

Personal Logistics

Actress, writer and performer Julia Sweeney held her own as a one-woman CD and DVD fulfillment house until her one-woman show, "Letting Go of God," aired on Showtime in late 2009. When holiday orders for the DVD started to come in faster than she could keep Amazon supplied, Sweeney took a road trip to the Amazon warehouse in Whitestown, Ind., three hours from her home outside Chicago; to deliver boxes of the DVD herself. This essay, originally published on Sweeney's personal blog and used with her permission, describes her encounter with a retail behemoth, and the realization that despite acres of industrial logistics, it's the personal touch that still counts.

I got underway on my little adventure at about 10:30 in the morning. The Amazon warehouse didn't come up on the Google map specifically, but I figured that Whitestown, Ind., was so small that it would be obvious where it was. I had 15 boxes of DVDs and CDs in the back of my minivan.

The December day was gray and rainy, the snow mostly melted. The view was sad: smoggy, foggy, dull, slate-colored air and water and sky. Still, it's a day at the spa for me to be able to drive and listen to the radio uninterrupted. That part was great.

What was depressing was how ugly everything was: all the industrial areas south of Chicago; the old buildings with the windows blown out; the steam coming from the buildings. I thought about the dark underbelly of our consumer lives, and what a beautiful town I live in, and how many other places are so sad and depressing-looking.

Gary, Ind., was sad, sad, sad. I've driven past this city a few times and never driven in – that is wrong, I will do that someday. But still, the drive was sad. Really, up until I reached Purdue University in Lafayette, Ind.,

about an hour from my destination, everything was so ugly and blighted with huge billboards for, seemingly, only three things: Christian churches; lawyers for industrial accidents; and casinos. I fell into a funk.

I really seethe when I see how much religion is relied on in poorer, more industrial areas. It's so obvious that religion flourishes in the petrie dish of exploitive business practices, hands-off government policies, and the undereducated and underopportunized.

And then, on the annoying side, there are a lot of toll roads. I had to pay three times. I guess I don't really understand the toll roads well enough to condemn them, but I'm irritated by them. Out west there are not so many toll roads – you can definitely drive from Los Angeles to Spokane, Wash., and not run into a single toll road.

I was pissy and sad about the whole endeavor. When I got to Whitestown,

I found that it was a metropolis of mostly warehouses, and the vast majority of them unmarked. Why unmarked? Military equipment? Poison? As I drove, I noticed many huge, oversized trucks – more trucks than cars. Is Indiana where all the large trucks come from? It's like I ran into a race of large trucks, and no obvious Amazon warehouse.

I couldn't find it. I finally stopped at Starbucks.

(I was embarrassed to be so happy to find a Starbucks. God, I'm a — well, in the old days I would say yuppie, but what am I now? An urbanite? And yes, I admit it, I was glad to find a well-known chain store for coffee. In fact, I was hoping to find a little local gem to eat lunch in, but the restaurants I saw were so decrepit, so without customers, so without a new coat of paint in the last 50 years – and not in a good way – that I felt glad to eat a burger from Burger King as I drove. I forgot how great a Whopper tastes. Oh god, I hate myself for writing this paragraph.)

Anyway, I stopped at a Starbucks. I asked if anyone knew where the Amazon warehouse was. I was pointed to another Starbucks employee on a break who was so kind and gentle and sweet. He took 10 minutes and found the address and even sent me the instructions on my iPhone.

That's when I reached the nadir of my trip. I could not find the place, even with the instructions. It's a veritable New York City of warehouses there. Many of the roads don't have names. There's a new housing development nearby too, Anson it's called. There are just a few townhouses,

lots of empty planned lots for houses, a school in the middle, and three large megachurch-sized houses of worship along the outside. One is called Eagle Church, and it too looks like a warehouse. A church that looks like a warehouse, for the people who work in warehouses, so they can spend their days off at another warehouse!

For about 10 or 15 minutes I seriously considered that I would not find it and I would have to drive all the way home with all of my stuff.

I saw one warehouse that I figured had to be it, but there were no signs for Amazon anywhere. However, there was a line of very large trucks – mostly Fed Ex and UPS – at a booth outside a gated parking and loading area (also filled with trucks). I pulled my car in line, me in my minivan about to be trampled between two gigantic trucks.

At the booth, the gate man was confused. I felt weird and kooky and silly. I said I had some boxes to deliver. After calling back and forth between the booth and the warehouse I was directed to enter and go to Loading Dock 11. It was hilarious. The loading dock was made for a very large truck. I felt like I had landed on another planet. Everything was oversized. I mean, even in my minivan I felt like an ant.

