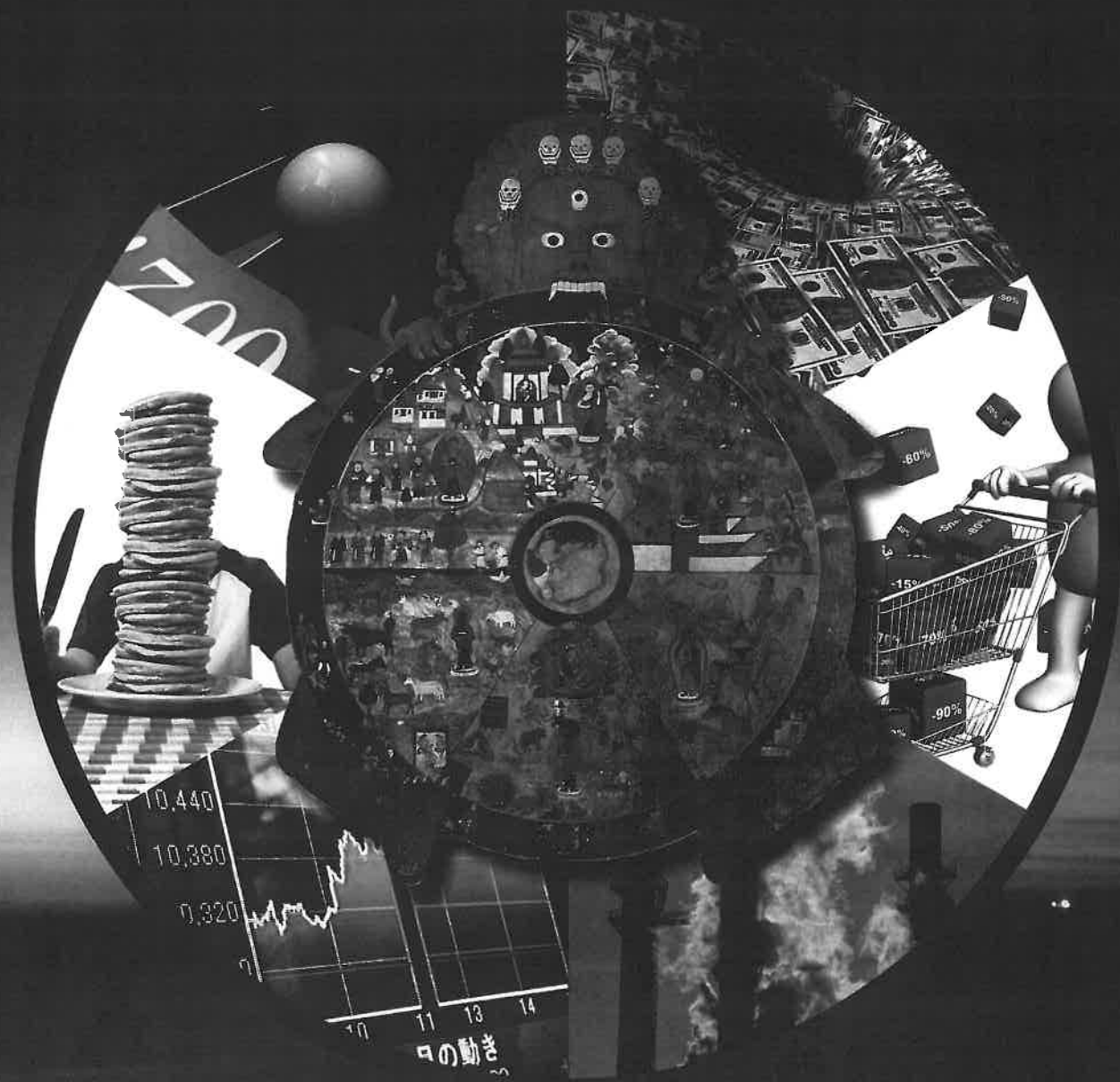


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Transforming Greed

We Do Not Need to Live Like Rats Fighting for Scraps

by Mark Hulsether

In a society premised on hypercompetition for success and radical insecurity for “failures,” large amounts of stress and suffering are hardwired into the system. It is obvious how this blights the lives of the most vulnerable—homeless military veterans, minimum-wage workers with sick children, people living in unsafe and polluted neighborhoods. But it also causes suffering for the middle class. There is an enormous amount of room for improvement in quality of life.

