

The Economics of Grace: Art, Money, and Salvation

By Phil Porter

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PROLOGUE

This is how it is:

We're trout

the bait of financial security dangling just beyond our reach

then jerked away in fisherman's haste

Swim toward it and lunge

(you'd think we wanted to be caught and hauled into a boat with two lifejacketed fishermen wasting the early morning quiet)

To lie there and flop the rest of our lives

(which would be short enough in this situation

being so much out of our element)

Yes, we lunge for that bait

The easy-money guarantees

and the fear lurking just below our minimum balance

And we're caught and we flop, but not for long

Hooked by the gills, we're hauled toward some future

at the end of 30 test monofilament fishin' line

and as we go we can't help but notice former "school" friends

nearby fins flashing in the low surface sunlight

Flicking their tail fins they are free on a new course

Free

That is grace

That is freedom

Graceful and free

their corporate path like slicing the air with a saber.

We're tugged onward, barely fighting

Even a mighty convulsion of the muscles

that would previously have caused a change of direction

(even if we were swimming upstream)
has little effect on this short, straight path
Once we have been hoisted out of the water
(no safety nets here, just mesh to entrap us)
we flop for awhile. But not for long.
Surely we can do better than dream, as we gasp for air,
of a freedom once so naturally ours.

Financial security seems to be a big issue at the moment. With the current economic situation—a slow recovery from a major recession, a country and its people deep in debt, infrastructures collapsing, income inequality increasing, taxes being limited by law and initiative, services shrinking—is it any wonder that we experience stress around our personal economic situation? I once heard data quoted, that each of us, no matter how much money we make, feels that if we only made 10% more than what we are making now we would be in the clear. It sounds right to me. Most of the time I feel that I only need just a little bit more to be secure. Of course, even then I wouldn't be making quite as much as some of my friends who also claim to be just on the edge of financial security. What is the story here? Are we constantly pushing the edges of our budgets, constantly seeking higher incomes—a more profitable, easier life? Do our demands continually outstrip our means?

And what does it mean to lead the “rich life” in our society? What is really important to us? What gives us satisfaction? What makes us feel full, and fulfilled? What gives us meaning? Can we accomplish that on a tight budget?

Right now, there is almost no hope of clearing our vision of the shrouds of economic demand. We are obsessed with money, an obsession so deep that it cannot be changed, only moderated. Our chances of being saved grow increasingly slim, although a branch to grasp before we go tumbling over the falls may be within our reach.

Can we be saved?

What a question to ask as the economic stream rushes us toward this two hundred foot drop to a rocky pool below.

“Salvation” is one of those churchy words that may be hard to avoid even if you aren't churchy. Despite its history or cultural roots, it might be interesting to contemplate modern-day salvation. Think of it in simple terms. From what do we need to be saved or rescued? Who or what will provide the rescuing? What will make us “safe” (another word related in derivation to “salvation”)?

What if we believe that money will be our salvation?

We expect money to make us safe and deliver us from want and need. We turn to it for security. Our problems would be solved (or at least relieved) if we had more money. Visions of “heaven” have been supplanted by a peek into lifestyles rich and/or famous. Today our three favorite salvation scenarios are all financial (and unrealistic): we can either win the lottery, inherit a fortune from a rich relative that we didn't know we had, or we can sue big.

I admit it, these scenarios run through my head too. How about yours? Every time I pass a newspaper stand displaying a banner headline about a huge California Lottery jackpot that has been amassed, I practically have to slap myself to clear my mind of visions of winning the Big One.

And right next to these dreams of fortune, there is this other message: I don't really need much more money to be safe, do I? Maybe just 10% more. There is a trap here somewhere. I can smell it.

But truly I say to you, my sisters, brothers and siblings: money is not our salvation. Even as I write this I hear all the other voices in my head: "Maybe not, but it's sure nice to have it," or "oh yeah, but it sure is fun to take those checks to the bank," and "what about that video camera and computer equipment you want to buy?" That is why, only a few paragraphs ago, I used the word "hopeless" to describe our current situation. These voices are always with us. Our obsession with money is deep—very deep. We have attitudes that would be difficult, if not impossible to change. Perhaps all we can do at this point is to place some other truth next to it—to keep it from overwhelming us, to provide some balance.

Art and grace are two of these truths.

Art is a process of having and giving gifts.

Grace is an experience of having been given a gift.

