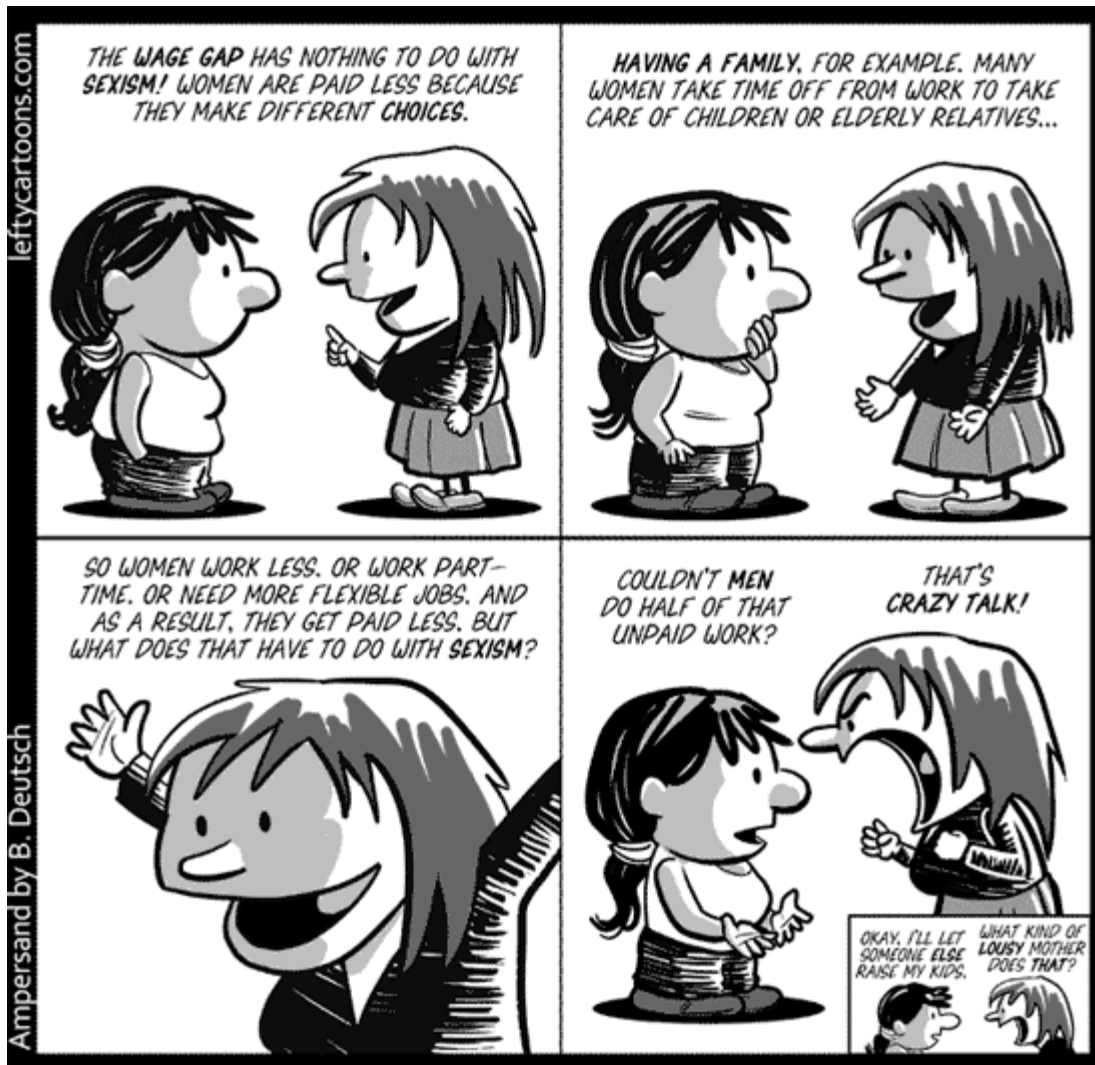


Money, Value, and Our Choices

With Miki Kashtan

In times past (and, in some parts of the world still or again), when inequality is the norm and foundation of how a society operates, and everyone knows that, the *expectation* that people will be valued "equally" doesn't even exist. Such an expectation does exist, however, in those societies that have accepted the rhetoric of the Enlightenment as a core set of norms, written into constitutions. Because we have established formal, political equality between people, however inadequate the mechanisms and safeguards of such equality are, they have become the prevailing norm and value, and have increased people's expectations. That change, I believe, is the source of what some of us experience as an ongoing painful reality: that formal equality in the political sphere has no bearing on people's access to resources nor on the extent to which their needs are valued.



This fundamental challenge takes on an impossibly larger meaning when I look at the global disparities. Here, again, is an example from my own life. We've been connected with a man in Bangladesh who is experienced in formatting books for CreateSpace, the platform that my book is being produced on. When I heard how much money he was asking for to do this job, my entire body shrank in anguish. I imagine it's about one tenth of what someone in the US would ask for it. The budget that BayNVC has for this project is entirely dependent on my own ability to generate revenue

along with donations from those who are moved to support the work (thank you to all of you who are making that choice and reading this now). It is very finite, and being able to reduce expenses is a huge benefit. It allows us to move more quickly into making the work available to people and groups without access to resources. So my anguish about this man's life is totally intertwined with relief about our own expenses, painfully so. Dave and I independently decided that we would give him more than he was asking for, probably double what he was asking for will be my guess. I am not even certain this choice is the one that attends to the most needs possible. I have no clear awareness of what this man's self-determined needs are, how this or that amount of money will affect him on all planes. I can't tell whether giving him extra money attends to needs more than finding a way to send money to people with expressed needs, in Bangladesh or elsewhere. How does this address the ongoing desperate poverty in that part of the world, or the continued privilege we have in relation to this man and the people in Bangladesh and elsewhere more generally? Again, I have no solutions.

