

Section 2 of Robin Wall Kimmerer's "The Service Berry: An Economy of Abundance", Emergence Magazine

Last paragraph of Section 1: *How we think ripples out to how we behave. If we view these berries, or that coal or forest, as an object, as property, it can be exploited as a commodity in a market economy. We know the consequences of that.*

Why then have we permitted the dominance of economic systems that commoditize everything? That create scarcity instead of abundance, that promote accumulation rather than sharing? We've surrendered our values to an economic system that actively harms what we love. I'm wondering how we fix that. And I'm not alone.

Because I'm a botanist, my fluency in the lexicon of berries may not easily extend to economics, so I wanted to revisit the conventional meaning of economics to compare it to my understanding of the gift economy of nature. What is economics for anyway? It turns out that answer depends a lot on who you ask. On their website, the American Economic Association says, "It's the study of scarcity, the study of how people use resources and respond to incentives." My son-in-law teaches high school economics, and the first principle his students learn is that economics is about decision-making in the face of scarcity. Anything and everything in a market is implicitly defined as scarce. With scarcity as the main principle, the mindset that follows is based on commodification of goods and services.

I'm way past high school, but I'm not sure I grasp that thinking, so I fill a bowl with fresh Serviceberries for my friend and colleague, Dr. Valerie Luzadis. She is an appreciator of earthly gifts and a professor and past president of the US Society for Ecological Economics. Ecological economics is a growing economic theory that expands the conventional definition by working to integrate Earth's natural systems and human values. But it has not been standard practice to include these foundational elements—they are usually left out of the equation. Valerie prefers the definition that “economics is how we organize ourselves to sustain life and enhance its quality. It's a way of considering how we provide for ourselves.”

The words ecology and economy come from the same root, the Greek *oikos*, meaning “home” or “household”: i.e., the systems of relationship, the goods and services that keep us alive. The system of market economies that we're given as a default is hardly the only model out there. Anthropologists have observed and shared multiple cultural frameworks, colored by very different worldviews on “how we provide for ourselves,” including gift economies.

As the berries plunk into my bucket, I'm thinking about what I'll do with them all. I'll drop some off for friends and neighbors, and I'll certainly fill the freezer for Juneberry muffins in February. This “problem” of managing decisions about abundance reminds me of a report that linguist Daniel Everett wrote as he was learning from a hunter-gatherer community in the Brazilian rainforest. A hunter had brought home a sizable kill, far too much to be eaten by his family. The researcher asked how he would store the excess. Smoking and drying technologies were

well known; storing was possible. The hunter was puzzled by the question—store the meat? Why would he do that? Instead, he sent out an invitation to a feast, and soon the neighboring families were gathered around his fire, until every last morsel was consumed. This seemed like maladaptive behavior to the anthropologist, who asked again: given the uncertainty of meat in the forest, why didn't he store the meat for himself, which is what the economic system of his home culture would predict.

“Store my meat? I store my meat in the belly of my brother,” replied the hunter.

I feel a great debt to this unnamed teacher for these words. There beats the heart of gift economies, an antecedent alternative to market economies, another way of “organizing ourselves to sustain life.” In a gift economy, wealth is understood as having enough to share, and the practice for dealing with abundance is to give it away. In fact, status is determined not by how much one accumulates, but by how much one gives away. The currency in a gift economy is relationship, which is expressed as gratitude, as interdependence and the ongoing cycles of reciprocity. A gift economy nurtures the community bonds which enhance mutual well-being; the economic unit is “we” rather than “I,” as all flourishing is mutual.

Anthropologists characterize gift economies as systems of exchange in which goods and services circulate without explicit expectations of direct compensation. Those who have give to those who don't, so that everyone in the system has what they need. It is not regulated from above, but

derives from a collective sense of equity and accountability in response to the gifts of the Earth.

In his book *Sacred Economics*, Charles Eisenstein states: “Gifts cement the mystical realization of participation in something greater than oneself which, yet, is not separate from oneself. The axioms of rational self-interest change because the self has expanded to include something of the other.” If the community is flourishing, then all within it will partake of the same abundance—or shortage—that nature provides.

The currency of exchange is gratitude and relationship rather than money. It includes a system of social and moral agreements for indirect reciprocity. So, the hunter who shared the feast with you could well anticipate that you would share from a full fishnet or offer your labor in repairing a boat.

The natural world itself is understood as a gift and not as private property, as such there are ethical constraints on the accumulation of abundance that is not yours. Well known examples of gift economies include potlatches or the Kula ring cycle, in which gifts circulate in the group, solidifying bonds of relationship and redistributing wealth.

The question of abundance highlights the striking difference between the market economies which have come to dominate the globe and the ancient gift economies which preceded them. There are many examples of functioning gift economies—most in small societies of close relations, where community well-being is recognized as the “unit” of success—where the interest of “we” exceeds that of “I.” In this time when the

economies have grown so large and impersonal that they extinguish rather than nurture community well-being, perhaps we should consider other ways to organize the exchange of goods and services which constitute an economy.

In a market economy, where the underlying principles are scarcity and maximizing return on investment, the meat is private property, accumulated for the well-being of the hunter or exchanged for currency. The greatest status and success comes from possession. Food security is assured by private accumulation.

In contrast, gift economies arise from the abundance of gifts from the Earth, which are owned by no one and therefore shared. Sharing engenders relationships of good will and bonds that ensure you will be invited to the feast when your neighbor is fortunate. Security is ensured by the nurturing of bonds of reciprocity. You can store meat in your own pantry or in the belly of your brother. Both have the result of keeping hunger at bay but with very different consequences for the people and for the land which provided that sustenance.

I haven't studied economics in decades, but as a plant ecologist, I've spent a lifetime asking the plants for their guidance on any number of issues; so I wondered what the Serviceberries had to say about the systems which create and distribute goods and services. What is their economic system? How do they respond to the issues of abundance and scarcity? Has their evolutionary process shaped them to be hoarders or sharers?

Section 3 starts here...such a great sentence! Let's ask the Saskatoons.