

Sufficient Affluence / Sustainable Economy (Episode Twenty-One) Life as a Living/Learning Experience

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Colonel Nathan R. Jessep: "You want answers?"

Lieutenant Daniel Kaffee: "I think I'm entitled."

Col. Jessep: "You want answers?"

Lt. Kaffee: "I want the truth!"

Col. Jessep: "You can't handle the truth!"

-- Jack Nicholson and Tom Cruise in *A Few Good Men* (Columbia Pictures, 1992)

In last month's episode, we discussed that our greatest asset in Detroit and Southeast Michigan may be the people who form the cultural mosaic of different language-groups from many geographic regions of the world. The population of our area speaks at least 126 languages at home. Therefore, being a skilled attorney may require a broader education in this day and age. Attorneys must master the tools that enable them to manage and to protect their working capital and to relate to an increasingly diverse population, facts that also are true for the rest of us. By heeding historical events such as the Crash of 1929 and the subsequent Great Depression, members of the legal community may find themselves in a more secure position as we move forward into the future.

Meanwhile, more and more folks have come up to me (Dr. Sase), saying, "You're an economist. What will happen with the economy? Tell me the truth." In response, this month's episode seeks to uncover more of the truth about our current economy and to address some important issues regarding it.



For reasons in our culture surrounding the nature of truth, I gravitate to the interplay from *A Few Good Men* that is quoted above. However, given the current headlines and sound bites of the media, this is not for reasons of unabashed fear, as one might imagine. The answer becomes one of no simple solutions about the economy and the changes that we may see. At best, we deal with probabilities, not certainties. We recognize minimal possibilities for some and very large ones for others. For example, the chance of drawing an Ace of Spades from a deck equals less than 2% (one in fifty-two), while the probability of flipping a head on a coin is 50% (heads or tails). However, we do not always know which chances may apply to any given economic event.



"The Real Patriot is the Fellow Who Gets a Parking Ticket and Rejoices That the System Works"— Bill Vaughn, American Author and Columnist

Rather than searching for concise answers about events in our economy, we need to understand economic changes in the context of history along with all of the other natural and social forces that impact our lives. Our current state of affairs suggests that, as a culture, we mainly have abandoned the depth and breadth of traditional education in favor of the Myth of Security. We need multiple prerequisites, including the art of critical thinking, to comprehend the complexity of what we call the economy. However, this art, which has evolved through philosophical study, the humanities, the arts, and the pure sciences for millennia, seems to have fallen by the wayside. Currently, members of our society generally search for some simple codex that guarantees a safe and stable life for their families and themselves. However, this search becomes a trap with a small number of game-masters manipulating it for personal gain. This manipulation leaves behind "salary serfs" and "wage slaves" who have fallen dutifully in line for presumed security. The result is that these Americans are left scratching their heads and wondering what has happened.



No Teacher Left Behind

We witness the formation of a second generation that has been taught to pass standardized tests without thought or question. As an educator, I noticed this trend, which started in 2002 in elementary and high schools. For almost twenty years, we have experienced the outcome of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (modified somewhat by the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015) in our college classrooms. Now, we find many college graduates who cannot write well, cannot synthesize what they learn, cannot reflect a real understanding of the subject matter, or cannot think in other critical ways that are necessary for finding solutions to present and future problems. Many of our great universities have been complicit in this through their continued reliance on standardized tests and perfect grades as the criteria for admission. Resultantly, K-through-12 teachers succumb to the pressure of descending into the practice of "teaching to the standardized test" rather than engaging fully in the interactive process of education.

Pic 5

"Seek First to Understand and Then to be Understood"—Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (Free Press, 2004, Rev. Ed.)

As our educational system seems to have become an enterprise of job-training specialists who never refrained from questioning the system, college graduates often enter the workforce without the ability to recognize the vital relationship between power and morality. In his book *The Unconscious Civilization* (Free Press, 1995), Canadian political philosopher John Ralston Saul explains that civilizations produce moral traditions. However, we have educated a generation with little knowledge and understanding of our culture and have questionable abilities to maintain it. In contrast, the web of intrigue has drawn our brightest minds into a quagmire developed by a small number of corporate con-artists and "economists" who have rigged the financial system for the benefit of a few. Saul states, "The bankruptcy of our economic and political systems can be traced directly to the assault against the humanities." Rather than drawing solutions for world problems through mediation, many in our best educational institutions have stepped aside, allowing darker economic and political forces to fuel crimes against humanity. These high crimes and misdemeanors include unlawful war practices and indifference to starvation, disease, genocide, and other abominations.

