

A Chronicle of the Age of Consequences

Chapter 14 Right and Wrong

As summer approaches, my thoughts usually turn pastoral – to warm walks in the morning gloaming, lingering suppers on our patio under whispering pines, trips to green places where water leaps and falls with musical abandon. But not this year. Increasingly, my idyllic longings are being interrupted by a rising indignation, often triggered by an insistent, anguished question: *why has no one gone to jail?*

Alright, one person – Wall Street maven Bernie Madoff – has gone to jail, but that’s only because he turned himself in, more or less. Eventually, he pleaded guilty to directing the largest Ponzi scheme in history and will receive, for his sins, a life sentence in prison – which won’t be adequate retribution for the thousands of individuals, institutions, and charities he defrauded or decimated. One can only hope that he ‘volunteered’ for jail from a pang of conscious, though he showed few public signs of regret. In fact, Madoff’s motivations for his mammoth fraud are as much a source of speculation these days as the location of his vanished assets. But one incentive, at least, is clear: Madoff desired to get as filthy-stinking rich as possible.

Which leads back to my question: *where are the other jailbirds?* Nowhere, apparently. Hell, at this point it looks like there won’t even be any relevant *indictments*. I find this shocking and infuriating – and a sign of the times, unfortunately.

Let’s recap: the greatest financial meltdown since 1929 happened because a bunch of greedy, arrogant bastards throughout the American financial system took outrageous risks with other people’s money with the sole purpose of enriching themselves fantastically. When their house-of-cards collapsed, it caused incalculable financial, emotional, and physical pain to millions of ordinary Americans. And not just Americans – people across the globe felt the rattlesnake bite of Wall Street’s avarice. We should all be deeply angry. What these ‘captains of industry’ did was not only morally wrong but probably illegal as well. So, where are the search warrants, the Grand Juries, the indictments, the verdicts, *the jail time?*

Where are the congressional investigations, the gavel-to-gavel hearings, the presidentially appointed 9/11-style Commission, the coast-to-coast calls for reform, or, most significantly, the enacted legislation overhauling the entire stinking system?

As I said – nowhere.

Instead, we’ve had eight months of bailouts for the bastards that caused all this trouble in the first place. Billions and billions of taxpayer dollars have been shoveled directly into the pocketbooks of banks and other corporations deemed “too big to fail,” making the much vaunted ‘free market’ look exactly like a lie. Apparently, our economy is piloted not by ‘captains’ at all – but by crooks, liars, greedheads and their enablers in media, business schools, and think tanks. Additionally, an entire class of professionals – economists – has fallen into justly-deserved disrepute. “Too big to fail” has become not only the cynical slogan of the current crisis, it’s the

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motto of the entire hypocritical corporate financial system that passes for our economy in early 21st-century America.

If I sound angry – well, I am. Millions and millions of Americans have lost their jobs as a consequence of this gigantic swindle, not to mention their homes, their life savings, their retirement plans, and their faith in the American Dream. In terms of financial and emotional devastation, the events of last September are far worse than what happened on 9/11, in my opinion. So why aren't the perpetrators being called *economic terrorists*? Why aren't we pursuing them with the same determination that we brought to bear on Al-qaida or the Taliban? Instead of handing them checks drawn from my children's dwindling bank accounts, *why aren't the bastards in jail?*

I'm also upset at the lack of outrage among my fellow citizens. Other than some grumbling recently about obscene bonuses being paid to executives at these bailed-out firms, some editorializing by op-ed authors and reporters, and the usual angry buzzing in the blogosphere, Americans have watched passively while their jobs, homes, and financial stability were wiped out by Wall Street greed. I find this truly remarkable – and very worrisome. Have we become *that* passive as a people? Do we feel *that* disempowered? Or are we assuming that *someone else* will take action – the neighbor next door, the nonprofit down the street, the local district attorney, a national newspaper, or a member of the political leadership?

