We live off each other. Can we be free?

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Simplicity and health versus consumerism -- or, my Solstice gift to you

Whether we be rich exploiters, stealing legally ("Rent is theft", proclaims a t-shirt), or Mother Theresa accepting donations for her gruel, we live off each other. There is no one entirely living as a self-made man or woman unless as a hermit in the wilderness -- without plastic. The other example of real independence and self-sufficiency is non-humans: Birds eat juniper berries right off the tree in my back yard, in keeping with their apparently simple society.

Some of us believe we are living off each other in a kind and reasonable way if we are providing an essential service with integrity. That does not make us free, but most of us want to say we are free if we are well compensated or supported -- no matter what awful job we have that compromises our dignity and dreams. Some humans are little more than parasitic in their job description, as they prey on others; e.g., mugging little old ladies literally or by clever legal maneuvers. One wonders how some individuals can look at themselves in the mirror, but they can be honest in admitting they are being their animal selves following simple, selfish rules.

The word "peasant" has a bad connotation, as in John Lennon's using it as an epithet in his otherwise brilliant 1970 song "Working Class Hero." Food production is highly respected in Cuba, for example, after the country endured petrocollapse a decade and a half ago. It helps that there are probably no peasants or capitalists on the island except for the base called Gitmo. In the freer part of Cuba there happens to be a nice public statue of John Lennon in a park in Havana. Back here in the land of Frank Zappa's Supermarket Supreme, it is considered honorable to produce packaged, processed food that is frozen and then given to faceless customers via go-betweens (grocery stores). Is this a parasitic and unsustainable way of making a living off fellow humans?

"We are free because we can choose between 30 different toothpastes. Our only freedom left is to shop." I don't know where I picked up that indictment of our society, but it sounds more true each day, as overcrowding from population growth deprives us of open space. Our ability to use public commons for hunting, gathering, and shelter diminishes daily, as police raids on encampments of the homeless are carried out for the Haves.

We are taught that we are free because we can pursue "The American Dream." Or, in a scaled down version, we are lucky to have a job and pay bills: "Just look at those dirty, lazy homeless people that are so different from me. Hmmph!"

But we are not free if we have a boss, or if we are our own boss while working like dogs. Actually, dogs hardly work. Humans are the most slave-like workers, more than cattle who just stand there and chew. The question is, can we be free in today's world of overpopulation and privatized fortresses called cities? Are we really free in an urban setting where our "castle" (home) may be locked down or even armed, as if under siege?

But, as crazy as it sounds, for many there is some freedom to be had from minimizing possessions and sharing everything. Too bad that in today's regimented culture, almost no one is given a chance to explore what it might entail to live another way, and what the advantages may be compared to consumerism.

Such exploration should be widely considered today, given that there is petrocollapse ahead for the U.S. -- likewise for all petroleum-dependent countries that have seen their traditional social structures weaken from "free" market-based economics.

A piece of the sometimes arsenic pie, for Argentines

In Argentina, the factory take-overs during economic collapse a few years ago resulted in cooperatives running on consensus instead of bosses. "The Take" is a popular new film about a car-parts factory that had been closed by the owner, only to be reopened by the workers who changed the social relationships.

Petroleum energy is used for such factories, and the country is upping its consumption. While cooperatives are a good thing, petroleum use is not: global warming, smog, poisoning of the water, and other drawbacks ought to be as important as jobs. Then there's the cars: they are deadly to all, so this is not appropriate work, and should be stopped. (The case against the car is shot through the culturechange.org website.)

Is anyone free when the job is anti-nature, even if humans have used democracy and enlightened mutual aid to create solidarity and decent wages? The bigger question is, is employment something free people do? A workers' cooperative can be a strenuous project to make ends meet, and even if it's non-polluting work, we should not be forced to do what

other people insist out of their self-interest. Oftentimes the supposedly well-meant directive to get a job or work flows from mass brainwashing and a lack of imagination. Questioning rules and making an effort to achieve happiness and health must be encouraged so we can help each other better -- particularly when the whole Western Civilization model is headed for complete, terminal failure.