When it comes to studying and explaining our economy, we can measure it superficially with mathematical tools from the social sciences. However, we cannot understand this economy without a more profound knowledge of humanity. In his book *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle* (Nation Books, 2009), American author and journalist Chris Hedges points out that many economists "build elaborate theoretical models yet know little of John Law, have never closely examined the [Dutch] Tulip Crisis, and do not study the railroad bubbles or the deregulation that led to the Great Depression." Some forensic economists spit out sets of numbers mechanically without giving any serious thought to or reflection on the case. They never have known or have forgotten that the numbers that we crunch remain mere echoes of the complexity beneath the surface in the life of a client.

Here is a fundamental problem with contemporary society: We have ignored exploring ideas that have worked or not worked in the past. We find ourselves in a dilemma typified by the axiom, "Not invented here and now." However, if we take the time to examine the past closely, we often find lessons taught by history that relate to and offer solutions for our current problems. These lessons reflect the events by which the Athenian democracy rose out of egalitarian reforms, which included the erasure of all of the debts that bankrupted many of the citizens of Athens. We find another example from the reign of the Roman Emperor Tiberius, in which widespread bankruptcies and the collapse of the real-estate market ended successfully through massive government spending and interventions that included interest-free loans to Romans.

In his First Inaugural Speech, Franklin Delano Roosevelt told a troubled nation that the "only thing we have to fear is fear itself." However, in recent years, many people with whom I have spoken have expressed fears that our monetary system will collapse. Granted, those who earn their living by lending and exchanging currency face significant personal risks. However, for most human beings, money exists merely as a convenience—and sometimes not even that.

Once again, history tells us that when monetary systems cease to exist, most people return to a barter economy—ten chickens for a goat or something along those lines. In respect to swapping, a scene from the comedy film *The Birdcage* (United Artists, 1996) provides an enjoyable example. Robin Williams explains the concept of bartering between people in Guatemala in the most eloquent of terms, noting, "Chicken is so important to them. It's their only real currency. A woman is said to be worth her weight in hens, and a man's wealth is measured by the size of his cock." Granted, the lack of a double

coincidence of wants of specific products in the practice of bartering becomes highly inconvenient. However, the increased human communication brought into bartering may more than offset the negative impacts.



SMOKIN' MONEY

For example, in the prison camps of World War II, soldiers on both sides quickly solved the problem of a moneyless closed society. They turned to what economists call “commodity money.” For these prisoners of war, cigarettes received from the Red Cross became the accepted medium of exchange and the standard and store of value for transactions among prisoners and between prisoners and guards. People always have found ways to cope.

"Mr. Ness, Everybody Knows Where the Booze Is. The Problem Isn't Finding It, the Problem Is Who Wants to Cross Capone."—Sean Connery in *The Untouchables* (Paramount Pictures, 1987)

In understanding the impact of our political economy, it remains crucial not to underestimate the intellectual capacity, the insight, and the understanding of the average man, woman, or child. Just because one does not possess a college degree or even a high-school diploma does not mean that s/he does not know what is coming down the pike. Furthermore, people have used and continue to use the coded messages of bards, poets, and other artists to remain discreet and to avoid retribution at the hand of powers greater than they are. Even nursery rhymes and children's songs originally carried deeper tones beneath the surface. If we recall our time in kindergarten, we may remember singing,

*Ring around the rosie /
A pocketful of posies /
Ashes, ashes /
We all fall down!*



PLAGUE PREACHING

This rhyme dates from the time of the London Plague in 1665. The symptoms of Bubonic Plague included a rosy-red ring-shaped rash. At the time, people believed that bad smells transmitted diseases. Therefore, the populace frequently carried pockets full of fresh herbs, or "posies." We believe that the

"ashes, ashes" line refers to the mass cremation of the bodies of those who died from the outbreak. For a sharper and more dangerous political undertone, consider

*Mary, Mary quite contrary /
How does your garden grow? /
With silver bells and cockle shells /
And pretty maids all in a row*

Purportedly, this rhyme refers to Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots (aka Bloody Mary; 1542-87). The garden refers to the growth of the number of cemeteries as she filled them with the bodies of her detractors. Silver bells and cockle shells were common names for instruments of torture, and "the Maid" was a device used for decapitation. For our final "children's rhyme," let us recall this popular one:

*Jack Sprat could eat no fat /
His wife could eat no lean /
And so betwixt the two of them /
They licked the platter clean*

In this English poem, historians identify Jack Sprat as King Charles I (1625-49) and his wife as Queen Henrietta Maria (1609-69). When the King declared war on Spain, Parliament refused to finance him—thus leaving him “lean.” After the angered King dissolved Parliament, his wife imposed an illegal war tax on their subjects--to get some “fat”!

