

ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING

Peter Schwartzman

Will money solve our problems?

How often have you heard or said, "If only we had the money?" All too often I am witness to this sentiment. Many people seem to think that money will solve their (and others') problems. Moreover, it is the lack of money more than anything else that is preventing some positive outcome from crystallizing. Is this true? Will money save the day? In my opinion, the answer is mixed yet timely and illuminating.

Clearly, there are some problems that would appear to be resolved if money were made available. Smaller classrooms, accessible health care, and lower credit card balances come to mind. However, wishing for this money to materialize won't make it happen. Playing the lottery, the slots, or bingo won't help either—in fact these enterprises, often directed/supported by the government, will make one's problems undoubtedly worse.

There is no shortage of money in our country. The United States has the highest GDP (gross domestic product) of all nations. And, given that the GDP represents monetary expenditures on products and services, we have literally trillions of dollars to work with. So where is it? And can it solve modern problems, such as, national indebtedness, climate change, hunger, fresh water depletion, invasive species, communicable diseases, etc.?

When you add up all the money we collectively spend on unnecessary things (such as, video games, pornography, illicit drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, jewelry, cosmetics, etc.), we are well over a hundred billion dollars. Yet, this list doesn't contain the largest item which we spend money on. Care to consider what this is? You guessed it: the military. The people of the United States currently spend more on military enterprises than nearly all the other 200 countries combined. Currently the tab is close to \$1.5 trillion annually! I've heard of "pork belly" programs but holy guacamole. (If these figures seem a bit higher than the ones you have seen before, they should. Here, expenses for past military activities—in the form of current veteran benefits and interest on the ever increasing national debt—are included and, therefore, made explicit, rather than hidden in other budgetary categories. See www.warresisters.org for further explanation.) Clearly, we are mispending and misappropriating a great deal of our collective money. Claims insisting that "we just don't have the money" are baseless.

So if hordes of money exist, why are so many still hungry, sick, overworked, or underpaid? It is because our dominant economic system rewards greed, monopolization, centralization, sickness (via chronic disease and its "panacea"—pills), individualism, and wasteful consumption not equity, health, decentralization, collectivism, humanity, and ecological balance. This profound observation/realization suggests that something must be done to alter/correct it, otherwise we resign ourselves to accept the suffering and ecological destruction that continues unabated each and every day. One conceivable solution to our current "fix" calls for a major overhaul of our economic system such that the ends (and means) in any new system would be humanitarian and ecologically rooted. If such a sweeping change is too frightening (or implausible) for you, consider incremental moves to non-monetary forms of exchange. Frankly, such tweaks to the existing system aren't likely going to do much in the long term but salve a few wounds while creating new, and deeper, ones. However, if we have to start somewhere, then let's tweak away.

Whatever happens, something substantial must occur. The clock is ticking. But there is

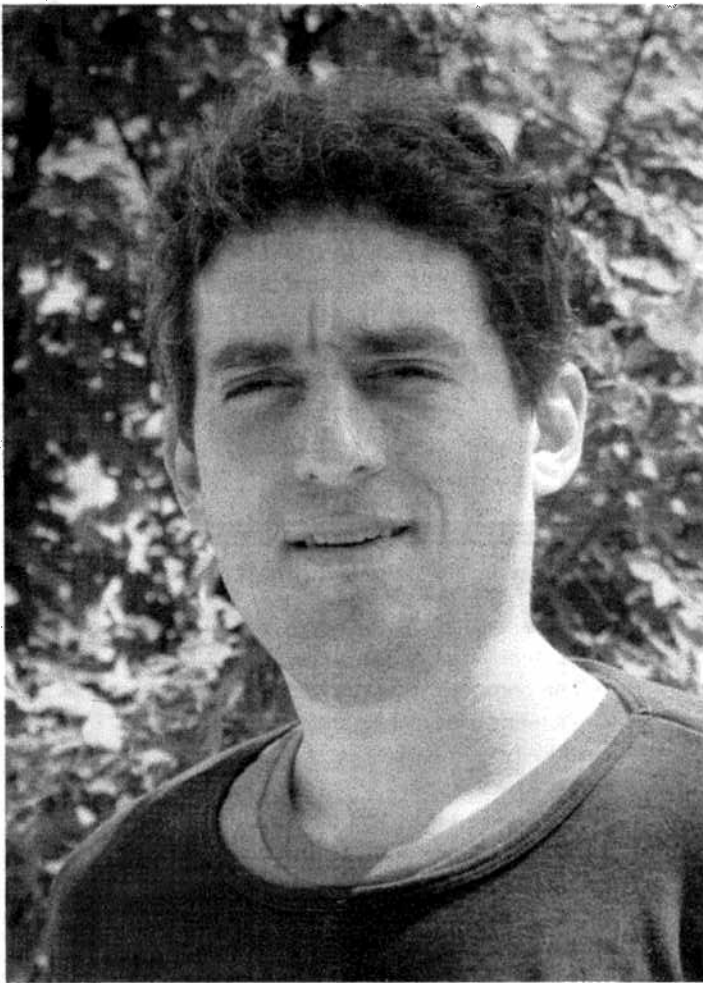
good news. Most problems that we have to solve do not require outlays of significant monies. For instance, overconsumption of goods can only be cured when people deliberately change their behaviors and welcome non-material experiences and connections rather than ostentatious and frivolous luxuries. Psychologists know that we, humans, need solid friendships and a sense of strong community in order to be **both** healthy and happy. So it isn't as if we have to give up something that we need. We just need to give up those things we don't need.