In today's urban environment, a radical departure from being a wage slave is to work in a cooperative.

No Boss is a new quarterly tabloid from Oakland, California that nurtures the cooperative workplace movement. Another radical departure from the mortgage ("pledge to the death" from French) is the cooperative housing movement. It seems incredible how easily people in great numbers could enjoy housing at much lower cost if property is shared and held by a community land trust, for example. But the inability to get rich off of later selling one's value-inflated house does put off those willing to instead pay through the nose for the freedom of isolation in a fortified box.

The Native Americans and freedom

Under any circumstances, people must pull their own weight. People need to support themselves, their family and community. But people can do this without bosses, as tribal life proved for untold millennia all over the world. A boss is a relatively recent concept that came along when merchants and farmers gained some power and had a surplus to produce for profit or for the church's share. According to Jack Weatherford, author of books on indigenous people and history, the capitalist factory had its clearest early model from slave-labor operations to grow sugarcane in the Caribbean in the 18th century.

The idea of providing our needs via sharing skills and helping each other to produce life's essentials includes bartering instead of the modern market economy. The medium of exchange -- money -- may be detrimental to the individual and the community, when accumulation becomes the object. Indian tribes engaged in this, using shells for money, but these rich were not a class of idlers or exploiters, if we look at the relative equality the tribe enjoyed and the pristine environment all around that provided the wealth.

In a recent study, traditional Pacific Northwest Indian cultures are described as having been inclined toward social hierarchy and a bit of slavery due to abundant food supplies and high enough density of human population. This is a roughly similar description of modern civilization, except the Indians had proven sustainability.

Some believe that modernity and the freedom to be inconspicuous city dwellers, with minimal family ties, beats the rigid tribal customs. Women's liberation appears to depend on no more old structures, in favor of new, open arrangements. But there is far more to women being free to do what they please and do almost any job in the work force: the deteriorating economy, after the heyday of cheap oil, meant that women absolutely had to go to work to keep most households going.

Tribal ways can be coercive, but there are many variations and practices: sometimes women called most of the shots. And there was no word for "work" or for "free" in most primitive cultures: what was done in everyday living covered what we might call work, and people were free enough not to have to describe "free" as some opposite of bondage. For us to call our regimentation and massive body of law "freedom" means living a compromise, at best – if you can afford to live.

It’s (almost) all in our minds

When we operate in the material world and have our brain in calculating/ego mode, we are not free. No way out, you say? It so happens that in dream state, where we spend one third of our lives, we are helpless to be anything other than free. The subconscious takes over and allows anything to come up and be acted out, and we are shown our real fears and loves. We can clearly experience what we want and what we believe in dreams, and we can go further by paying attention to our dreams and acting on them.

When awake, we may be so stressed out or distracted that we fail to live "in the now." Meditation – it’s not what you think. It can be described as the sudden realization that we need not be slaves to our thoughts. That is in itself a thought, but it's a better one at least. Discipline in thinking can be argued about, but one element missing from discussions on meditation is that it isn't necessary in pristine nature: sit in a clearing and what occupies the mind? The sound of a bird in a bush, the wind, the beautiful leaves, and perhaps survival-decisions take over.

Meditation by sitting in a room is partly just therapy for urban ills, or a mental salve to soothe cultural oppression. Or, it’s a misguided quest to become a super being through enlightenment -- the very idea of gaining others’ respect or adulation may be a reward for being "saved." A primitive person in nature's wealth does not need to be saved or have his or her mind freed. But since we are mostly urban dwellers and must relax and clear our minds, meditation is a harmless and good tool among many tools harmless and otherwise.

It is impossible to feel free or happy when ill. The mind is an organ like any other body organ, and cannot be full of toxins if thinking and moods are to be positive and pleasurable. The most thorough detoxification is through fasting (water only), combined with rest and warmth. Depression lifts as health imbues the brain and all cells, enhancing immunity. The rejuvenated body and individual believes greater things are possible even if it's the enjoyment of simple things once again. Fasting frees the body and mind from the fast pace of living, as time seems to slow down. It becomes a meditative time to ponder what one really values, such as friends, family and the beauty of nature.

