

Economics and Our Common Wealth

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

November 17, 2013

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Meditation

This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches...stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul—and [in so doing] your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body... (Walt Whitman, from the Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, 1855)

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I want to begin by trying to picture the following in our minds eye—it's a scene described by the late economist Jonathan Rowe as told to him by his wife who grew up in the Philippines. The social life of Mary Jean Espulgar's village largely took place beside the massive trunk and under the great spreading branches of a stately, ancient tree. It stood at the very center of village life. People gathered there in the evening to visit, tell stories, and just pass the time together. Some of Mary Jean's warmest childhood memories were of playing hide-and-seek late into the evening while the adults chatted under that tree.

The tree was more than a quaint meeting place; it was an economic asset in the root sense of the word. It produced a bonding of neighbours, an information network, an activity center for kids, and a bridge between the generations. There, older people took part in the ebb and flow of daily life where they could share their wisdom and memory. Grownups swapped stories of work and family. Children ran free and safe in unstructured and noncompetitive play with their parents and elders close at hand. No need to spend millions on a community center, no call for video games, cable TV, sports leagues, and weight training and exercise studios. Without really thinking about it, each and all in that village knew the profound worth of that tree. Every evening it beckoned them forth from their homes and private cares and worries, and with its silent eloquence, its abiding presence, it provided a household for an entire community. (Jonathan

Rowe, Our Common Wealth: The Hidden Economy That Makes Everything Else Work, 2013, pp. 13-14)

But ask western economists the worth of that tree in terms of GDP, of gross domestic product, and they would say the tree was in a pathetic state of underdevelopment. They would urge “modernization” on the village, by which they would mean, for starters, cutting down the tree, milling it into lumber, selling it and making people pay for it as a product—for in a monetized economy, the sole significance of that great elder tree resides not in its nature, nor its gathering presence, but simply in its market price.

Further, applying this economic model more broadly in the village, corporate produced entertainment would displace local culture: the evening intergenerational gatherings of the village, dinner-time conversation, and bed-time reading. And before long, the kitchen table becomes McDonald’s, parenting becomes the anxious monitored scheduling of activities, visiting under the tree or on the front porch becomes psychiatry, gameboys, and elder care. Watchful, caring neighbours become alarm systems and police officers and security guards. Quiet becomes the cacophony of advertizing. Up and down the line, what people used to do with and for each other turns into things we have to buy and consume. (And while I’m thinking about it, any of you walked into new public buildings lately? Whether its hospitals, airports or new construction at UBC—I can’t find a drinking fountain; but there’s plenty of bottled water in the vending machines for purchase.)

But back to the tree and that village in the Philippines: What they enjoyed and experienced socially and in a particular public place gathered as they were together under the arching branches of the elder tree is something called the “commons”—a term that denotes the wealth we share. In the words of Jonathan Rowe:

“The commons includes our entire life support system, both natural and social. The air and the oceans, the web of species, wilderness and flowing water—all are parts of the commons. So are

language and knowledge, sidewalks and public squares, the stories of childhood, the process of democracy. Some parts of the commons are gifts of nature, other the products of human endeavor....What they have in common is that they all “belong” to us...No one has exclusive rights to them. We inherit them jointly and hold them in trust for those who come after us. We are, to quote Edmund Burke, ‘temporary possessors and life renters; and we should not think it amongst our rights to commit waste on [that] inheritance.’” (Rowe, 14) Or in the words of a Kenyan proverb: “Treat the earth well. It was not just given to you by your parents; it was loaned to you by your children.”

Don’t know about you, but when last did you hear a politician, an economist, or Peter Mansbridge or Carol Off refer to the concept of the commons or of the perilous wasting of that inheritance we hold “in trust for those who come after us”? Though the commons and its true wealth is everywhere, it is nonetheless little noticed or taken into account. No nightly news reports on how it is faring; no speeches about it in Parliament. From politics to the media—barely a word about the common wealth that belongs to us all.

Now when I recently perused the official website of the Prime Minister’s Office and read its stated priorities, the following phrases stood out: preparing to “support our future prosperity,” “competing in the global markets of the 21st century,” and “focus on growth” so that we will “emerge stronger than ever.” I read those words and thought: What does this mean? And before I get on a partisan high horse, would the priorities differ significantly if another political party was in power? Would attention, concern and sincere cultivation of the commons and our common wealth be of principal concern?

