

Advocacy

What we can learn from the recession

By Anne McDonagh

This article is not about getting more skills training during this recession or going back to school when you get laid off. It's about the opportunity that this distressing time gives us to consider what kind of life we want to lead and what kind of society we want to build; in other words, what our values are.

Do we want to return to the 'greed is good' mantra of Wall Street and the multinational corporations, which got us into this mess? Do we want to continue to consume more than our fair share of the world's resources? Can we continue to tolerate the gap between the rich and the poor here and around the world? Should we put up with more and more food banks? More and more monster homes? Do we still revere those with wealth or fame regardless of how they got it? Isn't it obscene to be told to "shop til we drop" in order to stimulate the economy when over-consumption is one of the sicknesses of our society?

Maybe it is time to stop wasting our lives on goals that do not serve any purpose beyond getting "stuff" and finding distractions. William Wordsworth over two hundred years ago could have been writing about our lives today when he wrote:

**"The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!"**

(from The World Is Too Much with Us, 1807)

It may not seem the best time to consider the values we hold as a society since so many of us are understandably more concerned about our own economic survival than other people's; nevertheless, how we choose to come out of this recession will determine how we will live together in the future.

Will we tackle the systemic poverty that weakens us all? Will we work towards a sustainable economy that preserves the planet's resources and reduces our carbon footprint? Will we invest in our people instead of the stock market?

If we build a fairer society that not only provides opportunities for the most capable but also takes care of its most vulnerable, we will know that we are on the right track.

One of the most important investments a society can make is in the education of its people. Whenever international bodies rate the economic and social well-being of a country, the level of education of the population is one of the top indicators—not the number of millionaires.

In assessing the education of a population, these international organizations lump skills training and education together. However, they are not the same thing. We often hear that Ontario has a well-educated work force; it would be more accurate to say we have a highly skilled work force. Being highly skilled is, of course, something to be proud of as an individual and necessary for the economic success of our society. But being skilled does not mean well-educated. Unfortunately, we have not had enough well-educated people to keep our society heading in the right direction.

If more of us had had a thorough grounding in the humanities; for example, if we had studied logic (and followed its rules!), would we have considered it reasonable to assume that we could have more and more tax cuts and less and less government and yet still have safe food, safe water and a safe financial system? What lowering taxes and shrinking government gave us was poisoned water in Walkerton and an outbreak of listeria across the country from contaminated meat as well as the collapse of the economy.

Educated people would know from their study of history through the ages that checks and balances are necessary in order to make people in power accountable and thus behave in the best interests of those they are responsible to.

From philosophy, they would have learned the value of the “golden mean”, that is, moderation in all things. They would not have sanctioned the recent excesses of the financial market high rollers when all that mattered was making a lot of money—prudence and responsibility be damned. Unfortunately their “philosophy” comes from the greed engendered by the economic policies of the last thirty years and described by John Kenneth Galbraith, the Canadian-born economist in this way, “The modern conservative is engaged in one of

man's oldest exercises in moral philosophy; that is, the search for a superior moral justification for selfishness.”

If we want a better world and a society that takes care of all its citizens, we can use this recession to evaluate our society using our education in the wisdom of the humanities as our guide.

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