Maybe there are too many targets for Americans to focus their outrage on. Take your pick: (1) the Wall Street bastards themselves; (2) asleep-at-the-wheel (i.e., complicit) government regulators; (3) the huge community of academics, economists, and other 'pundits' who facilitated the debacle; (4) Congress, whose lack of oversight and leadership makes them culpable as well; (5) business reporters and other members of the Fourth Estate who failed to 'get the story' in time; or (6) fellow citizens who hoped to make a quick killing by participating in the great swindle themselves. It's a bewildering brew, I admit, but there are plenty of good reasons for a demonstration-in-the street by *somebody*.

But demonstrations didn't happen – and I find that very distressing.

I'm not the only one. In a recent issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine, Matt Taibbi speaks for many when he writes "People are pissed off about this financial crisis, and about this bailout, but they're not pissed off enough." He goes onto say "The reality is that the worldwide economic meltdown and the bailout that followed were together a kind of revolution, a coup d'etat. They cemented and formalized a political trend that has been snowballing for decades: the gradual takeover of the government by a small class of connected insiders, who used money to control elections, buy influence and systematically weaken financial regulations."

That's why, in other words, no one is going to jail, other than the pathetic Mr. Madoff. It's an insider's club – and insiders don't let fellow insiders get indicted.

But even more distressing is what's happening now: the powers-that-be, including president Barack Obama and all his men, are busy trying to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. Last

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fall, the atomic blast of 9/15 blew our Humpty Dumpty economy right off its wall, causing it to break into hundreds of pieces. Remember what people said at the time? One magazine declared it to be *“The Week That Changed America.”* A reporter in the *Wall Street Journal* wrote: *“This past week marks a decisive turn in the evolution of American capitalism.”* Another reporter, writing for *Time* magazine, said this: *“Coping in this new world will require adjustments by millions of Americans. We all will have to start living within our means – or preferably below them.”*

What a difference eight months make.

All the post-9/15 talk about new worlds, transitions, decisive moments, as well as “change you can believe in” (I’m sad to say), has largely evaporated, replaced now by happy talk among economists, pundits, and political leaders about “recovery” and the “bottoming out” of the recession – as if what happened were nothing worse than a bad case of the flu. The economy is dead! Long live the economy! Rather than seizing the crisis as an opportunity for genuine reform of our financial system, as many proposed way back last fall, our leaders are quietly and patiently trying to put Humpty Dumpty back together again.

And that makes me angry.

Why is this happening? For the record, I see four reasons: first, the lack of public outrage has emboldened the powers-that-be. Second, the voracious and fleeting media cycle moved on long ago, its attention span lasting not much longer than life of a house fly. Third, Congress and the Obama administration have moved on as well, to other crises, such as climate change legislation and medical health care reform. Financial reform, apparently, can wait. Fourth, and most importantly, the corporate titans who run our economy want Humpty Dumpty back on his wall – badly. To their minds, the events of last fall were, well, unfortunate. Free markets sometimes fail, you know. That’s why we have government – to print money and absorb the risk. Right?

Apparently so.

The Obama administration’s complicity in this Humpty Dumpty business is troubling, to say the least. Would the Bush administration done anything substantially different over the past eight months? I doubt it. After all, Obama has surrounded himself with Business-as-Usual types, which makes his call for regulatory reform...well, let’s just say no one seems to be holding their breath. Perhaps Obama believes what many Americans apparently believe – that there is no real alternative to our Humpty Dumpty economy. “Reform” to him, and many others, apparently means nothing more than buying a different brand of superglue in order to put Mr. Dumpty back together.

But what if Humpty can’t be put back together again, as the nursery rhyme instructs? And even if we could, *why would we want to?* Isn’t Business-as-Usual – endless growth on a finite planet – creating dire consequences economically, ecologically, and climatologically? Of course it is, as knowledgeable people have repeatedly cautioned, including a certain youthful president of the United States of America. Alright, then why are we supergluing our Humpty Dumpty economy –

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the source of much of our ills – back together? Hasn't its penchant for 'creative destruction' caused enough devastation already? So why are we doing it – so the greedheads can get back to work enriching themselves?

It's all *wrong, wrong, wrong*.