The economics of grace—the economics of gift-giving—are substantially different from the economics of the marketplace. Here are some of its characteristics:

1. A gift can be many things. Money and objects can be gifts, but so can time, talent, support, presence, laughter, prayer, and many other things. Access to the gifts we have to give are limited more by our imagination than by our budget.
2. Gift-giving builds relationships, sometimes out of a sense of obligation, sometimes out of a sense of gratitude. It creates interrelationships and sometimes interdependence. By giving gifts, we often demonstrate our availability to each other. In contrast, transactions involving money preclude the need for relationships. When we trade money for goods and services, we can do so cleanly, without obligation (which can be advantageous at times—how obligated do you want to feel toward your dry cleaner?) The message behind a monetary transaction, however, is one of completeness—we need have no further contact in the future.
3. Even when a gift is given, it maintains some of the essence of the giver. The handpainted pitcher I was given for dancing in the ordination of a friend will always remind me of her. The connections are palpable, rooted in physicality. They are body connections. The worth of a gift is increased by these connections. On the other hand, we rarely know the source of objects we buy, and if we sell something, we feel strange about any connections we might feel toward these objects we no longer own.
4. The exchange of gifts often happens in a circular fashion, the focus on giver and receiver almost forgotten. The gift continues to be given around and around. For example, many times others have helped me move my belongings to a new home. In gratitude, I have helped others, though usually not the same people, with this task made so much easier by extra backs and hands and bodies.

5. To be an artist is a process of discovering, developing, and giving one's particular personal gift. This special ability, skill, character or trait may be one traditionally associated with the art world, but it may be anything that one is good at or something that is particularly satisfying to do: gardening, making cherry pie, being a loving parent, having a sense of humor, organizing committees, baking bread, being a leader, being a friend. It often takes some effort to discover one's gift and may even require the observations of an outsider. We may undervalue our gift precisely because it comes easily to us, or doesn't seem special or unique. But its worth is not to be judged against the worth we perceive in the gifts of others. Whatever it is, the task is to find it, practice it and give it. To do so is to be an artist—a category now open to us all.

6. Gifts begin with an innate ability that seems to have come to us unbidden, as hard as we may work to practice and improve it. We can take credit for the effort we invest, but that original kernel is something that we can hardly own. When we make whatever it is we make or do what we do, we realize that what we have to give is only partly our own, incomplete until it is shared. The magic is this: as the gift is given it grows stronger. The transaction increases the gift. Even in its giving, we retain the gift as well—it is regenerative and alive.

7. The giving of the gift also invites and encourages giving from others.

The conflict experienced by the artist (and here I mean all of us who give of our personal gifts) in a market society is no accident. The market value of art/work can never quite contain the connectedness embodied in it. It is difficult to place value on a gift; it is hard to claim ownership of something that grows out of a talent that is mysterious to us.

We often fail to notice that, as artists, we have hold of a richness that few have discovered they can grasp. A microwave oven, a new BMW, or the latest running shoes rarely put us in touch with mystery, joy, pain, desire, ambiguity, or truth, despite the claims of advertisers. (In fact, what advertisers often do is use art—the skillful design of the product or advertisement incorporating line, color, shape, balance, light, harmony, rhythm, space, relationship—to suggest that the experience of perceiving the art is embodied in the product. The essential sin of advertising is to subvert the spiritual nature of all art. Art, by virtue of its play with the basic elements of creation, is holy. Advertising undermines this basic nature by pairing the experience of art—that skillful design of product or advertisement—with a product that doesn't match that experience.)

As artists, we have the opportunity to discover and develop our gifts, a rich source of personal satisfaction and fulfillment. And in the giving of our gift, we are opened to a whole world of interrelationship and gift-receiving. To be an artist is to be a part of a gift economy and to participate in its richness. It puts us in contact with aspects of our lives that have been overshadowed by our financial obsessions. We realize that a life that is rich in relationship, in mystery, in joy, in sensuality, in connection, is rich indeed. We can become a part of a great circle of gift exchange. The gift originates with God but flows throughout creation in a great circle—a circle of grace.

“Grace” is both an artist's and a theologian's word. According to the dictionary, it can refer to the “elegance or beauty or form, manner, motion or action” and it can describe the “freely given

unmerited love of God.” Whether or not you believe in God, we all know this experience on a body level: our breath deepens, our muscles relax, our faces soften, our hearts expand, our energy is released. We feel full. We are fed. The experience of grace is the opposite of the physical experience of stress. The experience of grace is sensual. It is like sliding down a snowy hill on a sled, tasting a delicious meal or wandering through a glade of trees at dusk.

Grace is a gift. We may sense the almost cosmic source of grace that seems as if it can only come from some place like heaven. But we may also receive grace from the natural world and all the elements in it, including our fellow humans—our fellow artists. Grace may ultimately be a mystery, but so often the simplest, most elemental actions of our friends and family grant us the experience of grace. And if we receive grace from others—our flesh and blood companions—we may be agents of grace as well.

