

Feb 03

*Real Money*  
Rob Rikoon

As an American, I believe in the power of individual action. Economic self-reliance is at the heart of our liberty. When we speak of personal freedom and the pursuit of happiness, what we really are talking about is the opportunity and ability to change our lives as we see fit.

At this crucial time, some hard choices need to be made here in Santa Fe. We have the opportunity to develop our local economy and deal with the issues of job creation, water conservation, and food security. If our community were to become self-reliant in food, it would increase our community's security. By decreasing our reliance on petroleum to transport goods, we would improve the quality of our food as it would be fresher and have less pesticides and preservatives. We could strengthen ties with each other and help traditional communities in northern New Mexico by buying locally made household goods.

By focusing on buying local produce, the ever present and thorny problem of water, our most precious resource would move onto the front burners of public discussion. As consumers, we would become less dependent on distant and impersonal companies. All of these intertwined issues could be addressed through focusing on developing a local, self-reliant economy.

Developing our local economy would help balance the boom and bust cycles of the tourist trade as our need for a constant influx of outsiders to spend their money here could diminish. Northern New Mexico has a history of self-reliance, though most of us are out of touch with these skills. Many people feel that they cannot afford the time, money, or effort it would take to make a change.

Neighborhoods, towns, and even small cities can develop in ways that promote their own productive capabilities. We can choose to not trade away what local people have produced until all local needs are met. Neighborhood trade and commerce was the venue where most people interacted until World War II, when large portions of the US population were uprooted.

As events unfold on the geopolitical scene, we may need to be more reliant on people with whom we come into daily contact. This will stand in stark contrast to our current dependence on businesses, controlled by people far away. The current cultural goal of personal profit may give way, through necessity, to an overwhelming need for connection.

It is difficult to find people who have a vision and an ability to translate complex matters into practical terms. One such person is Wendell Berry, who lives in rural Kentucky. Mr. Berry is an eloquent speaker for those who do not have a voice: the earth, water, as well as for small farmers and independent businesses struggling throughout America for survival. Mr. Berry has a long history of writing about how and why we must reconnect to the land and our neighbors.

Mr. Berry's sense is that future economic development will not be able to get back on track because we have reached a point where natural resources are no longer freely available to industry. This means that the real world does not allow for continued growth, at least at rates previously taken for granted by ourselves as investors and consumers. Stock markets depend on continuous growth in order to entice people to put

their money in securities. If the economy is not going to grow in an expanding and relatively steady fashion, why should people put their confidence in stocks, as opposed to real estate or gold?

The U.S. economy is based primarily on consumer spending. In order to supply consumer goods in the fashion to which we have become accustomed, the system depends on taking more and more raw materials out of the land.

We extract resources to serve growing populations, and over time the extractive quality of our farming and poor resource management has caused many items to become more expensive, while the quality of water and soil has diminished. In short, we are in the midst of an environmental crisis that has an economic basis!

The problems we face and the proposed cost of dealing with them are enormous. Addressing the issues of energy pollution, water quality and quantity, or soil health cannot be done without examining our personal complicity, as consumers, in creating these problems. We face more crowded, less secure, and increasingly competitive searches for the basic stuff of life.

According to Berry, the connection between our personal lifestyles and environmental problems begins when we delegate to others the tasks of providing us with food, clothing and shelter. As a culture, it appears that we have transferred to outside entities the responsibility for providing those things, as well as our entertainment, education and childcare. Elder care and care of the sick have also been delegated to others so we can focus on other, more “meaningful” work. These functions were once what gave meaning to people’s lives. Now, we seem to strive to put them out of sight and into the hands of paid professionals.

We gain little by off-loading our personal responsibilities and lose much by not witnessing and being involved in nature’s cycles. Maybe we have gained more leisure time, but I doubt it! The delegation of our responsibility is supposed to relieve us of stress, of the need to learn how to witness and accept the uncontrollable realities of life. I believe that giving away the job of looking after our families for more challenging, exciting and profitable work has led to an irresponsible attitude towards the planet's finite natural resources.

Our desire to have more free time has paradoxically led us to have less free time. Wendell Berry says that “when people make an effort to take back into their own power a significant portion of their economic responsibility, they discover that the environmental crisis is not a crisis of our environs or surroundings, but a crisis of our lives as individuals, as families, as community members. We have an environmental crisis because we have consented to an economy in which our eating, drinking, working, traveling and recreating, destroys the natural world.”

Most of us believe that we are not personally capable of physically producing the goods or services on which we depend. As consumers, we want things to be inexpensive, convenient, and to have as wide a selection as possible when we shop. This natural inclination encourages corporations to give us what we want, when and how we want it. In doing so, Berry notes, “everything small, local, private, personal, natural, good and beautiful (gets) sacrificed in the interest of the free market and great corporations.”

These days there is little difference between the lack of confidence in the future on the parts of both conservatives and liberals. Individuals of all political persuasions share a common belief that neither government nor big businesses are capable of

addressing today's problems. New Mexico's ranchers have been negatively impacted by world trade promoted by NAFTA, as have many important environmental initiatives. The problem with global trade, as it is now, structured by big money, is that it benefits corporations and promulgates an unhealthy cycle where money, influence and power are concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. This in turn deprives the ability of local people to provide themselves with a self-reliant lifestyle.

Our ability to produce, consume and control our local economy has diminished drastically over the last 20 years as our dependence on purchasing foreign produced goods has hurt local businesses. Very little production takes place in the United States today because we can buy goods cheaper from overseas. Soon, there will be only a very few big companies in charge of providing most of our medicine, food, building materials, transportation, and media content.

Corporate dominance of basic production is absolutely dependent on cheap transportation, which for the moment involves large-scale emissions, waste and accidental spills. Global trade requires widespread military operations to assure its safety. Consolidated corporate control of global business in the guise of free trade opposes any kind of local economic self-reliance because local economies threaten the basic character of dependence on which the current system is based.

Trade is good when it does not undermine quality of life. The kind of trade we have now has created sinkholes around the world. Mr. Berry closes his Local Economies essay by stating that, "without prosperous local economies, the people have no power, and the land no voice." Copies of Berry's work can be obtained at [www.oriononline.org](http://www.oriononline.org).

Local self-reliance versus global trade seems like a dilemma. It is up to us, as hands on community members, to take responsibility for protecting our local economic base and the physical environment in which we live. This is the true meaning of security.

Rob Rikoon ([rrikoon@aol.com](mailto:rrikoon@aol.com)) is an armchair activist, president of a registered investment advisory firm and a founding member of the Santa Fe Independent Citizens - Business Alliance, a local nonprofit supporting sustainable community building activities.

---