Chasing the Dollar, Or Doing Our Own Thing

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Introduction

I was thinking about a friend who got a decent job recently. In the minds of billions of people, it would seem to solve his problems for meeting his obligations. Though entry level, it's a desirable job where the workplace is pleasant. I began to reflect on his being a proud member of the working class, and how his path (however reluctant or exhilarating) generally follows middle class aspiration. It is extremely unlikely that someone in his position manages to join the exalted, glitzy, rich, tiny segment of the population, to enjoy the dream of the very easy life -- not that his value-system pushes him in that questionable direction.

Unfortunately, he is probably boxed in at the lower middle of the social pyramid, because another, very different path for working people and even the rich is not so visible or tempting.
Viewed by others without much respect, or with disinterest, an alternative-lifestyle movement nevertheless exists. It would mean, for my friend and his little family, to go live differently than the vast majority of working people and the idle rich in Europe. It may be communal, centered around permaculture, or it may be more individualistic whereby enlightenment and simple living are still chosen over the prevailing gold/no gold limitation. With the alternative path on hold or deemed remote by my friend, his prospects for embarking on doing his own thing someday, beyond perhaps being able to start his own restaurant, are statistically slim. An infusion of cash from winning the lottery is even more slim, but widely dreamt about to fit yearnings, needs, and common materialist fantasies.

One's breaking away from constraints so as to do one's own thing or find a better and simpler life in community, is less due to personal circumstances and inclinations than to society's demands that everyone adhere to the consumer economy. Not only must one "follow the rules," but take in stride inequity and misfortunes such as austerity-measures. In a time of rapid economic and ecological change, it is all the more timely for more people to think beyond paycheck-security and what today's ever-more stressed and unstable society demands and delivers.

Despite my friend's constrained circumstances, like for all of us to a greater or lesser degree, he brings kindness and open-mindedness to everyone he can, and is no stranger to social movements. More people should be like my friend, because for sure more community solidarity would flower and usher in a new cultural paradigm.

However, when people do not take the risk to make their lives a total adventure, to really be true to a creative spirit of independence, they are in effect waiting for someone or something to jolt them into a new routine and lifestyle. It may suddenly not be pretty, when finding oneself in the rapids. Major change for us all will surely come, but if it is not encouraged as part of one's proactive approach to an enlightened state in society, fundamental change presents itself when most inconvenient, disruptive, or even deadly — like the rapids, "going with the flow."

Pursuing enlightenment in the "safe" cage of work and consumerist immersion might feel beneficial, if it is not "a prison of your own device" (The Doors, 1967) and if it does not involve wearing blinders about general oppression and ecocide. Enlightened individualism without action is impossible and a joke on anyone preferring to be stuck on the treadmill.

Foundation of the Broken Merry-Go-Round

Chasing the dollar, whether as the keystone of existence or for survival, may result in some security or even affluence. But it can put one in a rut, clinging to a pipe dream that constrains creativity. Opportunity for satisfying adventure and gaining a different kind of security, and being of significant service to others, is closed off.

The alternative to having "enough" money, while not popular, might be to hear distant music and follow it. Whether it is to paint pictures every day, or go off to live in the forest — to do whatever one really wants to do as a lifestyle — is the path of

the few. Individualism has both good and bad connotations, but fulfillment through taking risks and sacrificing some comfort may “buy” more freedom and happiness than money does. It does not have to be in isolation; one can start own's own company, be a designer of interiors, take over a vacant lot with one’s neighbors and grow food, and learn from co-workers. But while we may critique jobs that don’t compensate for our precious time or allow free agency, it has been a time-honored and honorable tradition to learn as an apprentice to master an art or a craft, thus following one’s own path. It can be in service to something larger than ourselves, such as caring for others’ health.

It can be a huge challenge to make a life choice when options are few. So a huge proportion of people seems to believe, or acts as if, “I can’t or probably won’t have much money, nor can I do my own thing." Nevertheless, to the extent that a choice can be seen, it is vital that more of us take steps for ourselves, our community, and for the world.

Working people who aspire to middle class standards of living are the vast majority, true for the originators of the consumer economy since feudal times. The bourgeoisie were the new, enterprising non-nobility, non-serfs, and non-church players in local economies that through trade and population growth outgrew their small towns and regions. As capitalism in its infancy developed, the bourgeoisie’s apprentices and employees started to have money and property as they aspired to participate in the growing economy and be independent of the direct power of the nobles.

Today the billions of workers earning a wage to buy their food, housing, products and services are not under the nobles or church anymore, by and large, but it is still a common dream to aspire to be bourgeois or very rich — middle class or higher. This is not so true for the downtrodden peasantry that still toils and often starves in huge numbers, seeing no point in taking much time to dream of middle class splendor that is mostly confined to societies of consumerism. Nevertheless, as all workers try to survive, this easily feeds into looking forward to more material things (along with basic needs and rights).