In their gracious invitation to contribute to this issue, the *Dharma World* editors summarize the premise: that our global economy “sustains itself by constantly fueling consumers’ desires and is based on an economic structure that approves of and even encourages greed, under the guise of the need for economic growth.” (It also uses the guise of enforcing austerity under the rule of implacable economic law.) In this context, “greed has become virtually normal in society as a whole.”

All of this strikes me as true and extremely important. Sadly, I do not claim any special expertise to address the question that emerges: How can we “find antidotes to the poison of greed?” But I will offer some reflections based on many years of studying American religion and society.

A few months ago, driving across the country, I became fed up with radio news reports about Republican politicians who were blocking basic social priorities such as education and health care. They even refused to pay the interest on the debt from wars they had enthusiastically started! And all for a primary goal

of reducing taxes on wealthy people. I wanted to respond, but how?

Of course, I realized that these politicians’ ostensible goal was “freedom” and reducing deficits. They presupposed a variant of trickle-down theory in which growth produced by unregulated capitalism supposedly benefits everyone

in the long run, no matter how much it skews wealth and undermines the social and ecological matrix on which it depends.

Nevertheless, it seemed unlikely that their future vision would prove true, and it is reasonably clear that it severely disadvantages a majority of people—perhaps not every single person in what the Occupy Movement calls the 99 percent, but close enough to make this shorthand serviceable. It also seemed clear that the priorities of these Republicans (and, to be fair, also of many Democrats negotiating with them)—priorities such as wars, prisons, and agricultural subsidies for senators’ home states—were neither being demonized as “government spending”



Occupy Wall Street protesters demonstrate in Foley Square in Lower Manhattan on September 16, 2012.

Photo: AFLO / REUTERS



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nor put on the chopping block. That designation was reserved for benefits important to ordinary people, such as education and health care, which were targeted for privatizing or downsizing to the maximum degree that these politicians could manage. In their vision, people in future generations would be worthy to have quality education only if they could afford private schools, to live without fear of bankruptcy only if they could afford health insurance and had no preexisting conditions, to live in safe neighborhoods only if they could afford a house in a gated community, and so on. They could achieve these things if they worked hard in a worthy career—and if they failed, it was their own fault.

Moreover, the strategy to pay for any remaining public investments was some combination of passing the debt to our children and shifting the burden to the most regressive attainable options, such as payroll and sales taxes, as well as building for-profit prisons, charging fees for government services, privatizing resources such as universities and parklands, and ending deductions for mortgage interest. Such policies would channel more money toward deserving investors to maximize growth.

Thus the ability to take pride in a common good, to imagine collective efforts to address social problems, or to notice a range of experiences that are not reducible to pursuing material advantage—even the ability to conceptualize “need” or “success” as something other than maximizing individual

profit—all disappeared into a logic of individuals’ acting out “human nature” and “economic law” by pursuing their self-interest.

In short: human nature is greed, and greed is good.

Trapped in my car listening to news reports in this vein, I wished that I had enough access to airtime, coupled with enough specialized expertise, to prove something I will state as a hypothesis: If the United States had spent half the resources on conservation and sustainable energy as it did on its wars of choice in Iraq and Afghanistan, the energy it could have saved or produced would have exceeded that of the access to oil it seized through so much money and blood. (Granted, these wars were not fought solely for oil supplies but also to control the access of other countries to Middle Eastern oil in a geopolitical chess game; see David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*.) I wanted to bump conservative demagogues off the air and discuss the benefits we could reap by shifting the emphasis on prisons as a (supposed) disincentive to crime and prioritizing incentives for education and jobs as alternatives. (See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*.) Of course, the term “crime” is a moving target—one riddled with just as many double standards as “government spending.” It looks more like structural white supremacy every day.

Alas, I had no such power and access. All I produced that day was a protest song that few people will likely ever hear,

called “Tax the Bankers and Bail Out the People.” And I fear that this serves all too well as a metaphor for this journal issue. *Dharma World* cannot compete head-to-head with Fox News any more than my song can compete with the conservative American radio commentator Rush Limbaugh and his sponsors.

Moreover, those resources that I do have as a university professor are constrained, first by the time demands of the job (it occupies virtually all of my weekends and deems essays like this one a distraction from real work) and, more important, by the type of person one must become to gain and hold this job in the first place. In my profession, among many others, competition is cut-throat, and this translates into pressure to become a workaholic looking out for number one. One can easily begin by flirting with such careerism as a means to higher ends but get lost along the way and end with a reshaped personality.

