

Do We Want Material Possessions to Capture Our Joy?

by Ralph C. Martin

“He who binds himself to a joy
Does the winged life destroy...
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity’s sunrise”

William Blake

When my daughter was a toddler we constructed a unique snowman. Odd bulges became differentiating features, not seen on other snow creatures, and she giggled at her new buddy. I was distressed, the next morning, to realize that older children in the neighbourhood had smashed our creation. How could I explain this to a three year old who had put all her heart into this project? I chose my words carefully and with some gravity explained what had happened. Her refreshing reaction helped me gain perspective. “That’s OK. Now we can do it again and build another one.”

Over the Christmas holidays I read an article by George Monbiot in the Guardian newspaper, which summarized research reported in the journal, Motivation and Emotion. “As people become more materialistic, their wellbeing diminishes. As they become less materialistic, it rises.” He goes on to describe children in a church program gaining self esteem as they practiced more sharing and saving, rather than spending. Then he talks about the loneliness of a man with four Rolex watches, “one Rolex short of contentment,” contrasted with another man who had five.

How is it that we can be tempted to want more than we need or even more than we can use? I recall hearing about a person who shopped so much she didn’t even have time to open all the parcels when she got home.

Sustaining human civilization requires an assessment of what we want to sustain. Once at a farm meeting some speakers expressed exasperation about making a living from farming. “It partly depends what you mean by a living,” was the sole comment of an older farmer in the corner.

As I’ve noted in previous articles, sustaining ourselves, and Earth, is more than improving efficiencies. A reassessment of what we really need will go a long way to helping us determine a sustainability strategy. Knowing what is not needed, or what is too much, are parts

of the calculation. The status quo may not represent our real needs and, in fact, can distract us from discerning what they are.

Since the emergence of life on Earth, the journey of increasing complexity and interconnectivity has been stunning. We are blessed as humans to have developed science and technology to help us appreciate the wonder of our biosphere and how it functions.

To narrow our creative abilities to pursuing more material wealth is to shortchange our future. Even if this was a primary human requirement under past conditions, it is time to see where we are now and to pivot to the next challenge of survival.

Although our political and business underpinnings are tied to economic growth, usually to advance materialism, our 21st century challenges are about generating energy from renewable and non-polluting sources, reviving biodiversity, maintaining clean air and water and healthy soil, as well as other resources, and adapting to a changing climate, even as we mitigate human activities that exacerbate the build up of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.

A further challenge is to distribute income and resources fairly to sustain societal stability. The concept that people who work hard and take risks, deserve more, has limits. Impoverished people often work extremely hard and may risk (voluntarily or not) almost everything in proportion to their income and assets. The excuse is wearing thin that productive capacity must increase to address their needs. Reassigning productive capacity, in an equitable system, merits exploration.

To the extent we're unduly attached to the growth of the materialism we know, we are not only endangering our survival but missing the potential of a new quality of life in which we could thrive. Part of that potential is kissing the joy as it flies. Material possessions can serve us adequately. Do we also want to emotionally invest in them, such that they capture our joy?

My neighbour, Gilles, generates pleasure for sidewalk amblers when he uses ordinary items to build elaborate Halloween characters, in October, and delightful Christmas displays, in December, on his lawn. He refuses to let the persistent threat of theft and damage, dissuade him from offering quixotic art.

This year, one of three waving snowmen was toppled and, just as I did many years ago, I felt frustrated. Gilles dismissed my concern. His joy had been complete in their creation. Remarkably, several days later, it appeared that a passerby had applied first-aid to the fallen

snowman. “It wasn’t me,” said Gilles, smiling. The resurrection was less than flawless, but the buttressed snowman, with a crooked waving arm, embodied goodwill.

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