

We Urgently Need a “Higher” Standard of Living

We are a consumer society. The economy invariably does well, by conventional standards, when consumer confidence is high and people are spending at high levels.

Spending is also considered therapeutic in many ways. Remember the call after 9/11 to “go shopping” as an antidote to the distress and trauma in the aftermath of that day? More recently, resuming “normal” activities as antidote to the Covid blues is being signaled by return to restaurant dining, attendance at sporting and cultural venues, and vacation travel.

At the same time, awareness is growing that the lifestyle to which we are accustomed cannot be permanently sustained. Not only are the planet’s resources being rapidly depleted to meet the demands of a still growing population, the planet’s ecosystems are being radically altered and ravaged due to global climate change.

For my generation, at least, a serious disconnect exists between what we want for ourselves and what we are beginning to realize may be necessary to salvage a sustainable habitat for future generations.

For the current economy to prosper, people must consume lots of stuff. For the planet to remain habitable, people must stop consuming lots of stuff. It’s both that simple and that complicated – simple in concept, complicated in practice.

[Imagine if we all stopped driving cars! There goes the automobile industry, and much of the petroleum, highway construction, vacation travel, and insurance industries. We’d all be healthier, so the health care and pharmaceutical industries would also suffer. You get the idea: What would be good for the planet just doesn’t seem possible, maybe not even desirable.]

We’re in a fix. Yet we must begin to imagine a different, better world, or we will not know when and where to turn.

Two sources for such imagining: 1) A new book by anthropologist James Suzman, *Work: A Deep History, from the Stone Age to the Age of Robots*, argues that our ancestors did live differently. It’s a long and complex story, but it seems that many of our ancient forebears valued free time over money. They were not intent on accumulation of stuff. They “worked” – e.g., as hunter-gatherers – only to the extent necessary to provide for a good life. They had lots of what we would call free or leisure time. They took from the environment mainly what they needed and what the environment was able to replenish.

2) One of the teachings attributed to Jesus, the authenticity of which few scholars would dispute. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus puts it this way: “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!”

Jesus goes on to say that the lilies of the field also manage to be clothed with beauty without having to toil or spin. In short, not to worry, the world of God's creation is more than adequate to provide the food and clothing and all the rest that we need.

Can we begin to envision a way of life, and a corresponding economy, that does not rely upon the continual fueling of insatiable and unnecessary desires, a way of life in which there is more than enough to meet our material needs precisely because we have other and better things to do? We must stop the endless quest for accumulation of things we can't use, places we don't need to go, stuff we don't need to consume. We need an economy not geared to manufacture wants that are not needs.

To be sure, life is more than food, the body more than clothing. Our needs extend far beyond the material. But these other and better things we need are mostly things that money cannot buy.

Copyright 2022 by Byron C. Bangert