

POVERTY CONSCIOUSNESS



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I have been accused of “poverty consciousness” by hundreds, if not thousands, of people. The accusation always left me feeling uneasy, but I couldn’t clearly articulate why until several days ago.

The accusation is usually concerned with the low prices I charge for my workshops, events or products. I have always tried to keep my prices down because I have always been sympathetic to people of lesser means. In my first decade or so of putting on events, I would print in my flyers that “no one is turned away for lack of money”. I don’t put that in print anymore, but in practice still pretty much let people in for what they can afford.

Of course, I do have to make a living because I have little outside subsidy. I need to juggle my generosity and low price mentality along with paying the bills. Most people have to do this. But one of the factors here is how much of a living do I need to make? How much do I want to consume? What kind of lifestyle do I wish?

There is a difference between voluntary simplicity and involuntary poverty. I am voluntarily choosing to live a somewhat simple life (for the USA). I own no assets (that a bank would count) nor am I in debt. Some people say I have poverty consciousness because I don’t have a drive to build up assets or have much money. I would say that I have voluntary simplicity consciousness. The earth is dying because of too many people living a consumptive lifestyle and people are dying in grinding poverty because some people are hogging the plate. Currently it is estimated that 1/3 of the world’s people live on less than \$2 a day. Poverty in the world is not just limited to Africa and Asia, but is a growing world-wide phenomenon. The US has more hungry than ever before and there will be more cold people this winter of 2010 than ever before. But most of these people are not on the radar. However we all know people that are having a hard time with money right now. That is why I like to keep admission costs low to my workshops and events, relative to similar events. I am conscious of poverty. I am conscious that many of the people I would like to reach cannot afford my workshops.

There is a built-in discrimination against poor people in the US. This is the land of opportunity and if you haven’t gotten ahead and live in a nice house and have a large income, than it is your fault. You are a flawed human being. If you are smart and willing to work you can get ahead. If you are poor it is because you have got poverty consciousness. The American dream passes many people by, for many reasons. How can we find a productive place with dignity and respect for all people? An age-old question. But now we face it in 2010 with 6.8 billion people on the planet and with tattered and torn ecosystems to sustain us.

Last year I wrote an essay on how I am shifting from the old economic paradigm to a new economic paradigm.

For instance, I have not raised the prices on most of my retail herb products for 10 years. Look at the inflation during that time. I have deliberately not raised them because I perceived that much of humanity was having their living standards reduced. So I accepted a lower price to keep pace with them. I am willing to tighten my belt if the people around me are having to.

I am very grateful to Creator that I have health and am productive so I can contribute to society and be generous and give some things away. Sometimes I give my time away. Sometimes I could charge more, sometimes I could make more money, but since I do have poverty consciousness (consciousness of poverty and sympathy for those with less than I have) I am willing to make opportunities available to people.

Today I was talking to my friend and housemate, Peter James. He is one of the best community servers in our county. He was telling me how far he goes to fix people's computers in our two county areas, which is 150 miles by 75 miles. I asked if he charged mileage and Peter replied that he tries not to lose money in doing his services. I know he does a lot for free. When he answers his cell phone (which is frequently) his standard greeting is "This is Peter, how can I help you?" Peter does his work because he wishes to serve the community to the best of his ability. Peter does not have much money from month to month, but he doesn't have poverty consciousness, he has generosity consciousness. How much you can give becomes more important than how much you can get.

I am also working on being sympathetic to people who have richness consciousness and have made themselves part of the American Dream. There are good and bad people on both sides of the fence. We all want a decent world to live in for ourselves, our family and friends. I am not a saint and don't expect other people to be saints either. People do need to look out for themselves, but it is an old-time American custom to be neighborly and serve one's community. I can have the free will to be generous if I want to, but I don't expect that all my friends who organize events with me have to be equally generous. So my generosity is more tempered in group endeavors than in my personal exchanges. Perhaps this will help explain to them why I like to keep prices low.

These are a few of the thoughts that will pass through my head the next time someone tells me I have "poverty consciousness".

Michael Pilarski, November 22, 2010

So what sort of new economic paradigm am I voting for?

Read my 5/25/2010 article on my website: www.friendsofthetrees.net

BUILDING THE NEW ECONOMIES: SOME THOUGHTS AND RESOURCES.

The following is from an email to a person on a list serve thread.]

Dear JS,

Thank you for your comments on the “unraveling” thread. Perhaps you were replying in part to my comments about the need to build local economies.

I quite agree with you that jobs in a local economy will not support the average American lifestyle. What is often called a “living wage salary”. It is obvious that many Americans are being downsized in their lifestyle. We don’t have to like this, but it is a fact nonetheless. In a local economy less people will be getting a salary and more people will be self-employed. Less imported goods, a simpler lifestyle based more on local production. Some people are ready to embrace this already, but they are few. I expect it will be a forced adaptation. But in the end I do suspect that people will end up being happier. A shorter work week. More time with the family and friends. More time for the arts. More time in nature. Less stress. Less addiction. Simple pleasures, but with the time to enjoy them. I can envision a world of freedom-loving, clear-headed men and women without the pressures of advertising and manipulation of public opinion by big media.

I promote localization as a matter of principle, but don’t expect it to win any elections. But it may become a matter of necessity for more and more people. Certainly time will tell.

In the meantime I am keen to talk more about local economic systems ...

Michael P.