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What Is Valuable?

Kelly Harer

Western Kentucky University, kkharer@coastal.edu

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What Is Valuable? Kelly Harer

To fully understand why I chose to enter this program, you'll need to understand how my past led me to where I am today. I grew up in a small town in rural Pennsylvania, raised by a single mother who worked very hard to provide for me. She did her best for me considering she had dropped out of college—her biggest regret. From a young age, I was made to understand the importance of education. I was to get a college degree so that I could achieve a stable, well-paying job I enjoyed that came with great benefits. I'd learn from my mother's mistakes; I would not be stuck in a dead end job with no means of escape.

Though I grew up knowing I wanted to go to college, I did not think much about a major (beyond my first dream of becoming an astronaut, which was shattered when I realized I'd be motion sick *all the time*). I had a strong passion for the environment; in third grade I created what my friends and I lovingly referred to as "EG" (short for "Environmental Geniuses"), a club where we sold selling lemonade, baked goods, or anything else we could think of to raise money to buy trees to plant around our town. My love of the environment stuck with me through the years, however when applying for colleges to pursue my undergraduate degree, sustainability programs hadn't yet become an option. Though I had been taught to pursue a career I enjoyed, I was also taught to pursue a career where I would be able to support myself—in other words, not sustainability.

Instead, I focused on the lucrative career of elementary education, where I thought I could at least "make a difference" even though it would not be environmental. During my junior year, I realized teaching was not my thing and panicked about my future, which is when I changed my major to business management. In my mind, this was the surest way to that nine to five job with stability, great pay, and benefits that my mother so desperately wanted for me.

Upon graduating, the Office of Admissions at my alma mater offered me a nine to five (well, eight-thirty to five) job with my own office, great benefits, and decent salary. For a year, I traveled throughout the country recruiting students for Coastal Carolina University (CCU), and my mother could not have been more proud of me. Though I found the job fun and rewarding, I knew something was missing.

I realized that though I had “made-it” according to my mother’s definition, my job wasn’t fulfilling me in the way that I needed it to. After a bit of soul searching, I realized I needed to go back to school to earn a degree in my passion: sustainability. As an admissions counselor, I am very familiar with how to find information about particular programs, and spent a great deal of time finding the right program for me. After much research and a phone conversation with Dr. Olmsted (and a look at some color-coded charts I had made) I concluded that WKU’s Social Responsibility and Sustainable Communities program was the best fit.

Upon entering the program, I immediately became overwhelmed. My first week of classes, Dr. Kerby had us introduce ourselves with short videos where we spoke about who we were and why we had entered the program. I was (and still am!) in awe of my fellow classmates; one student had just gotten back from Peru with another student, who had also recently traveled to a Slow Food conference in Italy. Another was working on the degree from a ship, where she was conducting research. It appeared everyone had valuable, rewarding experiences, whereas I (as I joked with my friends) sat at home binge-watching Netflix with my stable nine-to-five job. Though slightly intimidated, I knew I had made the right decision.

After these initial introduction videos to our classmates, I began to question the definition of value, though this is certainly not the last time I would reevaluate its definition. Value, looking back over this program, is an overarching theme; my first epiphany involving value

occurred during Dr. Olmsted's Utopias, Dystopias, and Intentional Communities class. During this class, we read Tom Wessels' *Myth of Progress*, which critically analyzes the idea of progress and sustainable development. Wessels claims that energy is what's of value in nature, labeling it "the bottom-line currency" (Wessels 85). He also notes that "unlike human currencies, it is rock solid: a kilocalorie of energy always remains the same fundamental unit" (Wessels 85). Wessels further explains that in nature, the more energy-efficient populations are favored while energy-wasteful populations are "select[ed] out" (Wessels 85). Competition, an important facet of capitalism—the economic system of most of the world—is thought of differently in nature, as Wessels explains:

Competition in nature is quite a bit different than it is in human endeavors. In the natural world species don't seek competition, and more important, no winners emerge from its struggles. Although an individual or a species may prevail from a competitive interaction, they lose energy during the competition—more energy than if the competitive interaction had never occurred, so even those who prevail can't be considered winners. (Wessels 85)

This is the opposite of everything I'd learned as an undergrad business major, and honestly completely different from anything I had thought of before. My business professors had championed capitalism, explaining the laws of supply and demand while making it clear that consumers were the ones who *really* drove the economy. After all, businesses simply cater to consumer's demands. They failed to explain that businesses oftentimes misled consumers through greenwashing and other means. They didn't talk about subsidies that made processed foods of little nutritional value less expensive than fresh, local foods. They certainly didn't explain how American's demands negatively impacted the rest of the world, such as our meat

obsession which unjustly uses valuable land—one hectare of land can produce enough fruits, vegetables, and cereals to feed thirty people, or enough meat, eggs, and milk to feed between five and ten people. Not once did they consider value anything but in terms of money—never once discussing the energy used to produce products to meet our overwhelming demands.