I mention these latter points not because I feel underprivileged compared with most people (nor entirely deformed morally) but as one example of a larger problem: in a society premised on hypercompetition for success and radical insecurity for “failures,” large amounts of stress and suffering are hardwired into the system. It is obvious how this blights the lives of the most vulnerable—homeless military veterans, minimum-wage workers with sick children, people living in unsafe and polluted neighborhoods. But it also causes suffering for the middle class. There is an enormous amount of room for

improvement in quality of life and, conversely, a profound poisoning of spirit in our actually existing lives because of a rats-fighting-for-scrap mentality that is part and parcel of finding good work.

Thus, despite many admonitions to “think positively”—and, of course, much spending on consumer goods—the United States is a notably cruel, heartless, and unhappy society. This is a by-product of a winner-takes-all system with a strong tendency to reward the most ruthless “dogs” and “rats,” while providing a weak social safety net. None of this denies that there is great beauty, energy, and creativity in our culture—and surely some of this is spurred by competition, which is part and parcel of the cruelty. Still, would we be less creative if we simply rewarded creative people rather than threatening “losers” with radical insecurity? Would we be less happy if we divided our aggregate workload so that everyone worked and consumed somewhat less but we had full employment and a strong safety net?

Part of our task is to deepen our understanding of such problems. (I especially recommend David Harvey, *Brief History of Neoliberalism*; Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bait and Switch: the (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream*; and David Loy, “Religion of the Market,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, no. 2 [1997]: 275–90.) But, once again, can we talk about solutions?

Novelist and essayist Marilynne Robinson offers a clue in her response to a Republican governor’s rationale for austerity. He presented this austerity as just and inevitable in light of a deficit based on “decades of indulgence.” But Robinson noted that we had “indulged in two long and costly wars” and embraced many associated homeland security commitments:

“In such matters, securing nuclear sites, for example, it is easy to weigh the cost of what is done against the cost of failing to do it. A sound economics would apply this test in all cases” (“Austerity

as Ideology,” in *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, 49).

In other words, she appeals to basic common sense, whether or not she has the ear of the governor. Looking out for basic needs should be as obvious as fixing one’s roof when it is leaking.

Robinson’s arguments have limited traction in places of power because short-term selfish thinking is hardwired into our system. The pressure of “eat or be eaten”—whether in investment decisions or in career paths—translates into a focus on short-term advantage above all else. Activist and artist Ricardo Levins Morales illustrates this point humorously:

Try convincing your cat to stop hunting birds. It would certainly be in her interest to leave enough birds to reproduce so that there will be birds in the future. You have identified a problem—the decimation of the bird population—which you assume your cat will have an interest in. The cat can immediately see the problem but defines it differently. . . . She must get you to go away so she can get back to killing birds. (“Float Like a Butterfly, Sting Like a Bee: A Political Ecology of Change,” Zspace page, July 9, 2010, accessed via the Portside listserv: <http://www.zcommunications.org/float-like-a-butterfly-sting-like-a-bee-by-ricardo-levins-morales>.)

Similarly, the process of setting socioeconomic priorities in pure capitalism is blind to “need” defined in terms except maximizing the wealth of investors. Within its worldview there can be no upper limit to “enough growth” and no lower limit to what something is “worth.” This is simply determined by what the market will bear.

Yet, as Robinson implies, people within this system do have nontrivial room to maneuver. Economist Julie Nelson argues persuasively that free

market economists and doctrinaire leftists, although they may agree on little else, are both prone to exaggerate how much the market is a perfect machine that inevitably maximizes profit and drives down price. Writing with PhD-level training that fully credentials her to debate head-to-head with the high priests of econometrics, she shows how managers can define *profit* in variable ways and find leeway to sell goods in many forms. She provides a sophisticated rationale for ethical business practices and progressive reforms—with a root image for the economy not as a soulless machine but, rather, as a beating heart (see her *Economics for Humans*). We can orient this heart toward ends other than amassing private wealth.

Levins Morales points to the many resources that corporations presuppose (such as roads and schools) and costs they generate without paying for them directly (such as pollution)—deemed “externalities” if they do not affect short-term profits. He says:

The term “regulation” . . . refers to attempts by civil society to force some of these costs onto the balance sheets of the corporations that generate them. The cost of environmental destruction and of keeping their workforce alive (labor costs) are burdens that corporations go to great lengths to avoid. This is the dirty little secret of capitalism: it’s based on bad math.

