

Finding a Sense of Surplus

It's easy to grasp the wisdom in the first two of permaculture's three ethical principles. The benefits of "care for the earth" and "care for people," are obvious, and it's not a difficult step to put those principles into practice. But then comes that third, more challenging principle, "share the surplus." That's where some of us waver a bit. How large a pile do we need to store up before some of it spills over into the category of surplus? What if we give the surplus away and then badly need it tomorrow?

Even if we're able to see the intelligence in sharing the surplus, doing it is a tough step to take. In a culture that exhorts us to be sharp investors and to save for those ever-looming rainy days, and that equates our worth with our bank balance, what heresy it is to urge that we give that valuable surplus away!

How can we know how much is enough and learn to share the remainder? I'll start by offering a practical reason to abandon the urge to hoard. From a simple physical viewpoint, a surplus is a bother: It must be stored. Storing something is expensive and nearly always causes it to lose value. Think of hiding money in a mattress while inflation chews away at it, or having food rot in the cellar. The value of most goods comes not when they are stored, but from use, from the benefits of flow. For example, the fertility of soil isn't properly measured by the amount of nutrients present—many are in unusable form—but by the flow of those nutrients to plants and soil life. Likewise, money best retains its value when it flows: when it is exchanged for useful goods, employed as capital, or invested in a bank, business, or government which will then put it to use.

Thus surplus money must come out of the mattress and be made to work. However, when money is invested it can do great harm. What businesses are we comfortable owning stock in? How about government or corporate bonds? Land, an investment option I often hear suggested, is not a liquid place for savings. To get cash back from land, the property must be sold, and usually on contract (banks rarely loan money on raw land), so the seller carries obligation and risk for decades. And whenever land is sold—as I know from bitter experience—it is logged or otherwise developed, because land only has monetary value when it is consumed by the economy.

Also, it's easy to become obsessed with shepherding our surplus. A wealthy relative of mine, a brilliant and creative man who retired young, now spends much of the day watching the stock channels. His surplus controls him. Holding more than we need means devoting concern and effort to its care.

The Uncertain Line of Time

However, I doubt if practical arguments will persuade people to share the surplus, because the desire to hoard isn't really grounded in reason. In part, the insecurities that drive people to hoard stem from our transition, long ago, from cyclical to linear time.

Archaic humans experienced time as cyclical, where events weren't singular, but recurrent. Time seemed not to progress so much as to loop. Human activities were embedded within cycles of sun, moon, tides, solstice and equinox, and other patterns of return. A hard and hungry winter was inevitably followed by a gentle spring and bountiful summer. People knew that times of scarcity didn't last forever. During a grim season, their comfort came from the certainty that lean times had always ended in the past, and would end this time too. Hence they didn't need an eternally expanding storehouse to reassure them, merely enough to get through the drought, the deluge, or the winter. For these people, decrease and increase ebbed and flowed in a timeless and familiar rhythm. Each person's life was safely embedded in a well-worn pattern of cycles within larger cycles.

But we have unwound these comforting cycles and hammered them straight, into the arrow of linear time. We see each event as unique, separate, and not enmeshed within a larger periodicity. For us the past recedes into dimness, and the future extends toward uncertainty. Linear time offers no recurring pattern of birth, maturity, death, and renewal, only the whirling of numbers—bank balances, dates, odometer mileages, the NASDAQ index—that mount or diminish. Having lost the knowledge that this, too, shall pass, and that tomorrow always brings renewal, we can only gird ourselves against the worst possible case, and here our imaginations are fertile. No storehouse or bank account can be large enough to protect us from a murky, unraveling eternity where anything can go wrong, and stay wrong forever.

With no faith in renewal, it's easy to believe that we could lose everything. This fosters the illusion that we live in a world of scarcity. Economics itself, our secular religion, is defined as "the allocation of scarce resources among competing demands." That's a bitterly Darwinian view of human interactions. If we limit ourselves to that world, where armored ATM machines parcel out twenty-dollar bills in miserly dribbles, we can be fooled into believing that scarcity is the rule.