The idea that value can only be assigned in terms of money is the exact opposite of what I've learned throughout this program. In another of Dr. Kerby's classes, Gender Justice Sustainability, we read Vandana Shiva's *Earth Democracy*, where Shiva claims that the word value means worth, but has been redefined in terms of exchange and trade. In her words, "Unless something is tradable it has no economic value" (Shiva 131). She goes on to further state that "This assumption that something only has value if it can be exchanged for money has also rendered nature's economy worthless when, in fact, it is priceless" (Shiva 131). This book opened my eyes; as a business major who has always had a passion for sustainability, I began to come to terms with my own idea of value.

The driving force behind capitalism is competition, but instead of competing for market share and money, the best and the brightest of our species should be cooperating to save what is truly important—nature and all the life it supports—from what threatens to destroy it. One concrete example of this comes from, oddly enough, the energy industry. Our current energy industry is divided among numerous sources, from wind and solar to natural gas, coal, and oil (among many, many others). Each of these sources competes for market share. This competition wastes energy. It wastes time (another resource humankind cannot create). It wastes resources; and it even wastes money. Some segments of the industry, like solar and wind, place value on the environment while others place value on money. Within our capitalistic society, even those with the environment's best interest at heart—such as solar, wind, hydroelectric energies—still

compete for market share and money. If our species took a cue from the rest of nature, we could cooperate in order to create a solution to the outrageous energy demands of humankind that is destroying the planet we inhabit.

Another one of my epiphanies (there were many!) during this program occurred when I read *God's Last Offer: Negotiating for a Sustainable Future*, where Ed Ayres discusses four changes resulting from our extreme evaluation of money. These four changes, which he deems “the four spikes” include: the carbon gas spike, the extinction spike, the consumption spike, and the population spike. These spikes are interconnected; each puts human beings and the natural world on a collision course (Ayres 24). Our capitalistic valuation of money has encouraged each of these spikes; even worse, most of us consider our current unsustainable consumption normal. Ayres offers an example of the interconnectedness of these spikes:

We consume trees for lumber to build houses for the expanding human population and to make paper and packaging for our expanding volume of purchases.... But trees can't grow as fast as our demand is growing, and the world's forests as a whole are diminishing at a rate that the Worldwide Fund for Nature now calculates to be 1 percent a year. (Ayres 35)

Trees are responsible for converting Carbon Dioxide into Oxygen—fewer trees means more CO₂, a main factor of destructive climate change. On a large scale, such development and expansion of the human population adds to extinction; in fact, “a large majority of scientists believe that during the next thirty years, one of every five species alive today will become extinct” (Ayres 34). We must value these species more than money regardless of what our capitalist society claims.

While we all depend on nature for sustenance, wealthy, capitalist nations value money above all else. Much of the third developing world relies directly on nature—the nature that the U.S. and other wealthy nations are destroying—for provisions. For example, when heating our homes, those living in the wealthier nations may struggle to come up with the money to pay the heating bill, while those in developing countries may struggle to find enough firewood to burn, perhaps because a large corporation clear-cut nearby forests to grow soybeans for the first-world's consumption. Those in the United States and similar countries may not have enough money to buy food, while those living in economically poorer countries may not be able to grow food on soils that companies like Coca-Cola have polluted in order to supply capitalist countries with its products. Though the negative impacts may differ depending on where one lives, the practice of equating value to money is clearly a social justice and environmental issue.

Rosemary Radford Reuther also discusses value—in terms of energy—in her book *Gaia and God*, the second-to-last book I've read for this program (during Dr. Kerby's Gender, Justice, and Sustainability class). Reuther agrees with Wessels, noting:

Energy is needed for every aspect of human life: to produce food and consumer products, and for the transportation and packaging of these products, as well as for transporting humans themselves and for heating and cooling homes, offices, and work-places. (Reuther 96)

Reuther further explains the value of energy within the life cycle, which is dependent upon energy transfer from one stage to another. At the bottom of the food chain, plants take in and use about 1% of the sunlight that falls on them (Reuther 51). Animals who eat these plants can only convert approximately 10% of the energy stored in plants as food; and carnivores can only use about 10% of the energy stored in the bodies of other animals. Following this logic, “each stage

of the food chain must be roughly only one-tenth the size of the one on which it depends in order to create a sustainable relation” (Reuther 52).