“ I like that I make my product and then send it out into the world to people. I like the connection. ”

“ People were smiling, music was playing loud . . . It wasn't schmaltzy Christmas music, it appeared to be a happy work environment.”

That's when everything changed. I was greeted by a really nice but officious woman who was in charge of receivables. First she told me I was completely wrong to just drive in with my stuff. They don't do that. You have to register with them to deliver, and then get assigned a number, and then you have to make an appointment.

There were dozens of trucks unloading and everything was on a time schedule. You have to print something out before you arrive; that's what the guy at the booth needs. On top of all of that, this is their busiest and most scheduled time of year, and this day was practically their busiest. I felt a little like a boob.

The woman took my stuff, pointed to another door and asked that I park my car and meet her there. I was a little afraid I was going to be reprimanded more severely, but that's when I saw the inside. I had to stay behind this fenced-in area but I could see everything, and I'm telling you it was just like I imagined it. No, wait, it was much better. It almost did look like Santa's workshop.

There were people emptying boxes and inputting the contents into a computer system, then putting the cardboard on a conveyor belt that took it off to be recycled. There were people on two higher exposed floors, walking around with little carts – you know, like at the library – filling them with books, CDs and other smaller stuff to fill orders. There were people zipping around on Segway-like contraptions and beeping before entering aisles.

I told this woman how seeing the inside of this place was really a thrill for me, and she lit up and smiled. She explained how this part of the warehouse was for smaller items. She pointed to another area where people were wrapping packages. She told me they worked for free and then Amazon donated the money paid by customers to have their packages wrapped to the charity of the person-who's-wrapping's choice. (I wondered how many donations were for churches, but still, what a great policy!)

She told me how Amazon had always had this policy. She told me the whole warehouse was green: It had special lighting that turned off if there were no people in the area, and all the desks and all the aisles with goods were constructed from recycled materials.

"I love this place," she said. "I love this company, and I've worked for some bad ones. But Amazon is great."

I did not expect this at all. The people there *did* seem really happy. People were smiling, music was playing loud, really loud – and it was good. It wasn't schmaltzy Christmas music, it appeared to be a happy work environment.

When I left the warehouse, the man at the booth laughed and we talked for a moment. He was Kenyan, and came to the United States four years

ago. He said he loved working for Amazon, too. America! What a country!

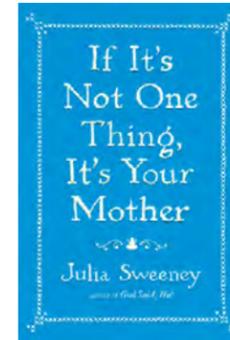
I drove home feeling so happy. It really was an adventure. I felt a lot better about Amazon. The warehouses didn't depress me as I drove home; instead I felt optimistic. As I approached Gary again it was dark, but the lights and steam coming from the steel mills and factories looked romantic instead of dark and sooty. I know I was enchanted by my Amazon experience, and that it colored everything, but wow. What a day.

Best of all, "Letting Go of God" was now listed on Amazon as available. It took me eight hours, \$40 in gas, \$10 in tolls, and an extra 2,000 calories I probably wouldn't have eaten, but still. I would say it was a day well spent.



The view inside the Amazon warehouse in Whitestown, Ind.

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Julia Sweeney's latest book, *If It's Not One Thing It's Your Mother*, is now available in paperback from, you guessed it, Amazon, as well as all other online retailers and bookstores.

Julia Sweeney, a writer and performer, was a "Saturday Night Live" cast member for four years. She is also known for her critically acclaimed one-woman monologues, including "God Said, Ha!", performed on Broadway and released on film by producer Quentin Tarantino. The audio version was nominated for a Grammy. Her follow-up, "Letting Go of God", was performed in New York and Los Angeles. A film version aired on Showtime.

Julia has worked as a writer on several TV shows including "Sex & the City" and "Desperate Housewives", and has appeared in TV shows including "Frasier" and "Sex & the City". Her many movie appearances include "It's Pat: The Movie," "Pulp Fiction," "Stuart Little," "Beethoven 3," and "Beethoven 4". Julia has voiced numerous animated characters including Mrs. Squiggles in the Pixar movie, "Monsters University".

With her friend Jill Sobule, the rock/folk musician, Julia performed "The Jill & Julia Show" for seven years. Their final performance can be seen on YouTube.

Julia Sweeney's latest book, *If It's Not One Thing It's Your Mother*, is now available in paperback from, you guessed it, Amazon, as well as all other online retailers and bookstores.

Find more on Julia's work, and to read her blog, go to her website: www.juliasweeney.com.