Clearly Levins Morales is writing from a standpoint that transcends a “cat’s-eye perspective” on the economy. He is broaching the question of how various stakeholders in our society other than self-interested investors can gain leverage in a tug of war for the ears and arms of our governments, as we collectively set ground rules for the market. Some such stakeholders may try to articulate an overall common good, while others will presuppose greater conflict

and join social movements. Either way, corporate donors are not the only contestants in this tug of war, even if they are the wealthiest.

In Levins Morales's analysis, as in David Harvey's, we must attend to the power of big money as a "gravitational field" structuring the tides of society. We should not be distracted by day-to-day fluctuations of politics (the waves and eddies) or propaganda (the play of light on waves). However, he stresses that swimmers being swept out to sea should not "fight the riptide." They should swim out of the current, parallel to the shore, and let other waves carry them to shore.

According to Levins Morales, we fight a riptide if we emphasize rearguard actions to defend specific privileges against rollbacks in spending. He suggests directly "challeng[ing] the moral vision of the right" with an alternative popular vision, and he begins with "a partial list of core values that reflect the world [he is] fighting for, translated into language that a second grader can understand." Here are some excerpts:

- No one gets seconds until everyone has had firsts.
- Don't make a mess you can't clean up. Share.
- Don't take stuff that isn't yours.
- Everyone gets access to clean water, air, food and shelter.
- People should get to make decisions about their lives.
- No one is disposable.

Levins Morales notes that "if you asked people you know about running our society along the lines of these principles," most would either agree with you or "wish they could embrace [your position] but don't believe it is possible." This, he says, "is not a bad starting position in an ideological struggle." Of course, he expects bitter conflict with his "gravitational powers," but he has moved slightly out of their riptide and is riding on a different current.

People set priorities all the time, and they do so oriented by their moral sensibilities. True, some people face greater dog-eat-dog pressures than others—especially if they are encouraged in this by families, peers, teachers, employers, entertainers, and so on. But no one is simply a cog in a corporate machine, and nothing more. At many levels of everyday life, one can cultivate *or discourage* a mind-set that says "greed is good" and there is no alternative to it anyway. At each level one can maneuver within the system and debate about its ground rules.

This is a place where people attuned to the compassion of the Buddha or the teachings of Jesus (among other traditions with comparable wisdom) have significant roles to play. Although religions can be part of the problem, they can also countervail it. Hardwired into their traditions, as part of long-standing sensibilities, are teachings about justice, care for the weak, and attention to the common good—teachings that command nontrivial respect in the public sphere.

If religious groups wish to claim a leading place amid a wider constellation of efforts to reimagine our priorities, most of them need to earn this place with a better track record than they have compiled lately. Sadly, religious people are often more invested in individualism than are nonreligious people. Still, however easy it is for religious sensibilities to drown in a stream of consumerism, profound parts of these traditions remain alive and strong. They help to shape the common sense of even the most self-centered Christians and Buddhists, and at minimum they should create some cognitive dissonance for such people. Beyond doubt, it is possible to tap into these traditions as touchstones of vision and resources for change.

Common sense plus the moral legacies of our religious traditions add up to a combined weight that is not trivial. We may not be able to fight a riptide,



Photo: AFLO / REUTERS

In the Capitol Rotunda in Washington, DC, on July 28, 2011, religious leaders take part in a demonstration urging Congress to reach a budget agreement that would protect America's most vulnerable.

but if we can fund a war, then surely we can fund a school. If we can grasp the wisdom of fixing our roof (even if this lowers our short-term bank balance), we can consider the consequences of mass unemployment and poisoning our groundwater. Not only can we rise above the intelligence of Levins Morales's cat, it is possible to be as smart as his second graders in orienting the heart of our economy. If our senators can manage to evade the market's "inexorable" logic when they support government spending in the form of wars, prisons, and security guards at nuclear plants, perhaps we can become equally ingenious in evading this logic to improve our quality of life. We might even become as ingenious in evading "inexorable" market logic in order to improve our quality of life as our senators are when they risk increasing the dread disease of "government regulation" by funding wars, prisons, and security guards at nuclear plants.

It is time to push unapologetically for compassion and common sense in decisions about our economy. There is no reason to feel defensive about this and every reason to go on the offense against a mode of production that systematically reshapes our beautiful world as more, not less, poisoned by greed. □