*

Self-segregation is self-perpetuating.

As innocent as it may seem, advising folks new to the area not to shop at the local Safeway—at the very least not at night, as some said—builds up the litany of beliefs we like to call "being safe," rather than "being racist."

Some of those who gave us their sage shopping advice were strangers to me. Some were people I know, and I know them to be quite nice and educated and all that good stuff. And yet, they felt inclined to warn us. To repeat what they've been told.

And isn't that how it goes? *Don't shop there, it isn't safe.* And suddenly, I think shouldn't go there, should warn others as well.

*Don't buy a home there; the neighbors a few blocks a way may not be right for you.* Confused by this ambivalence, I worry about crime and safety and look elsewhere for my home. Property values begin to fall.

I have, unwittingly, become part of the cycle.

But I won't.

I'm not saying that I'm saving the day, building up an economy, or blessing a particular store with my privileged-status self in hopes that it will become the seller of high-end organic goods and that all the doorway smokers will realize the error of their carcinogenic ways. That would be a bunch of malarky. What I am saying is that small acts of resistance are sometimes all that we can muster. I know that's true for me right now, in these tired [middle years](#). It's certainly easy enough for me to say, "Hey! Look at me! I shop here and, believe it or not, you can too."

Truth be told, I'm not even a huge fan of Safeway. I don't feel a strong desire to put it ahead of other stores, and I won't. I'll go where I can get what I need when I need it. But each time I choose the Safeway by my house, I'll give a little fist pump and nod to this, my (infinitesimally) small act of resistance. Silly, isn't it?

*Originally posted at [Calloway-Hanauer's blog](#)*