Consider how fulfilled you are? Where are the shortfalls? How many of us have jobs (one or more) that we don't care about or that make us feel like automatons? How many of us don't have enough time to relax and enjoy friends and family? An overconsumptive lifestyle is partly to blame for this. The advertising industry also deserves much of the blame. It feeds us commercials that link pleasure, happiness and fulfillment with objects. It turns out we just need good food, good conversation, and more free time. These are the things that will truly make us happy. And they don't cost money (or at least not much of it).

There is more good news. Some are beginning to realize this. Behavioral changes are underway. More people are biking or walking, saving gas and improving health simultaneously. More trains appear to be transporting goods (based on my ear, which is usually not more than 200 yards from any passing locomotive's whistle). The eating of locally-grown and organic foods is definitely up, so much so that big companies are trying to get their hands on these trendy consumers. (I highly recommend *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, by B. Kingsolver, for more on this burgeoning movement.) Yet, as the cost of fuel continues to rise (as nearly everyone thinks it will), **most** products that we buy are likely to shoot up further in price as well. Why? We are finally paying the price for becoming a petroleum-saturated society. More behavioral changes are likely to be called for as prices continue to rise.

Beyond behavioral changes, we need to reevaluate what money is worth and what it can do for us. Nearly seven years ago (see December 20, 2001 issue), I contributed an essay that outlined the immense power that \$1 has. Back then, one dollar could purchase ten pounds of rice (on world market prices), a full course of child immunizations, or one-thousand gallons of fresh, potable water. Though many of these things have risen in price (particularly rice, which has become increasingly expensive, as have other staple crops—adding misery to the world's hungry), one dollar can still get a surprising amount. In fact, many basic needs (such as, food, water, and maternal and infant health care) are available at relatively meager costs. They just require organization and commitments to make them available to people. The reason why so many people in this world do without these basic necessities has nothing to do with a lack of resources globally, it has all to do with where we have put our collective priorities.

Small sums can do wonders but so can larger allotments. Creating new wealth and redirecting much of what we already have is also critical. New wealth can be created



by taxing corporations and the "super" rich more. It is shocking how little the super rich pay now compared to the past. Now, those with annual incomes over \$1 million dollars pay around 23 percent of it in federal tax; in 1944, this percentage was 65 percent (Thompson). Tax loopholes that highly paid accountants find for millionaire and billionaire clients must end. If they merely paid their share, tremendous economic resources would be available for all of us. (As I write this, I am perfectly aware that our elected congressional representatives, nearly a third of whom make a million a year themselves, are unlikely to pass such measures without tremendous public pressure.)

As well as raising more money through higher taxes on the extremely well off, we need to reprioritize where our money goes. More than 50 percent of our tax dollars goes to support the military. Since this is where most of our money goes, we need to grapple with the military industrial complex that President (and five star General) Eisenhower warned us about. (His famous speech, given shortly before he left office in 1961, outlines the dangers. He said, "In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military industrial complex." I'll put the entire speech online, see below.) Security, national and global, comes from health and happiness not at the end of a missile, a tank, or an AK-47. Much of our military budget can be redirected elsewhere and have much greater benefit for all of us. (However, the last thing we should cut in the military budget is our veteran's benefits; they deserve all the help they can get.)

Beyond the military, there are large sums of other money that can be reapplied. Through our taxes, we also currently provide enormous (in the billions of dollars) subsidies to the fossil fuel industry and agrobusiness. If these destructive industries can't make it without public support, they should scoot over and allow more sustainable and humanitarian enterprises to flourish. It is time to shift these funds to support ventures and explorations in renewable energy (particularly, solar and wind) and organic and locally-grown food systems. (Does this shift sound too

far fetched? Why? Is it because of who currently controls the means of production, the substance of communication, and the electability of our politicians?)

We need to improve our schools, hospitals, and parks. We need to improve our waterways. We need to stop depleting our aquifers. We need to clean up our air. We need to stop letting companies pollute our air and water for free. We need to stop letting them poison and genetically-modify our food, especially when it is absolutely unnecessary to do so.

The system is broken. It needs major repairs. We need new leaders. Look for them. Get behind them. If the system is so crooked that forward thinking leaders can't be found in the two major parties, then look for third party candidates who have the vision required. The monetary shifts mentioned above will require new laws which will likely require new leaders to write, pass, and enforce, as the current lawmakers are products of a system that is corrupt. Also, stop depending on national leaders to solve our problems. We can (and need) to start locally, where we know we can make a difference. Support local groups and activities that are rooted in sustainable practices and humane ethics.

However, as much as local and national changes are required, we cannot ignore the activities that take place overseas. While some prosper, many do not. Those that prosper are often falling into the same patterns of consumption that we have. This bodes badly for the planet and future generations. Those that prosper require enormous quantities of resources to do so. Those that don't prosper often are compelled by chronic poverty and hopelessness to act in ways that are very destructive to the planet and humanity. This is where we, those in the most powerful country in the world, have the power to force a change that will be felt globally. Our nation's monetary non-military aid to other countries is atrocious, a mere 0.16 percent (that is, 16 cents for every \$100) of our total national monetary production—the lowest percentage of all industrialized nations. We need to change this along with all the other suggested changes. Once we do, we will be on our way to bringing real, lasting security—through health and happiness to others.

Do I sound cynical? Perhaps to some. However, I feel that I am very optimistic. All of us benefit when we **all** have our basic needs met. This is the only plan that will work in the long term. Given the stresses the planet is under and the suffering that so many humans currently endure, now is the time to begin moving in a new direction. This is the challenge of our generation.

Works Cited

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