



## Forum

### Adjacent Opportunities: Building a Healthy Economy

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I hate being reminded that I'm older than I feel. My friend and colleague, Pat Conaty, did just that recently when I broached the topic of Building Healthy Economies with him. Pat is a brilliant economic social innovator, author, and a person who puts his actions where his ideas are. As he explained "The problem is that just as folks like you and me hit late life (Late life? Ouch) and then have a certain epiphany: we, like previous generations of elders, in our existential quest for hallowed truth, end up rediscovering the wisdom underlying the ancient co-operative wheel of social and economic democracy." He goes on to describe that the positions that he and his coauthor Mike Lewis make in their new book, *The Resilience Imperative*, is that "the social economy and social enterprise sector is not new. Sadly the stone rolls back down the hill. We need to sort this and push mightily to the top. How to mobilize and achieve this non-violently is the question."

OK, I'm older than I feel and my drive to build healthy economies is nothing new. But as Conaty, who actually is 9 days older than I am, goes on to point out "the social economy struggle is as old as the hills, with deep roots in the peaceful struggle of Gerard Winstanley and the Diggers to persuade Cromwell in 1650 to allow commonwealth to be developed by stewarding land for community benefit. The Commonwealth was not fulfilled by Cromwell, despite aspirations by the Levellers and the Diggers for economic democracy. Ivan Illich talked brilliantly in his little books about the endless struggle of the vernacular culture against the Romans (in all their ancient and modern costumes)." Well, I'm not that old.

The fact that we have been trying for centuries to enact economic health speaks both to the tenacity of the movement as well as the power of such drivers as manipulation, excess and greed. There are a number of questions that arise for me, however. How do we create businesses, work and ultimately economic systems today that provide enough wealth, as opposed to vast wealth, so that 100% of us have enough? And how do we do so in such a way that we can find meaning and purpose in that labor, while nurturing the resilience that can withstand what happens when things like excess and greed invariably try to bring things down?

These questions, of course, imply a basic definition of what drives a healthy economy.

It begins by nurturing resilience within the system that in turn fosters a limber flexibility to change and adapt, while allowing for the change and adaptation of others. In this instance, the economic system must accommodate all the interactions taking place within it without bursting the boundaries it has established for itself. These interactions are a continual adjustment to the models we have built to achieve, in this case, a healthy economy. The process of dynamic change that takes place in our economic models requires us to be constantly making and remaking the rules that govern appropriate behavior within the system. The challenge is that when we build-in either too few rules or too many, or hold onto rules that are no longer relevant to the current model, the health of the system declines rapidly. Behaviors go awry because without the boundaries of appropriate rules, there is nothing to contain those behaviors that operate against the health of the system. The system is pushed beyond its extremes and it loses its resilience—it bursts, crashes and dies.

To build a healthy economy, the models of our system must reflect what we want. The rules we create to govern behaviors within the system must support that direction, while maintaining the system's ability to accommodate the emergent change that will arise, shifting the model and rules, again and again. Economies are not static—economists perhaps—but not our economies. The resilience of a healthy economy fosters and supports the development of even greater health, creativity and financial well being. Unfortunately, an unhealthy economy, one that fosters greed and excess, has lost its resilience and stifles change, allows for even greater deterioration and disease within the system.

At the forefront of any healthy human system is an ability to accommodate others. In contrast, what we have seen within our economy is a model that is designed to take from the system rather than one built to give back. When we have a system of depletion, there is only one outcome that can arise, and you can bet it isn't good for the greater good. The work that accomplishes this model of depletion, by its very nature, is not designed with the intention of returning anything meaningful or purposeful to the system. It is true that meaning and purpose are subjective terms, relative to the perceiver. But what we see is that

meaning and purpose, and real health, comes in our ability to focus on giving back to others and not depleting the system for our own gain. And when we create work as a means of accommodating others, we establish a level of meaning and purpose that, as a participant in that effort, we can find satisfaction and well-being in what we give back. We become focused on the greater good rather than the individual, and we can begin to breakdown the provincialism that says “this is mine and mine alone.” Within a healthy economy, mine and ours are interdependent and interconnected. And that really pisses off those who tend to only recognize “mine.”

In my forthcoming book, *Creating Good Work: The World's Leading Social Entrepreneurs Show How to Build a Healthy Economy*, to be published by Palgrave Macmillan in February, 2013, over 20 of the world's foremost social innovators describe what work with meaning and purpose looks like. We see the efforts of SecondMuse leading large-scale collaborations that are bringing world-shifting innovations to issues like water, pollution, energy and health. Karen Tse and her colleagues at International Bridges to Justice are training public defenders to end torture in over 30 countries, and they are succeeding. Dorothy Stoneman and her organization, YouthBuild, where she has developed over 250 YouthBuild programs around the country providing education, work, and meaning and purpose to young people who have dropped out of school and whose lives were floundering. Billy Shore and his amazing work at Share Our Strength and its nationwide program to end childhood hunger.

And then comes the cry, “Resilience, meaning and purpose are fine ideas, but alone they don't put bread on the table!” And to a certain degree, that is right. They might teach you how to make a better loaf of bread, but until someone is willing to produce a transaction for that bread, we don't have much of an economy—which brings us to wealth.

It is easy to demonize the vastly wealthy, but if we are to create a truly healthy economy it means that it works for 100% of the community, not just the 1% or 99%. However, in a healthy economy, the question is not how we create vast wealth, rather how we create enough wealth. And coupled with enough wealth is the equally powerful concept of *commonwealth*. This is what we value, own and share together as a community. Ideally, it's also what we buy with our taxes. Pat Conaty was involved in a series of projects that established community land trusts, in which housing was built on commonly-owned land, cutting the price of homeownership in half and making it accessible to members of the commonwealth. Somehow, I don't see the Commonwealths of Virginia and Kentucky lining up to shift their economies into real commonwealth. But to get to a healthier economy, one that benefits the entire population, how do we get to enough is enough? We build it.

Economic health is not a move to an idealized socialist state, but it does mean we have to let go of some long-held and unhealthy beliefs. As Martin Luther

King, Jr. described this transition in his last book before his death, “Communism forgets that life is individual. Capitalism forgets that life is social, and the Kingdom of the brotherhood is found neither in the thesis of Communism nor the antithesis of Capitalism, but in a higher synthesis. It is found in a higher synthesis that combines the truth of both.”

Perhaps Pat Conaty is right, my desire for a healthy economy—where exploitation for the sake of more is replaced by enough for everyone, where there’s enough work available that uplifts and inspires one’s life, and there’s a chance to create and affect real change in the world so we can all live lives that are not overcome by despair, disappointment and dissatisfaction—is just a dream of yet another old man. If that’s the case, then let me defy my age and dedicate the rest of my work life so that I can inspire and motivate the dreams of young men and women everywhere, and we won’t have to continue making the same mistakes millennia after millennia. And we can declare, enough is enough, and let the economic health and well-being of the people who live within our commonwealth be what makes us great.

**Ron Schultz** is the author of the forthcoming book, *Creating Good Work: The World’s Leading Social Entrepreneurs Show How to Build a Healthy Economy*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, ISBN 9780230372030). Enter code XP356ED and save 20% when you order at [Palgrave.com](http://Palgrave.com).