

**Homily—Money and Reciprocity**  
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Almost 20 years ago, we housed for a year a couple of teenagers whose mother had been deported. The circumstances were challenging, with a lot of emotional pain. We had to learn how to live together with the challenges and the pain, along with the unfamiliarity and the uncertainty. How long would this last, a situation both terrible with loss and weighty with love? It was complex, with adults trying to care for teens who had their own parents and longed for them. It was complicated, with teens who had always been the youngest ones in their family trying to be big sister and brother to our own younger ones. It was bewildering, with children navigating the meaning for their lives of having new family members who did not arrive as babies and would not stay for long. We had not trained as foster parents, and we were making it up as we went along.

One thing this situation wasn't was a financial burden. Two more people to feed, growing people no less, active and athletic. More heat and electric expended, with another full floor of the house pumping morning, noon, and night. Extra loads of laundry and lots more showers. Two more birthdays. Two more sets of Christmas gifts. Many more trips in the car to school and sporting events, seemingly always in opposite directions. And I never felt, never once felt, that we did not have enough money for all of this apparent "extra."

Our source of income was exactly the same that year as it had been the year before. Exactly the same as the year before when I had worked up a budget and fretted over how I would cover all the payments and put away the savings and manage the debt service. I had developed spreadsheets and projections and calculations to keep us on track. I had saved receipts and organized expenses into needs and wants, essentials and extras. I always felt like I was chasing money, trying to find enough, trying to find more, always feeling scarcity, never enough no matter how much. What was it that was so different the year the teenagers lived with us?

Before I get there, let's think some more about this idea, this fear of scarcity. Modern capitalistic economics operates by a notion of scarcity. Money is scarce, and so it must be hoarded. Time is scarce, and so all moments need to be grasped and tightly held. We are invited to be in competition with one another: "He who dies with the most toys wins," after all. Keeping up with the Jones. Even keeping very private about what you have or what you don't have locates us firmly in this money-as-scarce sense of economy.

Yet according to one metric, "With less than 5 percent of world population, the United States uses one-third of the world's paper, a quarter of the world's oil, 23 percent of the coal, 27 percent of the aluminum, and 19 percent of the copper. [ . . . ] Our per capita use of energy, metals, minerals, forest products, fish, grains, meat, and even fresh water dwarfs that of people living in the developing world." So very many two member families with two automobiles. So many of us live a stone's throw from our neighbors, and we all have our own lawn mowers, hedge trimmers, weed whackers, gardening tools, watering hoses. We live within a few miles of family or close friends, and we each have our own

crockpots, vacuum cleaners, blenders, and food processors. We possess stacks of napkins and plates and glasses. And when I say “we,” believe me, I am saying “I.” And of course, the industries-wide planned obsolescence of our appliances, laptop computers, and cell phone keeps us both hungry for the latest and needfully returning for more. The duplication and multiplication show us we all participate in this over-abundant accumulation, and we call it many names—independence, security, status, “making it,” the “American Way.” We call it happiness, except that too soon the feeling fades, and we buy more to fill the void of feeling within our overstuffed spaces and lives.

And our consumption and our sense of monetary scarcity feed all the piles of gold and caviar, all the Rolls Royces and fur coats, all the private security and private jets and helicopters and enclaves into which most of us likely will never tread. Those of us more modestly accumulating, and those of us too poor to be accumulating at all, we support with our labor and our over-consumption the lives of the very rich, those who own all the businesses pumping out all the products that we increasingly find we cannot do without.

About all of this consumption and scarcity, Robin Wall Kimmerer in her article “The Serviceberry: An Economy of Abundance,” she writes a caution for us: “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.” We accumulate manufactured things of metal and plastic—all created through extraction from the earth, all created at the expense of the earth, and much feeding an addiction to what can never truly nurture or nourish our minds, bodies, and spirits. Kimmerer goes on to say that “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.”