I use that word deliberately because I believe this crisis tells us a great deal about our ethical challenges at the start of the 21st century. Humpty got blasted off his wall last fall not because of lax government regulation, as many insist, but because our financial system is almost completely decoupled from the arrangement of morals and ethics that normally guide human behavior. It's *wrong* to cheat and to lie and to steal. It's *wrong* to cause pain and suffering to others. It's *wrong* to worship money. *Greed* is one the Seven Deadly Sins for a good reason. So is *Gluttony* (over-consumption) – which means Americans can't simply point fingers at Wall Street bad guys. We're culpable too. In fact, the average citizen needs to take a long, hard in the mirror and ask: *am I guilty as well?*

Of course we are.

Which brings me back to my anguished question, which I'll rephrase this way: *shouldn't we all go to jail for looting our children?* Because that's exactly what we are doing. Our deficit-spending ways are robbing their financial futures, our materialistic lifestyles are diminishing their ecological inheritance, our destructive economy is heating up their planet, and our greed is stealing their inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

As a parent, I'm anguished, angry, and ashamed.

But I'm not giving up without a fight. In fact, all of this business about ethics begs an important question in my mind: if we know what's wrong, then *what's right?* If our economy is morally adrift – encouraging greed and gluttony at unprecedented scales – what on earth would a *moral* economy look like?

For an idea, I turned to a new book titled *Right Relationship: Building a Whole Earth Economy*, authored by Peter Brown, Geoffrey Garver, and others. It takes its title from the Quaker term for a guiding ethic that encourages people to lead fulfilling lives as creative participants in what they call the 'commonwealth of life.' The Quakers call this ethic *bearing witness*, which is their term for living life in a way that reflects fundamental truths – truth, fairness, honesty, freedom, among others. This concept of 'right relationship' fueled their opposition to slavery in the 19th century, for example, and fires their support of good stewardship of earth's bounty today.

Unfortunately, what we have in the world today is a bunch of *wrong* relationships, say the authors. They include: climate change, overpopulation, loss of topsoil and fresh water, increasing rates of species extinction, deforestation, imperiled coral reefs, unstoppable invasive species, toxic chemicals that remain for eons in the environment, persistent human poverty and hunger, and an increasingly unstable world financial system and globalizing economy. They are all

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connected to one another economically and ethically – by the wrong way we value nature’s gifts and by the wrong way we treat one another.

“The global economy today is overwhelming the ability of the earth to maintain life’s abundance,” write the authors. “We are getting something terribly wrong. At this critical time in history, we need to reorient ourselves in how we relate to each other and to the earth’s wonders through the economy. We need a new mass movement that bears witness to a right way of living on our finite, life-giving planet.”

The goal of right relationship in the economy is to create harmony between scientific reality and enduring ethical traditions, they argue. The place to start is with science – what we know about the highly complex, interdependent, and changeable contexts and relationships that govern the planet. The next step is to add a huge helping of ethics, which includes creating an economy that enriches, not depletes, nature’s abundance – the bounty on which all real wealth depends.

All ethical traditions have at their heart two fundamental tenets: respect and reciprocity. The former is embodied in the Golden Rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. The latter involves sharing: I give so that I may get in return someday. These are right relationships, ancient and cross-cultural. Children learn them early – because they mesh easily with their natural inclinations for compassion, aid, joy, and a love of beauty. Children understand what ‘right relationships’ are intuitively. That’s why, according to the authors, it is no coincidence that it is exactly these qualities that our current economy tries to destroy as we grow up by encouraging materialism, selfishness, and wealth accumulation. We have a ‘taking’ economy, with little value for respect or reciprocity.

A moral economy, in contrast, takes no more than it needs and uses no more than it must. It emphasizes ‘giving’ – restoring, replenishing, rebuilding, renewing.

“Building a whole earth economy means,” write the authors, “moving from endless production and concentration of wealth to providing only as much wealth as is needed for dignified, secure living. It means moving from the burnout of unlimited growth to the resilience of continuously renewed abundance. A whole earth economy is keyed to the resources of local and regional ecosystems, and to the shared abundance of the earth’s ecosystems as a whole.”