Self-confidence stems in large part from health, so a person dominated by another person such as a relative or spouse may be in a better position to move on to greater freedom if health is achieved.

Simplicity

Material things deprive us of self-knowledge and experience of what nature has to offer -- if there's any unspoilt nature around. Having few possessions and fewer jobs and responsibilities may enhance the sense of freedom. Some people are so busy that it's pathological, and their waking time is like a caffeine-powered march to achieve things small and large.

The simplicity movement is about letting go of higher paying work to have more personal time. This does not work for all professions and personalities, such as artists, activists and peasants. A peasant has a simpler life than an activist or an artist these days. An artist heeds the call of the muse, for example, and is awakened by a dream to commence "work" at 3 a.m. perhaps. But a peasant just needs to get sleep so as to wake up early most mornings, to deal with food production. A peasant or artist cannot really simplify his or her life if they are already doing what their life's work is.

"The {union, the revolution, fill in the blank} will set me free"

An activist, however, can be a nut-case and past the point of effectiveness by being "burned out." An activist is driven by altruism, or outrage over injustice, or survival-impulse/self-defense, or ego. Effective activism can be freeing, particularly when -- ironically -- solidarity and mutual-dependence are achieved with other activists whose cooperation is essential. Activists sometimes delude themselves that their actions, their political party or their social movement can make people free. These activists, like the kind of revolutionaries relying on sabotage or armed struggle, may have their greatest failure in not understanding the foundations that are civilization and dominant culture.

The usual result of revolution is eventual worsening of the population's lives, often due to recurrence of the same old problems of corruption and cronyism. A simpler approach would be to live by example as a person not participating in common practices such as consuming much fossil energy. This can be more radical than a changing of the guard.

Freedom future for those interested

Sadly, some people seek "freedom" by taking a lot of drugs or giving up on living active lives. The bribe commonly accepted is 100 channels of television and junk food. It is a simple approach, but a dead end that's suicidal. They say "I don't need to live forever," but their long final years are marked by ill health and they are a burden on others. Oddly, these people think they are free and often vehemently resent others advocating any sweeping changes in national priorities and the mainstream consumer lifestyle.

More than ever in human history, we are all in the same boat: climate change is going out of control, and peak oil and petrocollapse cannot be averted. We have lost much future freedom, thanks to the failures of the environmental movement of past decades. Paradoxically, however, when a common threat brings people together, there is a measure of freedom in the struggle for a better world. At this point, without the crying need to work together, we find it convenient to do little more than get through another day and accept our broken system.

Until a brighter and surprising tomorrow, I wish you a splendid solstice.

- Jan Lundberg, Berkeley

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Announcement: Los Angeles petrocollapse conference Jan. 28 or Feb. 4. By the time you read this I will know exactly when and where an L.A. petrocollapse conference will be in my old home town, the eastern San Fernando Valley. Contact me at jan@culturechange.org or 1-(215)-243-3144.

And remember to support Culture Change to help us start the year with some wherewithall. Thank you, and may the solstice mark a turning point for the better.

http://www.culturechange.org/funding.htm

Links and further reading:

Network of Bay Area Worker Cooperatives (NoBAWC, pronounced "no boss") is dedicated to helping build the worker cooperative movement in the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond:

http://www.nobawc.org/

The Northern California Land Trust
http://www.nclt.org/about.htm

Jack Weatherford's books:

http://www.randomhouse.com/author/results.pperl?authorid=32616

Primitive people's diet and inequality

http://www.innovations-report.com/html/reports/studies/report-53133.html

Jan Lundberg's treatise on fasting (Culture Change Letter):

http://www.culturechange.org/e-letter-Fasting92.html

7 notions for a new year - Ideas for a livable tomorrow (Culture Change e-Letter #10)

http://www.culturechange.org/e-letter-10.html

What the heck, get yourself a Christmas present:
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http://www.culturechange.org/funding.htm

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