Earth is torn open for the metals creating automobile frames and microchips. Earth is scrapped and sucked at for the carbons of long dead life to create plastic sheeting and Potato Head toys. Earth is shaved and uprooted for toilet paper and wrapping paper and newspaper and the paper from which I read this morning. The air and the water are awash with pollutants, and we dig more holes to put the wastes in, or float those wastes out on ocean currents where no person has to look at them. We create landscapes of trash that support whole communities of the most impoverished and oppressed of our siblings. Our human actions have wrought a wasteland, and still we want more. Still, we live within a mindset that nothing is ever enough. What might be a remedy, for the mess and for the want?

Edgar Villanueva, an enrolled member of the Lumbee tribe in North Carolina writes about new ways of thinking about money, specifically within the frame of philanthropy and so-called charitable giving. In his book *Decolonizing Wealth: Indigenous Wisdom to Heal Divides and Restore Balance*, Villanueva agrees with Robin Wall Kimmerer that money conceived within a scarcity model is highly destructive, especially when money is about having power “over” rather than power “with.” To have power with, in other words, to see giving as sharing, sharing that empowers those who have been left out of the system. Villanueva offers this notion: the idea that money can be medicine. What does that mean? Villanueva says, “In Native traditions, [ . . . ], *medicine* is a way of achieving balance. An Indigenous medicine person

doesn't just heal illness—he or she can restore harmony or establish a state of being, like peacefulness. [. . .] Engaging with medicine is a part of daily life” (7). Money need not feel scarce if we see it not as a possession or as a form of exchange for commodities, especially when we stop using money to buy feelings—the feeling of doing good through charity, of helping the disadvantaged, those who cannot help themselves, those in need.

Robin Wall Kimmerer's description of the serviceberry offers medicine for us, a way to move from a scarcity mindset to an abundance mindset, a way to see cooperation and reciprocity in life, rather than brutal competition. She offers a way to see us all—all the humans and the earth and the beings—as in relationship rather than in competition. Nature is not a “dog eat dog” world. It is not one individual unleashed against another. That is a human mindset that we have learned. We can unlearn it. We can see that everything relies on everything else, that the web itself, the Earth and all upon and within her, is an organism of mutuality. When we thrive with each other rather than against each other, we all thrive. For Kimmerer, the serviceberry is the microcosm that tells the whole story. “Serviceberry,” she tells us, “is known as a calendar plant, so faithful is it to seasonal weather patterns. Its bloom is a sign that the ground has thawed and that the shad are running upstream—or at least it was back in the day, when rivers were clear and free enough to support their spawning.” The plant moves as nature and provides myriad goods and services to humans and to the plants, the animals, even the soil in which it grows.

Kimmerer tells us that “In Potawatomi,” her first native language, serviceberry “is called *Bozakmin*, which is a superlative: the best of the berries.” For her, “the most important part of the word *Bozakmin* is ‘min,’ the root for ‘berry.’” “Min,” berry, she teaches us, is also “the root word for ‘gift.’” Kimmerer invites us to see common berries as Earth's gifts to us and thus to change, through the words we use, our relationship to the berries, and more. She writes, “In naming the plants who shower us with goodness, we recognize that these are gifts from our plant relatives, manifestations of their generosity, care, and creativity. When we speak of these not as things or products or commodities, but as gifts, the whole relationship changes. I can't help but gaze at them, cupped like jewels in my hand, and breathe out my gratitude.”

Why is it so important to think in terms of “gifts” rather than things or commodities? For Kimmerer, it is because we live more deeply into gratitude. “Gratitude creates a sense of abundance, the knowing that you have what you need. In that climate of sufficiency, our hunger for more abates and we take only what we need, in respect for the generosity of the giver.” In a gift economy, our needs begin to condition our wants. Our hunger, our sense of scarcity fades when we live in gratitude for the gift of life and the gifts of living in relationship. A gift economy rather than a scarcity economy, as Kimmerer says, has “the remarkable property of multiplying with every exchange, their energy concentrating as they pass from hand to hand, a truly renewable resource.”

By living from the perspective of a gift economy, Kimmerer says, “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.”

