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ROB RIKOON

REAL MONEY

As far as most of us are concerned, the primary purpose of going to school, reading a newspaper, or going to work is to improve one's monetary lot in life. The financial columns of newspapers are not read for philosophical insights but explicitly for practical advice.

At the present time, the world's economy looks bleak and our physical environment is under duress because of individual and governmental mismanagement. Conventional wisdom says the best hope for finding a way out of our current malaise is increased productivity through information technology. Businesses main goal is to stimulate consumer spending. These solutions come to us courtesy of the experts who, in the late 20th century, said that boom-bust cycles would no longer plague the economy.

Fortunately, there is a wide interest in looking for a new approach to economic life. There is a calling out for a combining of heads and hearts to address the discordant and troubling tenor of our society. Our behavior, now based upon fear of scarcity, is hopeful to soon be based on curiosity, appreciation, and joy.

Thomas Berry, in his recent book, The Great Work, speaks of a transition from a period of devastation to one where humans and the planet interact in a mutually beneficial

manner. Truth be told, the world never really was as secure as we were led to believe. The traditional meaning of words such as freedom, democracy, and moral right and wrong has been almost totally obscured by recent events, both corporate and political.

We can still dream that a better world is possible for the next generation, though it is hard to believe this is so. There is a natural desire for retirees to ponder opportunities for travel, for students to excitedly pursue careers. At the present moment, our native cultural optimism is held hostage by fear and foreboding. Self-interest, the guiding light of “free markets,” has led us, paradoxically, to a place where our options open for the future look limited, indeed. How then can we have confidence that any effort to better ourselves will have a chance to ripen and succeed? The supposed alignment of our self-interest and the greater good, an underlying assumption of business for the last century is now being questioned.

Thomas Berry believes that the cause of our path to destruction is born out of the belief that non-human species have no rights or purpose other than to serve people. There is a growing movement of citizens around the globe, connected by the Internet as well as via word of mouth, who are taking action on their own to counter this worldview. The scale of activity that is most amenable to progress on this all-important issue is small, as small business creates the most opportunities that are in concert with the need to reinsert face-to-face contact into commerce. Duane Elgin, in his book Voluntary Simplicity, writes “A revitalizing society is a decentralizing society, with grass-roots organizations that are numerous enough, have arisen soon enough, and are effective enough to provide a

genuine alternative to more centralized bureaucracies. These organizations are taking charge of activities that formerly were handled by state and federal agencies: education, housing, crime prevention, childcare, health care, job training, and so on. The strength and resiliency of the social fabric grows as local organizations promote self-help, self-organization, a community spirit, and neighborhood bonding.”

One basic premise of this grass roots movement is that if enough people act simultaneously, even though each individual action is small in size, the totality of effort will end up being irresistibly powerful. This concept lends credence to the belief that concerned Americans can transform our culture from one of isolation, of being people identified merely as producers or consumers, into one where people and nature coexisting in harmony matters more than money.

The strength of the status quo hinges on continued consumer spending on “brand” goods. When United States civil liberties were first sacrificed as a result of the World Trade Center tragedy, they were accompanied first and foremost by a call for Americans to keep spending. What if we refused the urge to consider it beyond our influence and used a Gandian-type strategy whereby we refuse to spend money except on essential items? Duane Elgin believes that “More than anything else, the outcome from this time of planetary transition will depend on the choices that we make as individuals. There are no preconditions to our choosing a revitalizing path of civilizational development. There is nothing lacking. Nothing more is needed than what we already have. We require no remarkable, undiscovered technologies. We do not need heroic, larger-than-life

leadership. The *only* requirement is that we, as individuals, choose a revitalizing future and then work in community with others to bring it to fruition.”

Spending is the way we can move the current system from devastating exploitation to benign presence. It would only take a small percentage of people willing to change their spending patterns to slow down the rate of brand-America corporate growth. This would create a movement that could wield tremendous influence. Advertising, of course, is geared to do the opposite: to get people to spend on pre-packaged, standardized goods. It might appear to be unpatriotic to save money and not give it to big companies but, in doing so, we might become more than economic patriots. We stand today, willing or not, faced with a great challenge.

Do we deal head on with the extinction of species and climate altering course currently being plotted or, do we withdraw our consent as concerned citizens and conserve and use our financial power for Berry’s “Great Work”? We do not need to bemoan the influence of big money political donors and we would, as individuals, become financially healthier at the same time. By exerting discipline and autonomy, we could slow down the money treadmill on which many people run for their entire adult lives which is detrimental to our own and the earth’s health. In Elgin’s concluding comments on the vision for economic transformation, he makes sure to include corporate workers in the matrix of people who are needed to effect change: “If one corporate officer were to choose to shift from a self-serving to a life-serving intention, that change could contribute more to meeting corporate social responsibilities than a whole new maze of government red tape and

regulation. If one engineer were to make it a heartfelt intention to place the long-run well-being of the consumer above short-run profits, that change in intention could have more impact on the design of products than a multimillion dollar safety study funded by the federal government. If one media executive were to view his or her task as that of promoting the active social learning of a culture rather than maximizing short-run profits from mindless, consumer-oriented programming, that change could have more impact than a thousand letters and petitions from despairing viewers.”

The time may not be ripe yet for many to take such actions, but there are ways for us to regain control of our country. If we have to give up some aspects of material security in exchange for freedom and do the right thing, it would be in keeping with our deepest aspirations.

If we need to forego some consumer conveniences and low prices in order to be in touch with the realities of life, then that might be a trade-off worth making. We can and should hold onto the belief that we still have the ability to shape our country. The opportunity exists as long as we take action on our beliefs. If you are interested in reading more about how one small spending decision at a time can effect the world, check out www.adbusters.org, a non profit dedicated to promoting discussions on how to dethrone destructive consumerism.