The practice of ossification in literature for economic/political ends has gone beyond the "common throng." Notoriously, intellectuals, artists, writers, and musicians have relied upon allegories and tales of enchantment as a subterfuge to convey messages to those who can detect them. For additional examples, read the tales of the Brothers Grimm, listen to the early songs of Bob Dylan, and immerse yourself in *The Lord of the Rings* or other works by J.R.R. Tolkien. In our household, favorite examples include the "Alice" books by Lewis Carroll, the pen name of English ordained deacon, mathematician, and photographer Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Macmillan, 1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (Macmillan, 1871).



LEWIS CARROLL

The first volume of Carroll's surrealistic stories for children take the title character, a seven-year-old English girl, on a remarkable journey after she falls down a well. She emerges in what American scholar William Rose Benet calls "a strange country where everything happens with a fantastic illogicality" in his book *The Reader's Encyclopedia* (Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1965, 2nd ed.). Alice meets such strange and enigmatic figures as the Mad Hatter and the Cheshire Cat before realizing that she was in a dream. In the sequel, Alice climbs behind the mirror on the mantle in her home to find that

everything is backwards. After becoming the white pawn in an elaborate game of chess and then being crowned a queen, Alice again realizes that she has been dreaming.



Hercules Malloy (possibly a pseudonym, gender uncertain) puts forth some captivating theories about the origin and meaning of the "Alice" books in his/her *Oedipus in Disneyland: Queen Victoria's Reincarnation as Superman* (Paranoid Press, 1972). Though buried in bawdy pulp fiction, Malloy's work is an analysis of cryptic passages that read like remnants of a dissertation. Through symbolism, mathematical puzzles, and thinly disguised characters, Malloy asserts that Carroll, who taught students from the Royal household, provided the world with an intimate look at the coming of age of the future Queen Victoria. According to Malloy, the "Alice" books present thinly veiled accounts of the close relationships within the House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha as well as of the married life of Victoria and Prince Albert.

Malloy develops an unusual treatise that contains extensive detail reflecting a studied knowledge of Victoria's personage and of the political/economic intrigues among the royal families of Europe during that age. Here we present a partial cast of characters: The Duchess--Queen Victoria's mother, the Duchess of Kent; Tweedledum and Tweedledee—the brothers Ferdinand and Augustus of Saxe-Coburg-Kohary, who were among Victoria's favorite cousins; The Carpenter—Sir John Conroy, comptroller of the Duchess of Kent's household; The Walrus—King Leopold of Belgium, an uncle to Victoria; The White Knight—Victoria's husband, Prince Albert; and Humpty Dumpty—Louis Napoleon III, the Emperor of France.



VICTORIA & ALBERT

As bizarre and far-fetched as this hypothesis seems initially, it has fascinated some of us for decades. The more that we learn of Victorian history, the more rational that Malloy's premise seems. Malloy believes that Carroll based his work upon biographical (and possibly autobiographical) information about Victoria that he obtained covertly through a couple of degrees of separation.

In 1855, Dodgson, a professor of mathematics at Oxford, befriended the children of Henry George Liddell, the Master of Christ Church College at the school. A generally confirmed assumption is that his daughter Alice Pleasance Liddell inspired the classics *Alice in Wonderland* and its sequel. Malloy offers us some lesser-known information: Henry George Liddell was the Master of the residential college with which Edward, the Prince of Wales and the son of Victoria, affiliated in 1861. In keeping with the appropriate manners of the time, the prince would have developed a relationship with Henry Liddell. On the "Golden Afternoon" of 4 July 1862 (which really was overcast and wet), Carroll told a fantasy story to Alice Liddell and her two sisters while riding in a boat up the River Thames. This story later became the first "Alice" book. Now recognized as iconic examples of pure fantasy for children, the "Alice" stories also may reflect Carroll's cleverly subversive view of European royalty and the society of his time.



THE TEA PARTY

Takeaway

A well-educated person not only needs to have technical skills. S/he needs to have a comprehensive, wider-based knowledge of the arts, the humanities, and the social sciences as part of his/her ongoing lifelong learning. In order to understand the current state of our American economy, one needs to look at more than a handful of numbers and a few graphs. The economy remains a living system that reflects the full human experience. With this, the truth remains nothing more than a reflection of the human condition. To paraphrase Jack Nicholson's character from our opening quote, can we handle the truth? Currently, many cannot.

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