Additionally, dead plants, animal bodies, and animal excrement decompose through bacteria, fungi, and insects where their energy is able to be redistributed back into the food chain, thus completing the life cycle (Reuther 53). Nature does not waste. Instead, what would be waste provides a source of energy to other organisms. In stark contrast, waste is abundant among human populations, as demonstrated by our overabundant landfills and oceans filled with plastic. While energy is redistributed back into the life cycle in nature, humans waste energy through unnecessary creation, transportation, treatment, and storage of products, all in the name of money.

The term value has many different meanings for a variety of people, and though much of the world reveres capitalism, the small country of Bhutan, values happiness above money. Gretchen Legler discusses this vision of happiness, noting that while most of the world measures its success in terms of strong economies through Gross National Product, Bhutan’s fourth king, Jigme Singye, insists that “Gross National Happiness (GNH) is more important than Gross National Product.” Gross National Happiness was born from the idea that “there must be a way to define well-being more broadly than in terms of dollar.” Legler describes the four pillars: “sustainable and equitable economic development, conservation of the environment, preservation and promotion of culture, and good governance.”

The Bhutanese understood that the rest of the world could not accept the concept of GNH if the happiness could not be measured, so the country created an “official measure of happiness.” Legler notes that this measure calculates life satisfaction in nine happiness domains: “psychological well-being, health, education, time use, cultural diversity and resilience,

community vitality, ecological diversity and resilience, living standards (which includes economic well-being), and good governance.” Though money (economic well-being) is a domain of happiness in Bhutan, it is only one of nine ways to measure happiness in the country. This is in stark contrast to our society where we equate the possession of large quantities of money with happiness. As a society we need to ask ourselves: what is more important, money or happiness? Which is more valuable?

Our species’ worship (value) of money has led to destruction. When making decisions, many of us—as individuals, as corporations, as whole populations—limit ourselves to financial costs, ignoring the real social and ecological costs (Shiva 173). As individuals, we buy cheap clothes without thinking of the mistreated workers who made them. As corporations, we pollute the environment because it costs less money than being environmentally responsible (and we can pass this discount on to our consumers). As a country, we choose to support and subsidize farming practices, such as mono-cropping and genetically modified foods. While these practices supposedly save money; they negatively impact food quality, farmers’ quality of life (both home and abroad), and the environment. We base these decisions on our extreme evaluation of money.

I came into this program truly believing that new green technologies needed to enter the global market. After reading Naomi Klein’s *This Changes Everything* during our Sustainability Symposium class, I became terrified at the thought of “green” technologies, such as the technological idea to spray sulfate aerosols into the stratosphere to “dim the sun” (Klein 258). I had been so into the “green business” side of things before starting this program, that in my statement of purpose to get into this program, I included the following quote by Maurice Strong, secretary general of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment: “After all, sustainability means running the global environment - Earth Inc. - like a corporation: with

depreciation, amortization and maintenance accounts. In other words, keeping the asset whole, rather than undermining your natural capital.”

The problem with this, as I now understand, is still placing a strong value on money—I hadn’t yet taken into consideration the fact that energy needed to be considered a factor when buying products, and believed consumers simply needed to be educated on the benefits of “buying green.” I hadn’t yet seen *Food Inc.* where families struggle with buying cheap fast-food burgers because they couldn’t afford to buy broccoli for their families—they had neither the money or time (energy) necessary to buy healthy products that required time and energy to create meals; even though these families knew they should be buying broccoli for the health of their families, they simply could not. I now understand these problems go far beyond educating consumers. Until our society understands the value of energy and moves away from a capitalistic society that values only money, the social injustices that occur with regard to money will not change.

My mother wants the best for me, which in her mind includes a steady, decent-paying job which I enjoy. It isn’t that she is materialistic; she simply does not want to see me struggle to put food on the table or heat my house in the winter like she had to do. Though I had the opportunity directly out of college to take a three-month job with the Green Corps, I chose not to out of fear of instability. Throughout my life, I’d valued stability, and to an extent money, without even realizing it. Now, with the completion of this degree, I value my energies above all else. My new outlook might not be what my mother considers ideal, but I know she will always be there to support me.

I am focusing my energies on pursuing an agenda that focuses on truly making a difference. I am looking into the Peace Corps, where I can bring my knowledge of sustainability

and social justice to places in desperate need of both. My mother has already spent days trying to talk me out of it—not because she isn't proud of me or doesn't think it is necessary—but because the Peace Corps is anything but stable and she doesn't want to ever see me in trouble (“stay away from the Ebola, Kelly”). I am also looking into other unconventional jobs: AmeriCorps, summer camp counseling, and part-time educational outreach jobs to name a few. I am focused more on the difference I can make instead of stability or money, and I finally feel like I am perusing what I am meant to be doing. It wasn't until I began thinking about this paper that I started to understand the importance of the definition of value throughout this program and my life. I am fortunate, at such a young age, to understand what true value is. I have WKU's Social Justice and Sustainable Communities program to thank for that.

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