But scarcity is not life's law. Outside my window as I write this, high springtime is turning the corner to summer. A foot or more of new growth shoots in a green fountain from every tree branch, seedheads hang heavy on the tall grass, and nature's fecundity is a palpable presence. Nature's model is one of supreme, unbridled abundance. It seems ironic, then, to live in an economic system based on lack. When a single ear of corn can yield hundreds of grain-stuffed plants, how puzzling to find that our economy is based on a science of scarcity.

Economic Mythmaking

Yet economics, whose own practitioners call it the "dismal science," has at its core a number of untruths. One is that, in any transaction, it is a deep trait of our nature to squeeze every ounce of

value from the exchange. We've all been taught a homey little myth to reinforce this point. It says, in olden times people used barter to exchange their labor and resources: I'll make you a pair of shoes, you trade me your ax. But barter, this myth says, was inconvenient—perhaps the village ax-maker already had plenty of shoes—so humans invented money to create a system of universal exchange and to standardize values. That way people could know they were getting equal or better value in any transaction.

The problem is, barter societies don't seem ever to have existed. In the 1920s the maverick French economist, Marcel Mauss, cited anthropologists who found that moneyless societies rarely use a strict barter system. Instead, most goods circulate as gifts. One person in a community gives something to another who needs it, even though there may be no hope of immediate return. This open-ended giving links both people, and points toward a future exchange. The giver is seen by the group as useful, reliable, and generous, and is accepted into the communal flow of goods and labor, while the receiver is indebted to a system that supports him. I watched this process in action during a stay on Bali about 15 years ago, which at that time still had a largely cash-free culture. When a young couple married, a relative gave them a corner of land. Then friends built them a house from donated supplies and stocked it with food, furniture, and utensils. Later, the couple helped out at subsequent house-raising.

These open-ended exchanges knit close personal bonds that overshadow the value of the gift. Often a long-circulated gift will become invested with a value far beyond its utilitarian worth. Mauss says that societies even developed methods to prevent calculating who had given how much to whom, specifically to stop careful accounting from restricting the flow.

Our culture still bears vestiges of a gift economy, perhaps because it is more natural to us than the so-called "free market" that's often touted as inevitable and superior. When a friend drops by with a jar of homemade jam, I feel warmly obligated to return the favor and prolong the friendship. And the most coveted and valuable items in our culture—diamonds, works of art, sacred relics—have little usefulness, but derive their worth from intangible sources such as history and myth. The existence of gift economies and the lack of true barter pokes a nasty hole into the inevitability of the economics of scarcity.

So why is scarcity such an easy sell? Why is it so difficult to achieve the sense of having enough, and the belief that goods are abundant, that is the prerequisite to sharing the surplus? A deeper look at gifts begins to point to an answer.

Filling the Hole

One form of gift is that which so-called primitive people offer as sacrifice. They know that all we are given in life flows freely from the earth and from the gods, and sacrifice begins the process of repayment. These peoples' connection to the divine lessens the terrible sense of emptiness and loneliness that humans bear. Humans are born alone and we will die alone, and that knowledge,

whether called original sin or existential angst, causes nearly unbearable pain from which we try desperately and creatively to distract ourselves. For millennia, humans have known that a relationship with spirit was the path to filling this huge hole within themselves. The divine gave humans relief from the emptiness. To pay back this awesome debt, people once offered their surplus as a sacrifice or gave it to the church. Gifts to a Creator allowed people to pay back the ultimate gift of peace they received. These gifts, by returning what was given, also insured that the cycles of abundance would continue.

Because they were connected with spirit, archaic people felt full, so they didn't need to hoard. We hoard because we feel empty, and have nothing to fill our emptiness except material things. Modern people feel this emptiness so acutely because we are too clever to believe in the divine. We have bludgeoned God to death with the tools of science, logic, and philosophy. Only what we see and measure is real, and consciousness is merely an epiphenomenon of brain chemistry, not a link to the Creator. The scarcity ethic has its true roots in the immaterial, in our disconnection from spirit and the resulting sense of loss that our corporeal existence forces on us. Since this spiritual emptiness can no longer be filled with spirit, we look for completion to the only things we believe in: goods, endless activity, and most of all, money.

