

Help Yourself by Creating Value for Others



Send him mail.



“Insight for the Young and Unrestrained” is an original weekly column appearing every Thursday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Gregory V. Diehl. Gregory is a writer, musician, educator, and coach for young people at EnabledYouth.com. Archived columns can be found here. IYU-only RSS feed available here.

This past week I’ve been considering a job offer I just received to teach English in Thailand for a (relatively) handsome wage. I hadn’t even been looking into Thailand as an option until very recently. All it took was inquiring with a few websites for English in Thailand and a Skype interview and suddenly I’m treated as enormously valuable and highly sought after. In California, I’ve grown accustomed to maintaining a decent wage only through my own initiative and entrepreneurship. I almost feel suspicious that I would suddenly be in such high demand without having to do all the heavy lifting myself.

I’ve been through this before, especially during my time in China. It’s an excellent demonstration of the subjective nature of value. What I do daily for free in the U.S. (speak English and correct other people when they speak it) goes unnoticed or often incites anger from Americans. However, people on the other side of the planet are willing to work enormously to gain access to a young man who can even speak, let alone teach, fluently in English. To many of them, learning English means numerous better job, travel, and residency opportunities. To most Americans, it’s not even worth the time to learn to spell a word correctly or properly differentiate the parts of speech.

The value of anything ultimately lies in how much happiness or utility it can bring to other people. Many of the things I do for money don’t really seem all that impressive to me. I couldn’t fathom paying someone to do for me most of the things other people frequently pay me to do for them. It wouldn’t be worth it to me. I have no need of professional assistance from others to accomplish the things that come easily and naturally to me. And if the things that came easily to me came just as easily to everyone else, I would never be able to work again.

There’s a common fallacy in believing and acting as though the harder you work for something the more valuable it becomes. Most people actively push success out of their lives through their unconscious acceptance that it doesn’t count unless it’s difficult. We get

a sense of satisfaction from feeling like we are working hard. Culture tells us to scorn those who make a lot of money or succeed without breaking their backs along the way. All these brave men and women have done is applied their intelligence in a domain where others previously did not and created newer and more efficient ways to bring happiness and usefulness to others on an increasingly larger scale. We shouldn't condemn them. We should celebrate and emulate them.

Of what use is it to brag about the long laborious hours you are working when the same amount of money could have ended up in your bank account in half or a quarter of the man hours? You don't get bonus points for gloating to the bank teller about how hard it was to earn what you did. Perhaps it is due to some leftover and outdated aspect of our evolved psychology from before we could fully appreciate the use of complex tools and the principle of leverage that makes us still fallaciously equate greater work with greater results.

When I step outside my narrow view of the world and way of doing things, I can clearly see that there are many things I can do easily, and even enjoyably, which would be an unpleasant bore and even impossible for most of the rest of the world population. I believe that the greatest security I can have in life is learning how to satisfy the fickle demands of other people. No matter how much I might learn about how to provide for myself, there will always more things I cannot do that I would like to have done. The simplest and most effective way to get what I want from other people is to offer them something of subjective value to them in return.

I've also observed that true altruism is a myth. It doesn't matter how desperate you are or how much you need a helping hand. Most of the world will ignore you until you can show up on its stage with something worthwhile to offer. When your interactions with other people start benefiting them more than they benefit you, you'll be amazed at how quickly that kindness and attention is reciprocated back onto you multiplied. Complete strangers will start fighting to have you included in their lives. You'll become a valuable commodity worth investing time, money, and effort into. Whereas if you are simply a person seeking aid with troubling times, you are at the mercy of only those inclined to sacrifice their own ability and resources for the feeling of satisfaction they receive from helping those "less fortunate" than they are.

This isn't rude. It isn't mean. It's just human nature. Every moment of someone's time you occupy is a moment they've forever lost, and a moment they might have spent on something of far greater value to themselves. It's only when you find some way to become the greater value that people start going out of their way and sacrificing their other opportunities to help you. They'll help you because by doing so they are also helping themselves. Likewise, you'll feel better about yourself knowing that your livelihood didn't come at the expense of another, but in a mutually beneficial exchange. There is no reason

why, under ideal conditions, all our interactions could not be this way.

It's win-win or no deal. This is the essence and spirit of voluntarism. Nothing happens until we all gain from it. The subjective nature of value is what makes this all possible. If we all wanted the exact things and were equally capable of providing these things then one human would be indistinguishable from the next and we could all work any profession with equal efficiency and could just easily be replaced by anyone else. But since we are not all equal, it lies in the best interest of each of us to identify and hone those skills which are simultaneously easy for us and highly desirable to others.

What others find valuable will change considerably with time and location. When we say there are no jobs, all we are really saying is that we haven't identified anything other people find valuable that we can provide with relative ease for them. If you want security in life, if you want your life to mean something, if you want to gain traction in the world... get really good at making other people happy. Opportunity is everywhere; it exists in every single person who wants more than what they currently have. It only takes a creative mind to see and act upon it.