

Right Livelihood: Reflections on Community and Capitalism

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“The Concept of ‘Right Livelihood’ is ancient. It reflects a belief that each person should follow an occupation consistent with the principles of honest living, treating with respect other people and the natural world. It means being responsible for the consequences of one’s actions, living lightly on the earth and taking no more than a fair share of its resources” (from *The Right Livelihood Foundation*).

How timely, this edition of PVQ. So many of us have followed our bliss, taken the leap, and now find ourselves in a sea of uncertainty.

Using myself and fellow practitioners as cases in point, it seems as though this “flourishing” American - nay, global - economy has passed us by. While we may be benefited in some ways by the veneer of prosperity, many of us are perplexed by an internal and often unspoken struggle.

Perceiving life as a spiritual adventure, many of us committed ourselves to follow our bliss, as recommended by respected and convincing seers. While others were finding their ways into the mainstream workplaces, we were exploring alternatives which might better allow us to be true to ourselves and to an larger ideal - the prosperity of the common good, as experienced through the “Gaia principle.” We chose not to work directly for polluting industries or those with ideologically repugnant underpinnings. We’ve been mindful, with varying degrees of effectiveness, of making choices which we can *live* with, in the most vital and primal sense of the word.

We’ve believed in these virtues. Following my bliss has allowed a sense of expanding ethos, a feeling helping to move humanity - *all of us* - toward some greater and mystical maturity. In this worldview the success of the individual *has* significance as it contributes to the benefit of the whole. Enlightened self-interest was a term that made sense. Indeed, we were redefining success to mean something more sustaining and heartfelt than making a buck or a name for ourselves.

This approach to living has led many of us to embrace, as much as possible in a materialistic culture, the concepts of *voluntary simplicity* and *conscious living*. We would embrace more, too, if we would empty our arms of our microwaves, electric toothbrushes and ceaselessly whirring technology! But our culture defends itself against such an unencumbered embrace of simpler notions about how to communicate and how to be happy.

I note that my approach is often an annoyance to those who think capitalism, as practiced here, has nourished them and who cannot see beneath this veneer of prosperity to the underlying costs - many of which belie a spiritual poverty so deep, so profound, that we may never recover from its madness.

Even with the curious disdain of my community I have tried to be true to the inner voice that guides me. Recklessly true? Guiding me toward... toward what? Lately I’ve been feeling misled

by my inner voice. Following my bliss has not brought the prosperity I'd expected, at least not in terms of capital. Instead, it has brought wrenching uncertainty and, some days, outright panic. While this panic seems to be about money, about paying for car insurance, health insurance and new shoes, it is really about *not feeling safe* in a culture where my means force me to buy a \$3.00 pair of sneakers which I can afford only because someone is enslaved in China. It's about not feeling safe in a culture that offers me no true sense of community and which does not share my dream of human potential.

I began to confide in friends and colleagues who are committed to living more wholly. We are, in general, practitioners in the healing and expressive arts, who are walking "the road less traveled" (or which *used* to be but is now beginning to attract a crowd). In confidence, I discovered that they, too, are struggling with similar concerns.

Although I reached no conclusions from these conversations, I suspect that this struggle may not be as personal as I had been thinking. Or, rather, that it is both personal *and* collective. Maybe those of us who have taken the leap toward "sustainability" and right livelihood are on the leading edge (or *over* the edge) and that's why it feels so raw and ragged.

Or is such an outrageous assertion pure, deluded vanity?

One thing for sure: we have been trying to live consciously in a culture that too often capitalizes on UNconsciousness and thrives on deception - if we can call that thriving.

A rebellious handful of us want to live sustainable lives, approaching the ideal, living a collective truth which we co-create in an authentic democratic process, or *even consensus*, if we were truly nourished and had the stamina for it.

Unfortunately, our culture promotes a sweet, drowsy sedation - and very seductive it is - where we don't have to think, or feel. Or - finally - even BE. I often wonder, are we playing out some collective suicidal tendency? This is partly why, perhaps, some of us are feeling that the prosperity is passing us by. Because we seek a societal shift in thinking and perception, a shift toward life-affirming choices. There is very little listening for that.

I marvel at the apparent success of those who teach healing modalities at the well-known, upscale spiritual institutions. As I look through their catalogues, I gag at the surfeit of teachers basically doing the kind of work I am doing. At the same time, I long for the opportunity to be heard, admired, and well-paid as I imagine these people are. I've worked as hard as they have, haven't I? I've "paid my dues." But I worry - am I jealous? That would be the crowning counter-intuitive ignominy.

So, even within this "spiritual" field of teaching, there is the commercial blush. Is nothing sacred? Apparently not, in this capitalist culture where everything is potential capital and ripe for exploitation. Many of us, though daunted, remain committed to ideals of wholeness and to the discovery of what it means to be truly human *and* humane. For us the commitment is more

important than sedation, than entertainment. Or perhaps for us it *is* entertainment - a sort of sacred play.

Why then does it have to be such lonely play, and work? Perhaps because in our culture competition is revered and considered healthy, too few people value cooperation, and too many pretend we're all doing better than we really are, I observe that we live in a system that is in collapse, where the prevailing "fake it 'til you make it" attitude ensures that we present ourselves dishonestly. We cannot build real community when we are all pretending. Polishing the veneer does not deepen the shine. At the same time, most of us complain in isolation. "The more money I bring in, the more bills there are to pay," I overheard a local car mechanic bemoan. As one, myself, who has for years now adjusted my own hourly rate to reflect the increases in my mechanic's, I listened with concerned interest. But I didn't dare ask him how much he does make, or how he spends it. I know better - or used to - than to break *that* cultural taboo. We learn not to reveal our incomes, as though withholding such information protects us. Instead, it widens the gap between us.

It is curious to me that all this secrecy is going on in the U.S., which extols its virtues as the richest society in the history of the planet. Debatable though that may be, it is amazing how we "buy into" the lie by not speaking our truth. I'm not really suggesting that we start divulging our financial status publicly, or to one another, even in familiar conversation. I *am* suggesting that we need to observe in ourselves why it is that we do not talk about money in a deep or revealing way.

Also, lately, in talking with people about money and its spiritual aspects, I discovered that more and more of us are turning toward "right livelihood." We're realizing that the government's statistics on full employment have not yet begun to reflect the *quality* of employment. We're still thinking that to *be employed* is enough. What a shift in humanity we'll see when that perspective broadens!

With all my recent (in the year 2000) conversations I feel as though I've made a breakthrough. Just *talking* about this deeply personal and highly-defended subject of money moves me toward a larger understanding of ourselves, our objectives and our means. And it helps create community.

The following was published with the article as an invitation for dialogue:

Please join the author Bonnie Hoag for a symposium sponsored by Dionondehowa Wildlife Sanctuary & School - "Right Livelihood and Community in a Capitalistic Culture" on Sunday, August 27, 10AM-3PM (note: year 2000). It is designed for everyone who feels they have followed their bliss, taken the leap and found themselves swimming? treading water? drowning? in a sea of uncertainty. This will be a brainstorming event which may use some of the following as springboards for thought and dialogue: "Community - cooperation and competition; feeling misled by your inner guide; the great humbling; finding and keeping clients; money - feast and

famine; cultural attitudes toward your work; speaking from the heart; when “being on the path” seems to take us over the edge.

Informed by this gathering of ideas we will then plan a subsequent symposium for the larger community, for people who are attracted to right livelihood and who haven't yet taken the leap but are cozying up to the edge of the cliff.