Goods and activity quickly reveal themselves as unsatisfying, but money never seems to. When we are bloated on food, we stop eating. After buying that vacation home, most people cease acquiring real estate. Sex and drug-taking pale after a while, or cause enough damage to drive us into a 12-step program. But money . . . money is something different. Money is non-material—it merely represents wealth, and is convertible to wealth of any kind—and thus holds the most promise to fill our non-material, spiritual emptiness. And being non-material and limitlessly convertible, money never tells us when we have enough. A story told of Andrew Carnegie is that a reporter asked him, "Now that you're the richest man in the world, how much money will be enough for you?" He answered, "Just a little bit more."

We have traded our gods for cash. Today we worship at a less satisfying, less meaningful shrine, but one that is difficult to turn away from. The gleam of gold holds the eye, and watching the pile grow larger is nearly irresistible. During a controversy over whether Christians should accept interest on invested money, a 5th-century Syrian bishop, Jacob of Saroug, had a vision of the devil, who was all in favor of interest. "I do not mind," the devil told the bishop, "if the priest uses the interest he draws from his money to buy an ax with which to smash the temples of my idols. The love of gold is a greater idol than any image of a god. . . . They have cast down the idols, but they will never cast down the coins that I shall put in their place."

Without a relationship with spirit to make possible the divine exchange of surplus for the gift of wholeness, we have little choice but to store up all we can in an attempt to fill our emptiness. That rainy day looms too ominously for us to be generous. Of course, whatever we hoard still isn't enough—how could mere matter or money fill that spiritual hole?—so in misdirected hope we work

harder, produce more, earn more, and mound up our nest egg.

The result of this is the growth economy. Only by believing in endless growth and progress can people be certain they'll soon have still more, that tomorrow will surely be better than today. If I didn't believe that tomorrow I will get a raise, that next year I'll live in a bigger house, that someday I'll have my boss's job, I would have to look around me and be miserable at the sight. Without the promise of growth to distract me, I'd be forced to see what I had today—that crummy job, the ugly house, the abusive boss—and realize that it was horrible, wasn't going to change significantly, and was a result of a dismal system in which I was trapped. And that would be a revolutionary discovery, one that the advocates of growth have not made or pray we won't make. If we believe tomorrow will be better, we can acquiesce to today's injustices and inequities. But the truth is that tomorrow we will still be mired in the economics of scarcity. Tomorrow will be very much like today. Only by understanding that today we have enough can we abandon our empty, ceaseless striving.

A Permacultural View

It would be pleasant to wrap up this essay by offering a simple solution that everyone can adopt and instantly be cured of a sense of emptiness. But I can't offer a fail-safe technique for developing a sense of surplus. The solution won't come from outside. However, let's take a permacultural view of the problem. One of permaculture's strengths is that its solutions are not one-size-fits-all techniques, but derive instead from a way of looking at things, and at this new vantage many problems dissolve into solutions. Permaculture suggests that the best solutions to most problems is to observe, and to model designs and actions after natural rhythms and time-tested ways. Learning to share the surplus follows this pattern. By observing the physical consequences of the need to hoard, it becomes obvious that the cost is high. But recognizing when there is a surplus is not done only by measuring and counting. It comes with a deeper observing: understanding where the sense of "not enough" stems from. That emptiness comes from inside. It can be relieved in part by reconnecting to the cycles of natural abundance through a closer relationship with nature.

Perhaps more importantly, inner emptiness and the resulting drive to hoard can be alleviated by reconnecting to the divine, whether it's spiritual practice, some form of talking therapy or experiential self-exploration, Earth rituals, or a few visits to the church you went to in childhood. By linking to natural cycles and the constant flow of gifts from spirit, it's possible to know how much is enough, to give away the surplus, and to be sure that the gift will be returned.

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