To make their point, the authors slightly modify a quote from the American conservationist Aldo Leopold, who, in the 1940s, famously called for a ‘land ethic’ in our relationship with the natural world: “*A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, resilience, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.*”

By *integrity* the authors mean the ‘naturalness’ of an ecosystem, its complexity, diversity, and intactness. By *resilience* they mean its ability to rebound to a previous functional state after a shock or other form of disturbance (fire, drought, floods, etc.). If it cannot rebound, it will likely find a new equilibrium at a lower state of complexity. By *beauty* they mean the aesthetic appreciation of resilience and integrity – the beauty of nature’s abundance. Beauty based on right relationships, they argue, can be a springboard for changing our perception from one of exploiter

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to one of steward – that is, to one who restores, nourishes, and brings forth the flourishing of life’s commonwealth.

Respect, reciprocity, integrity, resilience, and beauty – these are the building blocks of a moral, or whole earth, economy whose baseline purpose is *to renew life*. The ultimate goal of this economy is a right relationship between humans and the planet’s commonwealth of life – and creates a happy ending to our own particular nursery rhyme.

“If science and ethics can be brought together in a mutually enhancing way to provide convincing guidance for ecologically sound behavior,” conclude the authors, “the human story may yet take a positive and more hopeful turn.”

Obviously, this is easier said than done. But that’s alright because the take-home point of this book is this: *we have to try*. Its authors give us a useful theoretical framework for thinking about a new economy (though I skipped over their call for global governance, which I think is as unsavory as it is impractical). If we keep in mind the goals of integrity, resilience and beauty in our daily lives, and seek right relationships in all that we do, then we can begin to step hopefully in a new direction. We *can* build a moral economy, based on scientific reality infused with strong ethics. *And we need to* – quickly.

This isn’t just wishful thinking. Across the nation, people have been ‘opting out’ of our immoral economy in droves for some time now. The numbers aren’t large, of course, and their impact is still negligible economically, but their vision is clear and their cause just. I see it as I travel, on ranches and farms creating right relationships on their land and with the customers they serve, in the myriad conservation efforts that aim to restore degraded ecosystems, in the diverse collaborative projects that bring together former antagonists, and in the joy and laughter and sense of accomplishment that is the fruit of all this work. It’s not theoretical – it exists and it’s growing, day by day, acre by acre.

“Opting out” was very much on my mind in 1997 when I jumped ship. At first, the ship I thought I was jumping was environmentalism’s arcane position on cattle ranching, but over time I came to see that it was the movement itself I was abandoning. When we first hit the water, it looked like a bad decision. That’s because the dingy into which I climbed, along with a rancher another activist, did not look particularly seaworthy, the ocean swells we confronted were menacing, and we had no idea where we were going.

But we painted the word “Quivira” on the side of our little dingy, in honor of a mythical land beyond rightdoing and wrongdoing, and we began to row. Shortly, we saw that we were not alone. Other people were rowing with us, not many at first, but all looking toward a hopeful horizon. As we rowed, we talked, and it became clear that many of the people in the sea with us had not simply abandoned the ship called the “grazing debate.” They had jumped other ships – the industrial food system, the way energy should be produced, how we treat animals, and so on.

What we were all opting out from, I see now, was one very big ship – the U.S.S. Juggernaut, steaming full speed ahead toward a rocky shore, full of nervous passengers, the door to the

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steering house firmly locked from inside. Alright, but where were *we* heading? It wasn't clear at first, but over time I saw the outline of a misty land ahead I've begun to call *Agraria* – a place where we strengthen the bond between people and land; teach each other how to live within limits; share what works on the back forty; and celebrate the arts of life. *Agraria* is not a dream – it exists. I've been there.

Are we rowing fast enough for all of us to get there in time? I don't know. What I do know is that our children deserve a healthy planet, a whole economy, and lives full of right relationships. Anything less is immoral.

After all, it's *their* future. And it's in our hands.

Meanwhile, I'll holster my indignation and return to my pastoral pursuits. There's not much to be gained by ruining a supper under the pines with nonstop Humpty Dumpty thoughts. Where I live, summer is too brief – gone in a flash of monsoon lightning, it seems.

Just like childhood.