Grace bumps up against the economics of the marketplace in the same way that art does. Grace is important to us, but it may pale in relation to our ideas about money, objects, and ownership. In French, the word *cher* can mean “dear” as in *mon cher ami*, or it can mean “expensive” as in *trop cher*—too expensive. Grace is not expensive, in fact it is free, but it is dear. Its cost may be low, but it is of great worth.

Grace is actually sexier, or at least more sensual, than money. The sensuality we associate with money actually has to do with its ability to buy us objects or experiences with sensual connotations. The sensuality of an object or experience is a function of its artfulness. Things of beauty, things made out of luxurious materials, can elicit in us the experience of grace/fullness. But that experience is not necessarily dependant on ownership. And we often confuse (thanks again to the wonders of advertising) the physical experience of grace that comes from seeing a thing of beauty with the need to own it. I can watch with wonder Michael Jordan floating through the air toward the basketball hoop. I can feel inside me that kinesthetic sense of flying. The image is one of grace in the fullest sense. But I am not confused. Buying those shoes isn’t going to recreate that sense of grace. If I want to experience that sense of grace again, I should probably just find more time to watch NBA basketball on television, or better yet videotape the commercials (which are beautifully lit, carefully photographed, artfully edited) and replay them. The grace is the thing and access to it may be easier than we think.

We can own objects that are grace/full, but ownership ultimately limits grace/fullness. Grace is part of the gift economy. Grace must be received and then given out, to complete the circularity that leads to its increase. To own it is to stop that process—and its gift withers and dies. (And that is why there must always be a new sexy product to buy: the last purchase we made seems to have lost its luster and appeal in our attempt to own it.)

Perhaps we cannot help but be worried about money, but we can also be awakened to a richness that we may have more access to than we realize. As artists (as we understand it in its broadest sense) we give and receive gifts, we receive and dispense grace.

If our financial needs continue to outstrip our means, we may never find either safety or salvation. And once we find fiscal safety, we may realize that our lives lack other riches. But we can

also free ourselves from our obsessions about money, at least partly, by understanding other sources of richness, sources over which we have much more control. Time, energy, attention; hands, bodies, hearts—these are all gifts we have to give, and they are the gifts we may receive. In that can be our safety and our salvation.

We may not be able to supplant market economies, but we can place the economics of grace right next to it for balance. Here are some ideas about how it can be done:

1. We must realize that we were worried about money today, and yesterday, and most of the days before, and we can be fairly sure that we will be worrying about money tomorrow and the days after. To imagine that we are on an ever-upward path toward better financial times is magical thinking that has been so inculcated in us as to seem realistic. Things will get better and things will get worse. Financial security is not necessarily right around the corner.

2. Begin to notice the physical experience of grace. These words may describe the experience: openness, calm, presence, breath, aliveness, joy, release, ease, relaxation, contentment, satisfaction, pleasure. There are surely many others that most clearly describe the experience for you.

3. Notice your associations with that experience—the people, places, things, and activities that seem to elicit it. Invest more time and energy in those people, places, things, and activities.

4. Begin to separate the experience of grace from all the other messages that may be wrapped around it, especially promises of grace/fullness that are tied to the ownership of certain objects or experiences.

5. Notice what you have to give. Whatever it is, you will feel grace/full when you give it. This is your art. Practice it—doing it better and fuller each time.

6. Grace/fullness engenders giving. Giving happens naturally out of our experience of grace. But notice, too, the grace in the giving, how the gift increases in you rather than decreases.

7. Notice that money is only one thing we have to offer. There are other things that we may have much more access to: time, energy, attention, concern, labor, play, laughter. These are all gifts to give and receive.

8. There is effort in giving and receiving grace—oftentimes great effort. It is in this sort of effort, though, that the distinctions between work and play are blurred. The effort, as well as the result, contains its own satisfaction.

9. Be aware of the unutterable mystery of grace, and give thanks for it.

Our knowledge of grace is present, though it may be hidden in our body memory. To bring this knowing into the light is to reconnect ourselves to the circle of grace.

Now that is the rich life.

EPILOGUE

Imagine a truffle as big as your fist—thick dark chocolate with creamy white chocolate filling. It's even richer than that.

Consider a symphony orchestra in which even the last chair second violin is a star—everyone is

playing their hearts out.

Almost.

Picture smoothly oiled coppery skin bathed in the hot midsummer light on a white sand beach.

Close, but not quite.

Imagine sunset-orange clouds hanging low over lavender hillsides at dusk.

Even that isn't enough.

But the shiver up your spine, the tingle of your skin, the long deep breath, the clenched muscles loosening—

these are signs

these are signs.