

What is Money?

Written in June 2012, the summer after the Occupy Movement began, by Stone Riley.

Money is a way to do arithmetic with human lives.

It is a kind of magical arithmetic that lets us try to represent human relationships and interactions as precise numbers, to try to record and weigh our doings properly and fairly. It is used by most practitioners to try to bring secure balanced justice into their lives, but it is used by some to lie (with tall tales, misleading metaphors, masquerade, etc.) and thereby to steal.

In all of human history for which we have discovered and deciphered news reports – the last few thousand years – people have been complaining that money doesn't work right.

People feel it ought to be a kind of stuff, solid real stuff that accurately records human rights, a proof of the honest rights of those who own it, but it's always fantasy pretend stuff instead. That is to say, the calculating and recording (of which money actually consists) often yield astonishing results opposite to the sense of justice that most people seek when engaging in the practice.

And of course the astonishing results often happen when those who are in charge of record keeping and calculating are also in command of violence, and thus are free to invent tricks that make the money stuff (and the rights it's said to rightly represent) belong to them. And they often command laws into existence to bless their theft, to try to magically instill a paralyzing sense of shameful guilt among their prey and invigorating righteousness among themselves.

And in fact, there is much to and fro in all of this. For the last few thousand years, wherever people use money much, arguments about how to do the sums properly have been endless. We are always changing money – the procedures, laws,

words, and even our basic ideas about it.

For example, new laws were created in the late 20th century for credit cards as a kind of money. In a larger example, we always try to have a clear idea of what “real” money is but our idea shifts.

We might agree gold or silver coins are the real money, or else pure tokens (stamped bits of clay or printed paper slips etc.) or maybe ledgers kept in holy temples. If we have no money we agree is real, people run tabs on each other and try to agree on arbitrators for disputes. And beyond money, we share for free with people we agree are family.

Circumstances change and social forces shift so these arrangements are a constant struggle.

Indeed, in extreme times it can shape up like a grand life-or-death sports event where people doing the various professions in a country get up opposing teams (like the Soldiers versus the Farmers versus the Clergy in medieval Europe) then load a huge wagon heaping full of money stuff and vie to shove it their direction on the national playing field.

Using that kind of analysis today you'd have to say the game is currently the Moneylenders plus their servant Politicians against the Workers with the money wagon shoved right down to a crumbling cliff edge that marks the farthest boundary of every city's Central Park. And when we read the daily news this mental picture is vivid and exciting.

But that sporting view of economics is useless when we're losing the match so badly. If we say “*It's Them versus Us in a game of Struggling For The Money*” we'll only be maneuvering on the same old field. Conventional thinking is a losing strategy.

Can we quit the fatal haggling? Somehow can we recognize that the wagon full of money stuff is just pretend – nothing but a metaphor for electrons in computers owned by the banks – and then can we walk off the field and find a better pitch?

Shall we consider using magic?

First let me describe the desperation of this moment.

1: There is no chance left of stopping global warming before it yields tremendous pain and dislocation; in fact, it is already doing so and very little action is being taken.

2: Our money system is now obsessed with a grotesque ideology in which all of Earth is treated as a gambling hall; all the excesses of addiction which appear in such a place are seen as proper human nature according to the current laws and philosophy of money.

3: Our country, the United States, is an empire whose ruling elites failed the tests they set for themselves in seeking world domination; they have turned toward home with a wish to conquer here; they have tried to stupefy and overawe us, tried to drive us to a slavery of debt, and – failing here too with the inevitable rise of resistance – they have largely gone insane.

4: The U. S. government – born as a republic and then evolving toward democracy, but now deeply corrupted in the money craze and panicked by its blunders in the imperial wars – has turned tyrannical; our government now imagines threats at every point on every map and often acts with extraordinary cruelty.

5: In short, there is nothing stable. Everything is changing and will for a long time. The current money system – which uses bank computers as its undoubtable holy scribes – will just dissolve the first time the worldwide web goes out of service for a week or so. Retail sales, pay checks, taxes and much else will be impossible. People will try unofficial local kinds of money but that involves serious difficulties of its own.