In so doing, there is a social cost. This is because people of the large base of the pyramid of the dominant culture seldom see a role for themselves in society, or on the planet, other than to survive and somehow accumulate money and property. Being of significant help to society at large and to the natural world is almost always left to the eccentric or the revolutionary. To follow one's muse and create art, master a fine craft, become a great storyteller, or work for the community with little monetary compensation is strongly discouraged, as only minor income is tantamount to failure. So to the vast majority, whether educated or not, money and property imply freedom and security; no other choice is seen or desired. As children it easily entered our minds to keep spending much of our lives with our favorite animals, enjoying nature, and playing games. This soon goes by the wayside, when money pressures and work close in. To reinforce this, the mass media's image of upper middle class splendor, and the superstar musician or athlete, titillate many on their disillusioning journey to adopt the role of the hapless or quiescent.

The alternative to working in a stifling, often meaningless fashion for a boss or bureaucracy is, by many, denied to exist at all. So it remains for those who know they are square pegs for round holes to find freedom and creative outlets. This cannot fairly apply to slaves waiting for a chance to escape, nor does it include the positive-living peasant or worker making a difference in others’ lives every day. At the other end of the spectrum of wealth, if one comes from privilege and university education, the opportunities for social activism might seem more obvious but not so risky.

So it is those fortunate and/or daring enough who are the ones overtly doing their own thing, whether it means having money and property, or not. They may have been workers, or even peasants, and may still be so. But they always feel they must explore what life has to offer by thinking independently, being active, taking risks, and branching out. Increasingly, however, being a local crafts producer, farmer, musician, or environmentalist in a viable, satisfying community is rare or next to impossible for anyone without a financial cushion or supportive parents.

Whether one is hesitant to step out or drop out, or to join a radical movement for social justice, still depends on the ability or wish to surmount pressure to earn plenty of money for food, housing, a car, etc. Yet, when everything is shared, daily needs are more obtainable. In a crisis of land-access, severe austerity, or famine, there is suddenly no choice but to change one’s routine and fight for change. This stage of social change, whereby revolutions happen when there is

sufficient hunger in the belly, is not the subject of this essay. While much of the world has a modicum of calm as we hurtle toward cataclysmic change, it is worth analyzing today's forces of change and the impediments of proactive, common-sense change for the individual.

Many start to put into action their aspirations to becoming independent and utilizing their natural talents and creativity. First they may find a satisfying job if luck, training, or connections make it possible. But for those wanting something more, and if they get the chance to proceed up the ladder, most seem to run into a trap: by taking higher pay and sacrificing time for the well-paying job, people's perceptions of what they need to reach security and fulfillment shift up... and up... and up. So even when one has a basic lifestyle of a job that offers enough time for cherished hobbies or dreams, the salary or profits become not enough — when a more time- and energy-consuming job or venture will pay double. The more money people have in their pockets, the more they spend — a basic tenet in finance. And so what used to be a balance, that allowed for "individualism" in off-hours, is elusive or appears no longer possible.

Making money usually generates the perception of needing more money... and having to spend more money. This creates an upward spiral or upward cyclone, with a middle suction, taking down the “individual” at the core. It is the few who follow through, when getting the higher paying job — “I’ll pay off my debts with it and then do my own thing.” Almost all get sucked into a more expensive lifestyle that then keeps them even farther away from being the free individual.

We can extend this to the multi-millionaire driven to become a billionaire, and to the billionaire who just has to have more billions than another billionaire. If true security and independence could be obtained this way, to enjoy both gold and enlightenment, this could be called sane and admirable (if the wealth generated somehow did not exploit people or destroy what is left of nature). But when we have a world coming apart at the seams, and there’s nowhere to run and hide as global warming heats the collective pail of us frogs, then maximizing wealth does not only not free the individual but is ultimately a dead end if we end up with a dead planet.

The Lesson of the ‘60s Counter Culture

In the 1960s and early ‘70s, consumer society faced a rapidly emerging dissatisfaction. It was not negativity, for most of the cultural rebels saw the need for a more peaceful, free world. The perceived opportunity for pursuing the beauty of life in fast-changing, precarious times was irresistible for many.

A "new" consciousness popped up like fields of wildflowers in the spring. A major current in especially middle-class and working youth in those days was to do something other than devote one's life to working for someone else (or for a corporation or the government). Having come of age in that exciting era, I saw that young people had begun to see their future as something to seize or shape, instead of letting bosses, the government, or other institutions run their lives. Alternative forms of self-rule for small communities (modern tribes) formed, and the participants attempted to lead peaceful, independent lives. They were proudly doing their own thing apart from the blatant consumer track, while resisting and actively opposing what was called the War Machine and Plastic Society.

