ENOUGH IS ENOUGH
Peter Schwartzman

It's all in the numbers

Millions, billions, trillions, quadrillions. Is it all the same, right? Listening to the media you would think so; however, the answer is emphatically no. They are not the same at all. A penny, the same as $107 is $10 the same as $10,000? Is $10,000 the same as $10,000,000? Obviously, no. Unfortunately, when one works with big money numbers that none of us deal with on a personal level, we typically get lost. This is understandable but it is not something we can continue to allow to confound us. There is way too much at stake.

AIG got more than $170 billion from us in bail-out funds because our elected congressional representatives agreed that it was necessary to save them from bankruptcy. The parity two years we have heard a huge uproar because $165 million in bonuses were to be given to AIG executives. It is understandable that we might be upset about this, especially because it was these executives that put AIG (and our economy) into such bad economic circumstances to begin with. But when we read some of the comments, they only amount to a fraction of the money the government gave AIG overall; actually, in comparative terms, one penny on a $10 bill. So while we hear about how tough elected officials are fighting for this lousy cent, the other $99 (or in real cash, $165 billion) goes somewhere else (including many European banks) without much notice. Worse yet, other recipients, e.g., Bank of America, use the bail-outs to buy other companies, namely, Merrill-Lynch, and consolidate power even more within the hands of those financial institutions with "failed" economic strategies.

One of the greatest oversights of all these bail-outs relates to the truly gargantuan size of these sums of money. Since most of us don't work in billions, we don't often think about money of that scale. Let's look at its enormity through a couple of lenses. Throughout all the lenses, one would need to earn $190,000 per minute, working 24/7/365, to earn $100 billion a year! Exxon-Mobil came close in 2008 with $40.6 billion in profits; remember that $44 billion goes somewhere else (including many European banks) without much notice. As interesting as it is, most of you will never see the impact of $100 billion, let alone $1 trillion. The health and happiness of our future may depend on it.

Works Cited

Peter Schwartzman, a resident of Galesburg, is an associate professor and chair of the Department of Environmental Studies at Knox College. He is a trained climatologist with interests in a wide variety of environmental areas. He also cofounded ElectricCity, thecenteringalesburg.org, a community place for learning and connecting.

Spring is a time when we all know that the world will come to life. In a few weeks, the South will feel its air-conditioned caves and aches and chills will fall on San Francisco, but all will be one people, more urgent, more plurable, stepping gracefully into the moist recesses of photosynthesis, and not even the economy can change that, so Vive le printemps. I say this as the father of a seven year old, hairied gap-toothed daughter who gets up before sunrise from breakfast to dance the shimmy, a far cry from so much pre-adolescence going on around you. It's hard to be glum.

Here in Minnesota, spring doesn't arrive for good until Mother's Day and the opening of walleye season, when men and their mental health and fishing and sit around the campfire afterwards and pass the whiskey bottle and she talks about her years traveling with the tent show before she met their father, all the wonderful men she knew, ducktailed men with big tattoos on their cheeks who drove fast cars and carried rolls of fifties and were afraid to spend, which is a shock, to hear about Mother's wild roving years, but everyone did have them, so get over it. And the urge to rove wildly does strike people at this time of year, for example, am tempted to bleach my hair and change my name to Lauren L'Etang though probably I will not.

In spring, a person's thoughts naturally turn toward what you would rather be doing than earning a living, and in America this usually means being An Artist. This is the true American dream. Winning the lottery is a faint hope, becoming a sports hero is a daydream, but publishing poetry is the ambition of one-third of the American people and another third are thinking about writing a memoir.

And you thought you were the only one! Ha! You are part of a vast tide. One reason the economy is so sour is that nobody wants to tote barge or lift bales, they want to be edgy and multi-layered and express their anguish in some colorful and inexplicable way. Your dental hygienist is a poet ("Into the ravenous maw flecked with food and decked with plaque, I descend, pick in hand"); this does not make for better dental care. People who feel they have a Higher Calling may feel justified in slacking off on the Lower Calling even though it is the one that pays the light bill. Your mailman comes sweeping up the walk on the tips of his toes, arms extended, twirls, and hands you an invitation to his dance recital. Also a handful of your neighbor's mail. You attend the recital. You are not had. Men and women are barefoot in leotards tossing brown parcels back and forth and running from dogs and afterward you must go backstage and tell them how good it was.

That is the challenge when people you...