I could give more examples, and I imagine this is enough to drive home the point another participant in that teleseminar made. She said that our current system "makes it invisible at whose cost things are. There's an elegant logic of fairness that obscures the disparity in needs and in access."

How Much Money Do I Ask For?

I have already written about this side of the difficulty in an earlier piece, where I focused on how I can make the work I am doing available to all while still maintaining my own livelihood and moving towards the free flow of generosity that I want to see replace the exchange economy within which we live. In the moment, the focus I have is far smaller in scope: how do I decide what amount to assign to a day or training? To a coaching call? To facilitating a meeting within an organization? That very same question of value arises from the other end when I do that. At present, the structure of BayNVC is such that trainers are responsible for generating the revenue necessary to sustain their livelihoods and to contribute to the expenses of running the organization. This means that my own personal capacity to generate revenue is the sole source of income for my own livelihood as well as the people who are supporting the work I am doing. Since I am involved in multiple non-income-generating projects for which people are paid to work, the responsibility is pretty intense at times. That is factoring in need, not just exchange value. That stands in contrast with the logic within which we live.

Within this reality, I continually make choices. There is, to begin with, the fundamental choice to tie my livelihood with this work. This is not the only model that exists, and I am aware of many that are unhappy with that choice and prefer that people offer training in Nonviolent Communication only in a community setting, free of money. Indeed, there are many fellow trainers I am aware of who do just that. This is a huge dilemma for me, especially because I so totally want this work to be available to anyone, anywhere, regardless of means.

So, why did I make the choice I made? Put simply, if I was going to offer this work free to all, I would need to find another source of livelihood, which means I would have substantially less energy and availability, and hence would have far less that I offer. This was the basis of my choice, and I am still not fully settled. I am continuing to look for ways to offer what I do in ways that make it easier for people to attend without money. I have some ideas that I have come up with which I plan to put into practice in the coming months.