The experience of those times for almost an entire generation expressing itself through action, radical thought and self-discovery, did not ultimately result in autonomy from mainstream society. However, cultural values were proudly different and faithfully nurtured. All thinking people were behind the civil rights movement, but the crisis of racism was not resolved. We remained focused, albeit not victorious. The positive effect has carried through to today, although almost entirely below the radar. Distractions then were fewer: there was only the hinting of global threats beyond nuclear holocaust. The greenhouse effect, expanding overpopulation, the incipient cancer epidemic from industrial toxins, and risky supply chains for food, water, energy, and medicine, could all be dealt with by some specializing "freaks" (as hip progressives were affectionately called), finding their niches in "The Movement."

As the turbulent 1960s cooled down, the revolutionary dreams and tendencies of the idealistic youth could be momentarily set aside, it seemed — one could go work in the consumer economy for a time while practicing a degree of communal living or maintaining links to it. One religiously enjoyed what the older generation called "subversive" music, ignored television, did not aspire to accumulate material things, and made the effort — less and less frequently, by and large — to “change the world” by standing up for freedom and justice.

With the systematic suppression of The Movement by the early 1970s, coinciding with relief felt at the end of the Vietnam War, people were much more likely to ease into a workaday world of taking care of necessities, i.e., to consume and find "personal growth." It was still a matter of pride and respect to do one's own thing, and education was for most young people the opportunity for learning and leading one's own life -- rather than slogging away in greater debt, culminating with landing any job that would pay the bills. Yet, by the end of the decade after the two Oil Shocks, tendencies to really do one’s own thing independently were weakening as The Movement was barely even underground, and there were far fewer exponents to join or follow. Instances of resistance periodically cropped up, but for the most part they were single-issue campaigns. History has always had misfits, reformers, and rebels.

The Times They Have a’ Changed

Now, fast-forward to today, the working population and the very rich all find themselves in the same boat: a besieged biosphere undergoing rapid climate change; toxic exposures; non-stop wars; the alleged need or the addiction to be technologically connected at all times, no matter the costs. Practically everyone, although sometimes reluctantly, still feels pressed to pursue self-interest as an aspiring member of the middle class or ruling class. The only option most people now see as worthwhile is to try to be a card-carrying member of the comfortable — if possible, via a miracle, along the lines of the media’s showcases of rich, selfish consumers we are expected to ape and respect.

As the expanding, stressed population now has more global problems to worry about — hitting home harder all the time — than four and five decades ago, there is often less tendency to step out of mainstream mediocrity and experiment. Resisting that increasingly rare and youthful temptation to do so is what can pass for sane or stable. There seems to be no alternative for individuals or intentional groups to pursue. How many young people today are forming or seeking out a commune, or are organizing to create autonomous zones from corporate-state domination as the Zapatistas did? Yet, Black Lives Matter is an example of a new movement having an effect on policy, and, even more important, it boosts dignity. Unfortunately, too many potential activists are still sitting it all out.

Selling out or denying our dreams does not even pay off, as hope for finding material happiness and security is seen by more and more of us to be less and less likely. A consequence of the ending of cheap conventional oil in 2005 is the beginning of the end of “infinite” expansion and wealth for the many — advertised and deceivingly offered for anyone willing to work as a dutiful consumer and be a quiet voter.

Nevertheless, islands of learning and determined liberation do exist, and will continue to flower. They will be mostly ignored for the time being, but these communities, collectives, and affinity groups will only become more valuable to the world, and more noteworthy, as the failed model of endless consuming and individualistic aggrandizement teeters and sputters. The Farm in Tennessee, the Zapatistas in Chiapas, the dwindling but tenacious number of peaceful and artistic anarchists in Berlin and elsewhere, and innumerable other projects and communities do live on and sprout up. They sometimes dissipate, peter out, or are smashed. And most could be overrun in a grand collapse. This is why they must now be given much more appreciation, to replicate them — as consumer society and the house-of-cards financial system near inevitable termination as historic phenomena.

Aside from feeling obliged to do the right thing for others as well as for Mother Nature, doing so means doing your own thing. Certainly it is not what the pack or herd is already doing. Doing our own thing in solidarity together or as a a loner means that we won’t just have, as we contemplate our lives at the end, but we will have done something. Chasing the dollar in order to just have money, instead of doing our own thing, is about having instead of doing or being. This the choice we all now have. It depends how one views the chance to live, and what living well means to each of us.

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Further reading: