

The Gift Economy by Paul Van Slambrouck

Want to fix the economy?

Next time you buy coffee, purchase a cup for the person behind you. Or as you grind your way through the morning commute, pick up the tollbooth charge for the driver behind you, draped over his steering wheel and ranting at the long delay.

You've heard that famous Gandhian quote about being the change, well these are good measures to start with, packing more punch than you might imagine.

This approach to life starts with the following premise: What exactly did I (or you) do to deserve to be alive? If you can process that question and come out thinking it was a gift that you can't ever pay back, then beginning a life of greater giving is the only logical and remotely reciprocal way to go. If the most valuable thing you have isn't anything you earned, why be stingy with all the lesser stuff. You can start that practice of greater generosity with greater gratitude. And where better to start than with your mother, but don't stop there. Family, friends and the final frontier, strangers, are all worthy subjects.

Let's review what ails us. Our financial system nearly collapsed a few years ago. We propped it back up with what was left of our communal resources, and a little scotch tape here and there to correct the systems shortcomings. And now we find ourselves with a recovery so anemic only the wealthy can feel it. There has to be a better way.

Barter is a good way to survive a lousy economy. I can fix toilets; you can clean carburetors. Care to dance?

Learning to function in something like a "gift economy" is far more subversive, though, and worth thinking about.

A couple of years ago, in the teeth of the near economic collapse, the Steamin' Bean in Blue Springs, Missouri got caught up in the gift economy. A woman picking up coffee through the drive-through window decided to buy another cup, anonymously, for the person in the car behind her. The chain went on for close to 1,000 customers. That happened because of the viral affect of generosity.

As Steamin' Bean owner Garin Bledsoe explained in a UPI.com report on July 15, 2009: "It's hard times, but people are wanting to be part of something, knowing their 5 cents, their dollar, goes to a greater good."

The literature about the gift economy is rich. Remember those anthropology classes about the potlatch? Primitive societies far and wide used "gifts" as a means of creating cohesion and connection, all the better to survive the hardships of living off the land and the threat of other less-than-friendly tribes. This practice, in various forms, was quite widespread and predates out modern invention of currency. As history goes, this era of capital, the stuff we carry in our wallets and pocket books, is a blindingly new invention. How's it working out for you? Bet you're like the vast majority of the world. No matter how much you have, there's never enough.

Here's something to think about. Were these pre-modern habits of "gifting" purely survival techniques? Modern man may be less inclined to this sort of basic gifting, sharing and reciprocity. But we're good at studying things and the research keeps coming in that giving feels good. Really good.

What exactly happens when you buy that cup of coffee for the person behind you?

You get some good stuff happening in your body. In the brain actually, according to a number of recent medical studies that have identified a neural kick from being generous. Dacher Keltner, author of *Born to Be Good*, summarizes his own work as well as other recent research in this field in this article in *Greater Good* magazine.

But really, do we need science to tell us this? Raise your hand if the last time you did something nice for someone -- something not out of habit, but a truly spontaneous act of generosity with no expected payoff -- you felt better than good. You actually felt sort of changed, like some kind of shift from a scarcity mentality to a more abundant sense of yourself and life. Okay, I'm projecting here. But you get the point.

I've been researching activities that might fall under a broad heading of the "gift economy." This is in service to an eventual book about CharityFocus.org, a non-profit that has over the past decade served as a kind of incubator of gift economy projects.

One of the basic truths about activities as seemingly trivial as buying coffee for the person behind you or opening doors for others is that they are not trivial at all. If you buy the proposition that changing the world for the better starts with yourself, these small acts of generosity, when done with full intention do something quite powerful. They switch your world from a "me" orientation to a "we" orientation. That enlarged and connected sense of self can truly alter everything, from the way you think to the way you act.

The first time I encountered this approach was in writing a small article about CharityFocus.org for *The Christian Science Monitor*, when I was that newspaper's San Francisco bureau chief. And I remember as clear as a ringing bell, the dawning recognition that generosity was not about fixing some external problem. It was about me. About creating an internal shift, about establishing a different base of thinking.

Lewis Hyde wrote a book called *The Gift* in 1983. It is both brilliant and utterly resistant to summarizing. But it delves into questions about the worth of creative arts, and the somewhat existential question of how artists can possibly reconcile their "gift" to the commoditization tendencies of the market economy. The book is really a musing about notions of value, reciprocity, and the links and disconnects between the modern economic landscape and the "gift economies" of older cultures. It is mentioned here to suggest that the notion of a gift economy is not a leftist alternative to capitalism. The fact is that we are probably all wired, both physiologically and socially, to seek cooperation and collaboration despite an educational system and social context that works from cradle to grave to inculcate in us a zero-sum view of the world. Resources are finite, life is short, get what you can -- and if you have a little excess, perhaps write a check to your favorite charity.

In my book research, I read literally dozens of testimonials each and every day from people who have discovered in the smallest act of generosity a very large sense of joy. And a majority decides to "pay it forward" in some way. And so these acts never stand-alone. They reverberate inwardly and replicate outwardly.

So buy that cup of coffee for the person behind you. You'll feel great. You have science behind you. But you won't really need that affirmation. The thing you'll notice the most is what happens inside.

And make no mistake, the economy, as you have known it will never be the same.