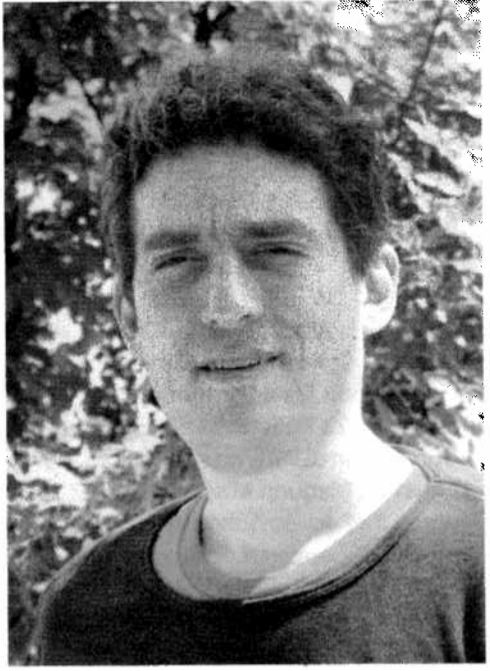


ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

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Is money bad for us?

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With all the recent scandals about money laundering, one can't help wonder if money causes more problems than it solves. It may sound preposterous to question the merits of such a dominant icon in our lives—the greenback. However, the most well-entrenched elements in our culture deserve regular inspection, particularly because of the power they have over our lives. In the case of money, this power is clearly awesome.

There are several aspects of money that are problematic. First, it commands so much of our attention. People talk about it all the time. Second, it controls what we think we can and cannot do. How often have you heard someone say, "if only we had enough money, our problems would be solved"? Third, money has become so idolized people will do all kinds of reckless things to obtain it. These three characteristics of money make it worthy of significant critique and beckon a serious reevaluation of how we function.

Talk about money is everywhere. When some were riding the technology bubble and NASDAQ was booming, people were giddy about all their new found wealth. Investments were the rage. Some people made loads of money while they slept. And they started spending money this money, only to find out that it could all dry up and "burst" along with the Dot-coms. This all occurred at the dawning of a new century. A few years later and the roller coaster headed rapidly downward again, this time taking nearly all of us with it—foreclosures, closing businesses and factories, massive layoffs, etc. This was all in the past year. And, now, after all of this tumult, everything is still understood strictly in terms of money. Who is spending it? Who is making it? Who is losing it? Who is accepting giant handouts (in terms of huge government subsidies to mega-corporations)? No matter what happens to the economy everything seems to be about

M-O-N-E-Y. We know what the GNP (gross national product) is and what the prime lending rate is, but we have no idea if kids are being fed or if adults are living fulfilling lives. Doesn't something seem awry?

Television is full of shows focused on money. Game shows teach us to want money. Soap operas promote luxurious lifestyles full of material goods. Sports programs romanticize athletes and their flashy ways (who make millions for dribbling, hitting or punching). Celebrity shows glamorize the lives of the rich and famous. And even news programs sensationalize the importance of wealthy members of our society. And in between all of these shows, commercials tell us over and over again that we will feel better if we spend money on products. So what did everyone feel they had to have this past holiday? You betcha, a flat-screen plasma television. It seems that you aren't a fully-fledged American anymore if you don't have one of these.

But it isn't just how pervasive the discussion/presentation of money is that is the problem, but more how it limits our ability to solve personal and societal problems. When raising/having money becomes the focus of a group, much of its spirit and reason to be is lost. I've witnessed this in several organizations I've been a part

of. When solutions are couched exclusively in monetary terms, a great deal of cynicism can reign, especially if there is no clearly identifiable way to obtain the necessary funds. Our hyper-consumeristic culture tends to overemphasize the role that individuals play in solving problems (i.e., by donating to charities) and undervalues the power that people have working collectively. For example, if I want my lawn mowed, our society focuses on my need to have a personal lawn mower (and weed wacker) or the wealth to pay someone else to mow it. These solutions trump alternatives such as sharing such an expensive machine (which sits idly 99% of the time) with a group of neighbors or trading lawn mowing services for child care. No doubt, people with modest means are forced to think collectively, whereas people with M-O-N-E-Y are expected to have a large collection of tools, and the more engines the merrier. Also, people are so compelled by the "power" of money to solve their problems that they spend excessive proportions of their available cash on lottery tickets. Given the odds of winning, this is really just an extra tax on the poor, who, based on my limited experience, are more likely to be burnt by this fantasy of winning big M-O-N-E-Y. This is a very damaging behavior because not only is weighted highly in favor of losing, it forces one to overlook the ability for collective and collaborative forces to impact one's life positively as well.

Lastly, money has become the object of adoration. People crave it like nothing else. This sounds exaggerative but really, how else can one explain the rash of immoral, illegal, and sometimes dangerous activities that people engage in an attempt to get money? And, often, the people perpetrating these acts aren't desperately poor (which might explain their rationale). Thus, it seems that money has the power to drive people temporarily insane, willing to risk everything for a few thousand dollars. For the above reasons, I am compelled to think that money needs a giant overhaul in our society. Getting rid of it is out of the question (at least in the short run). However, deemphasizing it can't hurt. As money becomes less intoxicating for people, communication among people and collective solutions become more possible. Communities around the country (such as, Ithaca, New York) have come up with alternative forms of exchange; this is worth a look elsewhere. Rather than fretting about how little money there is, people will see their neighbors as allies with skills and insights. Children will stop focusing on how many American girl dolls they have and begin to notice how many species of trees live in their backyard or the number of stars in our galaxy. We'll start focusing on the depth of our friendships rather than the thickness of our wallets or the square-footage of our garage. What a world that would be.