The most common term and tool used to gauge what the PMO’s office, and other governments and economists, mean by “prosperity,” and “growth,” “expansion” and “recovery” is something called the Gross Domestic Product, or GDP. I hear this all the time in the media;

and no wonder—for it combines a simple number with the appearance of expert authority, and a readymade, simple-to-relate story line delivered by well-coiffed people reading off a Teleprompter. But what is the GDP?

As best I can make out, the GDP is “simply a gross measure of market activity, of money changing hands.” It’s an adding up of “the total output (the dollar value of finished goods and services)” that are bought and sold in a given time frame. If the GDP is going up, that’s supposed to be good; the economy’s growing; there’s more activity going on out there; and that’s progress, right? But let’s think about it, for a minute: If Jim Chu, the Chief of the Vancouver Police Department, announced one day that “activity” on the city streets had increased by 15%, wouldn’t that leave us with some questions? “Exactly what had increased,” we might ask. Volunteerism or muggings? Tree planting or burglaries? Car wrecks or neighbourly acts of kindness?

Quantity of activity, taken alone, says virtually nothing about whether life on our streets is getting better or worse. Same with the GDP: “It treats everything that happens in the market as a gain for humanity, while ignoring everything that happens outside the realm of monetized exchange,” regardless of its impact to the commons and our common well-being. Yoking together a nation’s accounting “to the lowest common denominator of price” entirely leaves out “the functions of family [and households] and community on the one hand, and the natural habitat on the other.” Each of these, we know, is crucial to economic well-being. “But because the services they perform are outside the price system,” they are invisible and not taken into account when gauging the well-being of a nation and people.

So by the curious measure of GDP, the ancient tree in that village in the Philippines is worthless. A public drinking fountain in a hospital is of no account. “The GDP treats leisure time and time with family the way it treats air and water: as having no value at all. When the need for a second job cuts the time available for family or community, the GDP records this loss as an economic gain.” In fact, and I hardly exaggerate, by this economic mis-measure of things, the most desirable habitat is something like Alberta’s tar sands—not only in the staggering costs and profits of the production of bitumen, but also the bill that surely must be paid for cleaning up or containing all the havoc it wreaks upon the environment in Alberta and beyond.

A tree cut down and sold as lumber. A hospital vending bottled water. No bedtime story because parents are out working a second job. A man-made natural catastrophe—all these and more add to the GDP simply because they cause money to exchange hands. “It’s as if a business kept a balance sheet by merely adding up all “transactions,” without distinguishing between income and expenses, or between assets and liabilities.” Herman Daly, a former World Bank economist, puts it this way: “[our] current...accounting system treats the earth as a business in liquidation.” (quotes on GDP above taken from Clifford Cobb, Ted Halstead and Jonathan Rowe, “If the GDP is Up, Why is America Down?” *Atlantic*, October 1995.)

Five years ago, Mary Oliver, writing from a nation having set loose the dogs of war and thrashing in the early throes of economic crisis, wrote an anguished poem. It will serve as an ending for one part of this sermon and a gateway to the next and its conclusion:

Of the Empire

We will be known as a culture that feared death
and adored power, that tried to vanquish insecurity
for the few and cared little for the penury of the
many. We will be known as a culture that taught
and rewarded the amassing of things, that spoke
little if at all about the quality of life for

people (other people), for dogs, for rivers. All the world, in our eyes, they will say, was a commodity. And they will say that this structure was held together politically, which it was, and they will say also that our politics was no more than an apparatus to accommodate the feelings of the heart, and that the heart, in those days, was small, and hard, and full of meanness.

Three years ago, just before his tragic early death, the historian Tony Judt, cried out:

“The materialistic and selfish quality of contemporary life is not inherent in the human condition. Much of what appears “natural” today [actually] dates from the 1980s: the obsession with wealth creation, the cult of privatization and the private sector, the growing disparities of rich and poor. And above all, the rhetoric which accompanies these: uncritical admiration for unfettered markets, disdain for the public sector, [disregard for the commons], and the delusion of endless growth. We cannot go on living like this.” (Tony Judt, “A manifesto for a new politics,” *The Guardian*, March 20, 2010)

These are not just technical problems. They are spiritual and social pathologies of our age that pose a threat to our common wealth, to our social cohesion, environment and the health of any democracy worthy of the name. What is to be done? What sort of language can we propose to explain and justify our vision and goals for meaning, peace, equity and justice? –for the enlargement of heart, for softening its hardness, and for draining it of its icy venom and meanness?

To those who continue to call for the evisceration, the hollowing out of the state’s responsibilities and capacities, to those who undermine its public standing in word and deed—there is a household of political and social memory that knows there is much to defend. There is something called the “public service mission” of government—the duty of a truly social democracy—to provide and protect our common wealth just because those goods and their well-being are in the public interest.

