

Section 4 – Robin Wall Kimmerer’s “The Service Berry: An Economy of Abundance”, *Emergence Magazine*

At one point while writing this essay—as I was struggling to imagine how the ways of Serviceberries and ancient gift economies could help us imagine our way out of the mutually assured destruction of unbridled capitalism—I needed a break from the Windigo shadows that were creeping toward me. Thankfully, I was interrupted by a text from my neighbor, Paulie. As though she were reading my troubled mind from across the valley, Paulie invited me to come pick berries at her farm. Serviceberries. For free. The tingles of synchronicity propelled me from my desk to the orchard.

She planted this orchard with commodity in mind, part of her revenue stream as a small local farmer; an innovative crop destined for “pick your own” fees, which can be lucrative. But instead she has invited her neighbors to come and pick for free. Her labor and expenses are not free: tilling, irrigation, and marketing cost real money. The trees cost money, as does the gas when Ed mows between rows—and the Serviceberries would not be paying their own way.

She is losing the return on her investment by inviting us to come fill our buckets with this surfeit of sweetness. She is not obeying the rules of the capitalist market economy; she is not behaving in a way that will maximize her profit. How un-American.

In one fell swoop her berries rolled from the commodity column on a spreadsheet into the beribboned box called “gift.” The berries hadn’t changed a bit: they were still juicy and bursting with antioxidants. The farm hadn’t changed either. It’s a small, family operation, diversified with an array of crops that generate revenue all year—from early spring lambs to Christmas trees. The only thing that changed was whether the folks who came to pick berries were asked to put pieces of green paper into the coffee can inside the barn door.

I asked her why she did it, especially in these pandemic days, when every small business is struggling to make ends meet. “Well,” she said, “they’re so abundant. There’s more than enough to share, and people could use a little goodness in their lives right now.” People came to pick in the cool of the early evening, socially distanced at opposite ends of the rows, isolated yet somehow connected by the rhythm of fingers moving from bush to bucket—and mouth. “Everyone’s so sad now,” she said, “but in the berry patch all I hear are happy voices. It feels good to give that little bit of delight.”

But it’s also education, she says. Most people don’t know Juneberries yet, and giving them away is an invitation to try them. True, Juneberries have long been a staple food for traditional people who share habitat with *Amelanchier alnifolia*. Harvested in great quantities, they were used as the basis for pemmican, the original energy bar. Now used for making pies and jam and

cramming your mouth full, they are celebrated as a gift from the land but are little known as a product in the market economy.

Paulie has a reputation to uphold for being no-nonsense in her approach to life, so she qualifies her explanation: “It’s not really altruism,” she insists. “An investment in community always comes back to you in some way. Maybe people who come for Serviceberries will come back for Sunflowers and then for the Blueberries. Sure, it’s a gift but it’s also good marketing. The gift builds relationship, and that’s always a good thing. That’s what we really produce here—relationship, with each other and with the farm.” The currency of relationship can manifest itself as money down the road, because they do have to pay the bills. Free berries might translate to better pumpkin sales, because people will want to come back to a place they have a relationship with. “People feel like they got something more than they paid for,” she explained. “They learned about a new food, or watched the kids climb on hay bales.” Good feelings are the real value added. Even when it’s paid for as a commodity, the gift of relationship is still attached to it.

The ongoing reciprocity in gifting str stretches beyond the next customer, though, into a whole web of relations that are not transactional. They are banking goodwill, so-called social capital. “Being known as a citizen is always of value,” she says. If someone leaves a gate open and her sheep end up in my garden, there’s a cushion of goodwill in place so that the munched dahlias may be forgiven. “The way I see it,” she says, “always value people over things. There’s that old line that farmers like to spout, ‘Without farmers, you’d be naked, hungry, and sober.’ But it goes both ways: without good neighbors, you’d also be alone, and that’s worse.”

And that customer who comes to value the smell of ripe berries and the view of lambs on pasture and the memory of their kids climbing on hay bales—they just might vote for the farmland preservation bond in the next election. That’s a fine return on investment from a free bucket of berries.

I cherish the notion of the gift economy, that we might back away from the grinding market economy that reduces everything to a commodity and leaves most of us bereft of what we really want: relationship and purpose and beauty and meaning, which can never be commoditized. I want to be part of a system in which wealth means having enough to share, and where the gratification of meeting your family needs is not poisoned by destroying that possibility for someone else. I want to live in a society where the currency of exchange is gratitude and the infinitely renewable resource of kindness, which multiplies every time it is shared rather than depreciating with use.

You might rightly observe that we no longer live in small, insular societies, where generosity and mutual esteem structure our relations. But we could. It is within our power to create such webs of interdependence, quite outside the market economy. Intentional communities of mutual self-reliance and reciprocity are the wave of the future, and their currency is sharing. The move toward a local food economy is not just about freshness and food miles and carbon footprints and

soil organic matter. It is all of those things, but it's also about the deeply human desire for connection, to be in reciprocity with the gifts that are given you.

The real human needs that such arrangements address are exactly what we long for yet cannot ever purchase: being valued for your own unique gifts, earning the regard of your neighbors for the quality of your character, not the quantity of your possessions; what you give, not what you have.

I don't think market capitalism is going to disappear anytime soon; the faceless institutions that benefit from it are too entrenched. But I don't think it's pie-in-the-sky to imagine that we can create incentives to nurture a gift economy that runs right alongside the market economy, where the good that is served is community. After all, what we crave is not trickle-down, faceless profits, but reciprocal, face-to-face relationships, which are naturally abundant but made scarce by the anonymity of large-scale economics. We have the power to change that, to develop the local, reciprocal economies that serve community, rather than undermine it.

In *Sacred Economics*, Eisenstein reflects on the economy of ecosystems: "In nature, headlong growth and all-out competition are features of immature ecosystems, followed by complex interdependency, symbiosis, cooperation, and the cycling of resources. The next stage of human economy will parallel what we are beginning to understand about nature. It will call forth the gifts of each of us; it will emphasize cooperation over competition; it will encourage circulation over hoarding; and it will be cyclical, not linear. Money may not disappear anytime soon, but it will serve a diminished role even as it takes on more of the properties of the gift. The economy will shrink, and our lives will grow."

I see this in the example of my neighbors, both the farmers and the berries. Yes, they have to pay the bills and are part of the market economy, but with every commodity traded, they add something that cannot be commodified and which is therefore even more valuable. People come for a sense of connection to the land, a laugh with the farmer as a fellow human who cherishes the crisp fall air—not for the commodity of a pumpkin, which after all you could buy anywhere.

Continued fealty to economies based on competition for manufactured scarcity, rather than cooperation around natural abundance, is now causing us to face the danger of producing real scarcity, evident in growing shortages of food and clean water, breathable air, and fertile soil. Climate change is a product of this extractive economy and is forcing us to confront the inevitable outcome of our consumptive lifestyle, genuine scarcity for which the market has no remedy. Indigenous story traditions are full of these cautionary teachings. When the gift is dishonored, the outcome is always material as well as spiritual. Disrespect the water and the springs dry up. Waste the corn and the garden grows barren. Regenerative economies which cherish and reciprocate the gift are the only path forward. To replenish the possibility of mutual flourishing, for birds and berries and people, we need an economy that shares the gifts of the Earth, following the lead of our oldest teachers, the plants.