

From the Kitchen

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What are you worth? Do you answer this in terms of your monetary value? Does it make you contemplate the value of what you can do? Do you answer in terms of selling your body? The first question has many answers and all of these depend on assumptions you make, consciously or unconsciously.

Value is most commonly expressed in terms of money. Money has no intrinsic value – only the value we place on it and this is volatile. Much of the value assigned to money is dependent on how people feel and on their nerve (for instance, when investing). The value placed on money is also affected by pronouncements of governments and credit rating agencies.

The fluctuating value of money and the things it relates to can wreck economies and people's lives. The value of a corporation depends to a large extent on people's perceptions and can plummet without warning. Most people base their hopes of being able to live well in their retirement on the fickle values of corporations. A few years ago many people lost half their retirement nest eggs because of this volatility.

Money is designed to represent the value of the exchange of goods and services. When we do work for someone, we do so in the expectation that this will allow us to house, feed and clothe ourselves and our families. To quantify the value of the work and the value of the essentials of life, we replace the value with money. This allows individual choices in managing the exchange – within limits, we can choose where to live, what to eat and what clothes to wear.

There have been (and still are) societies and communities within which such choice was absent. People worked for the community and were fed, housed, clothed and educated by the community. There was little if any effective choice. There was no money involved and none needed. People were expected to contribute their labour to the extent of their ability and those who couldn't contribute were looked after (in a manner). That is one way of managing to do without a symbolic representation of our worth and the worth of goods. Can you imagine any others?

Many years ago I was a member of a community that set up an internal trading scheme that operated without money. People offered goods and services and the respective provision and consumption of these was represented by tokens in a computer system. The initial aim was to value every person's contribution as being the same number of tokens per hour. Thus, someone weeding a garden would receive the same exchange for two hours as someone giving a massage or repairing a car or drawing up a will. However, many people insisted that their time was more valuable than another's and the community split into two groups: the equal time-value group and the variable time-value group, with some cross-trading between

them. And then it was decided that the tokens were to have the same value as that of dollars in the 'outside' world. Most people found it difficult to think outside a money system.

Is the disparity between poor and rich people brought about by this system of replacing value with symbolic artefacts? In societies where real objects (such as shells or beads or grain) are used as a means of exchange, there are still rich and poor people and, as in our society, these often equate with the powerful and the powerless. Is it power that attracts money (or shells) or the money that creates power?

Going back to the initial question: how much are you worth? You could count your worth in terms of your accumulated wealth but, then, if you lost it all, would you be worthless? Do you value yourself on the basis of what you can contribute to others? If this is the case, your worth has nothing to do with what you can accumulate and your accumulated wealth (if any) becomes irrelevant. Some people purposefully accumulate huge fortunes in order to then use these to contribute to others. It is said that the industrialist Andrew Carnegie left a piece of paper in his desk drawer on which he had written, "I shall spend the first half of my life amassing a fortune and the second half of my life giving it away."