So, in this awful wreck how can we possibly help our children and their children and their children have decent lives?

Shall we consider using magic?

At the start of this essay I wrote “magic” as a psychological term to mean “magical thinking”. That term refers to the kind of reasoning where we mix real world facts with themes from myth, instinct, etc. and believe or act on the result.

First I said that money's most basic act – assigning numbers to your human doings then calculating with them, then feeling like the mathematical result is something real and true – is magical thinking. (It's based on the same mental process as buying a lottery ticket because its ticket number is your birthday.) Later on I said money laws have a magical function for us; laws can make us ashamed of being in debt and proud of being owed. I might well add that being in debt is an especially fearful magical thought.

Insights like this are useful; we will see things more clearly if we identify the human mental magic processes in money, as different from the facts of circumstances. For example:

Let's say some day you're on a committee to create some kind of unofficial money in your town. Okay? Might happen? Systems of this kind face real difficulties but let's say that you use insights about psychology to make the system fit the way human beings think. Then I would say that you are “using magic” very well.

But let's go further. The word “magic” is also used by artists nowadays, so let's consider that.

If you hear a creative artist say “magic” in a way as if it's professional technical terminology, they basically mean “beauty” but they mean beauty of a very useful sort.

When dancers, singers, musicians, actors, poets or comedians go before an audience, or a painter imagines her audience beside her, and if the work is going beautifully, something happens which they often think and speak about as if an enchanted circle has been cast.

You feel a powerful flowing empathy among everyone there and you feel as if the work is waking up in that empathic circle. The work will be shaped like it should be for those people and while it takes shape you gain new understanding of it. That's what artists call “magic” and it really works when art is done beautifully.

So here is the conclusion of this essay. Here are my suggestions for the future, for the benefit of our children and theirs and theirs.

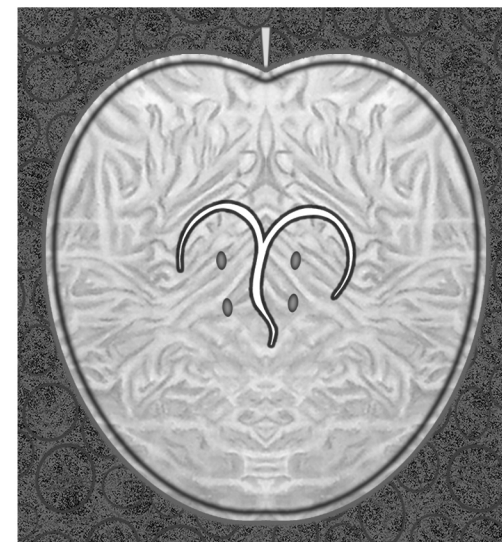
I suggest that you prepare yourself to work on that committee somewhere developing unofficial local money that will be so useful that people will continue using it long after the worldwide money system disappears. (It will help them eat and shelter from the weather and keep peace in their community, etc.) Or if you never get that job, some other opportunity to be useful with money skills will certainly arise.

First, there is a book I suggest you read. This book is by David Graeber, a nonviolent anarchist college professor who is a leading intellectual in the Occupy Movement. It is one of the major sources for this essay. Read it twice at least.

This book is titled “*Debt: The First 5,000 Years*” and it is full of excellent true stories. They are from the whole length of recorded history and from reports by anthropologists who studied what money is and how it's been used in societies across the world. These stories in this book will serve you as a treasury of real examples to help you build your work on an accurate understanding of human nature as relates to money.

And secondly, I suggest you dance. Learn it from your human body and by watching others. Let dance demonstrate to you how energy flows and thus how beauty works in creative art.

Finally, I suggest you see your work as art.



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Part of a pamphlet series titled
Views Of Camp:
The Occupy Movement
Through An Old Man's Eyes



Dedicated to
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
the great political genius
of my country in my time.