Even within the fundamental link between my work and my livelihood, I make choices all the time. For example, the project I've been working on in Minnesota, supporting legislators and advocacy groups in finding collaborative solutions to child custody legislative debates, is not currently funded. The money that some people and groups donated quickly got absorbed by the numerous hours of work I've been putting into the project, and the last trip I took was completely pro-bono. I do other things without pay, too, such as supporting a local community, along with a steady stream of small requests for me to provide feedback, coaching, and other input into projects, communities, and relationships. Each time I am approached is a decision point. I don't always say "yes" to such requests. Somehow, intuitively, I

check inside to see how much willingness I have. I would so much rather be fully funded *independently* of what I choose to support, which takes me back to the vision of a different world. I choose those where there is absolute clarity that I am *happy* to do it without receiving money, because I so want the people or organizations in question to thrive, and I see so clearly how my support could be crucial for that. Both of these factors are significant for me: the need I am connecting with along with the faith in the project itself, and the fit with what I have to offer.

Even when I am asking for money, I often agree to receive far less than in other circumstances. The internal reasoning is quite similar. In most instances, I am not going by the rules of the market. Rather, I am investigating within myself the parameters of what I have to offer, to whom, and why I want to offer it. I also consider what other benefits I might receive from doing the work, such as learning about how to provide certain services. Lastly, I consider the resources that are available to the people or organizations that are asking for my support. In this moment, writing this, trying to put in words the internal process I go through give me a lot of compassion and understanding for why some people set up a fee structure. There is never, then, a need to go through any process. Although most of often it takes only seconds to get clear, sometimes the question of how much money to ask for in a particular context is full of agony and takes a long time and many conversations to settle. I really get the appeal of the simplicity and apparent elegance of the market solution.

Making Inner Peace

The supply and demand logic, and the underlying separation, scarcity, and therefore focus on narrow self-interest that are its foundation, basically say that we ask for the most that "the market can absorb" and pay "the least that we can get away with." My heart says that I want the principle of need satisfaction to replace that logic.

The tear in me is about reconciling my desire for a world based on need equity with the reality of supply and demand which are based on output equity (see last week's piece for more about these concepts). In moments, I am satisfied with my small, clearly inconsequential efforts to subvert that logic. For as long as I can remember, I have made access to training I do available to people regardless of their capacity to pay (with the exception of out-of-pocket expenses such as room and board for retreats), and BayNVC has done the same for the most part, too. That is a form of subverting the logic. Outside of public workshops, I engage fully with each situation to decide how much to ask for. I have created small scale experiments with changing the norms of giving money to people. I change the language, and use "pay" as rarely as possible, replacing it with "give" or "contribute."

Much remains to be done. Moving closer to the capacity to have dialogue about money and needs, so people can give and receive money in ways that are affected by connection, is an exercise we can all engage in more and more of the time. The more of us engage in experiments - similar to mine, or entirely different - that subvert the logic of exchange, enhance connection to needs, invite free gifting, and reclaim the commons - the more possibilities we create together. Engaging with our varying degrees of access to resources within the existing economy and considering how we want to make choices about resources, especially when we have access to power, is another path that has potential. Although deep and slow-moving, these changes are happening, all over. I hope as this mini-series unfolds to provide pointers for those eager to engage. For starters, any of you who participate in or know of gift economy experiments, please provide them in the comments to this blog.

My own experiments, on both ends of giving and receiving, often backfire. It's an occupational hazard of being outside of the norm. I take the risk with love, though my heart breaks, and often. When the experiments fail, it's not commonly my livelihood and that of others I have committed to that most weighs on me. I have come to have enough faith in the overall sustainability of what I am doing, even though I am deeply longing to find ways of holding less responsibility, not working as much of the time, having less stress.

The pain is, primarily, about the nature of the world we have created. About really and truly having no solutions that I as an individual see that truly can make a difference. Ultimately, this grief means accepting that for my experiments, it is the level of integrity and creativity, not the results "on the ground," that most count and serve as a measuring stick.