We take for granted, not only the commons, but also those institutions, legislation, services and rights that we fought for and inherited from the great age of 20th century reform. It is time to remind ourselves and to tell younger generations that all of these were utterly inconceivable as recently as 1929, and 1966, and 1982. We, and generations rising, are the

fortunate beneficiaries of a transformation whose scale and impact was unprecedented—a transformation driven in considerable measure by the belief there were and are deep and abiding *moral* rules to economic, political and social life. And that those are worth defending, renewing, and deepening.

Morals. Morality. In a recent essay co-written by Christine Boyle and Seth Klein, they assert that “the language of morality has, in recent years, been avoided by many on the political left...and even by those who come from a progressive faith background...as passé...overly preachy or judgmental.” But by abdicating that language, the “unfortunate consequence is that the domain of morality” has been left to the religious right or so-called conservatives who, ironically, have inherited the modernist urge to destroy and innovate in the name of a universal project. Bu the aim of this project is not to build the rich, thick mesh of social interactions, public goods and a flourishing biosphere—but to reduce them to a minimum until there is nothing but products for purchase and individuals, consumers, and citizens bound to markets and to the state by habits of consumption, authority and obedience.

Any society, wrote Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, “any society which destroys the fabric of its state must soon be disconnected into the dust and powder of mere individuality”—and that, I fear will resemble nothing so much as Hobbes’s war of all against all, in which life for many people has once again become solitary, poor and more than a little nasty.

The origin of the word “economy” is simply the word for housekeeping. A household is a place where life is lived in common; and housekeeping is guaranteeing that this common life enables the members of the household to grow and flourish and act in useful, meaningful ways.

It's a place where vulnerable people are nurtured and allowed to grow up in the world and to wind down from its cares; it's the stable background from which we go out to labour in order to provide for our necessities; and it's a space where leisure, privacy and creativity can find room and scope, and thus strengthen the lives and relationships of those who call that place home. A housekeeping theory, like the GDP, or unfettered markets and unlimited growth, the monetization of the commons—a theory, a practice, a politics that wanders too far from the basics of good housekeeping is a recipe for damage to the vulnerable, to the usefulness and regularity of labour, and to the possibilities human beings have for renewing and challenging themselves through leisure, learning and creativity. (see Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 2012, p. 227)

“A moral economy,” in the words of Christine Boyle and Seth Klein, “is one in which people do not feel they have to sacrifice their values, harm human dignity or compromise ecological health in order to achieve economic security.” Boyle and Klein ask us to imagine a “society that places value on service and caring” and that this would be reflected in a decent livable wage. In a moral economy, “natural resources are not depleted and the commons is not despoiled.” It is an economy where “Aboriginal rights and title are respected, and where we strive to honour the commitments made to those who first occupied this land.” A moral economy does not “abide poverty, and policies are put in place to lessen rather than increase the inequality divide by income, gender and ethnicity.” It is an economy that reflects our deep-seated values, values expressed in the collective provision of health and security for all of us through “public health, housing, childcare, education and retirement security.” (Boyle and Klein, “Imagining a Moral Economy for British Columbia,” *The Tyee*, 10/15/13.) And a moral economy would measure its *true* worth not in terms of Gross Domestic Product, but with something like “*genuine* progress indicators,” a kind of

reckoning that would take into account not only consumption, but also the added value of housework and community volunteering, as well as the ruinous costs of income disparity and pollution that degrade the commons and our common wealth. (see Cobb, Halstead and Rowe, cited above)

This is not “Kumbaya” or a recipe for fewer, decent jobs. While we may often be a ragbag of sometimes contradictory values, for most of us, this kind of economy feels morally right. The problem is that too many Canadians, and others, have been convinced that these values, while desirable and consistent with their moral principles, are unrealistic. But truly, if we do not articulate them and work for their realization, we abdicate the commons and our common wealth to those bent on liquidating them.

In closing, I need to say this. Central to our theology and our belief is the living fact of mutuality—of interdependence. Each of us depends on others and the whole spectrum of life—animate and inanimate, conscious and unconscious—for our very lives. No element is dispensable or superfluous; what affects one, affects all, for good and ill, since suffering and flourishing belong to the entire web of existence. Each is needful and needed; each dependent on others and endowed with gifts for others. No one, no thing, is exempted from damage or incapable of a gifted blessing extended to others and the world. Helpless alone and gifted in relationship. That’s who we are, and the place from which any thoughts and plans and actions regarding our economic well-being and the flourishing of our common wealth must begin and continue until they are achieved.