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The Quickening

Up Front

Try this little experiment tonight: Turn on your television during primetime and watch a few minutes of commercials. The message is so loud and clear that it's a little unnerving.

Eduardo Padrón

Everything from automobiles to healthcare to cornflakes, toothpaste and of course, your suddenly cozy and intimate hometown bank, is portrayed as your personal red, white and blue security blanket. "In these tough times, a crunchy crinkle cut chip can make all the difference..." Saturday Night Live never had it so good. If it were that easy, if we could just dial up Madison Avenue, then we would have sent the Dow soaring and slashed unemployment months ago. But maybe there is no quick fix to this dilemma, and maybe the dilemma runs deeper than the image factory would have us believe.

As a nation, our focus shifted dramatically in this era of quick money. Our foremost product became the manufacture of wealth, and as it turns out, the illusion of wealth. As we now know, the lure of the big payday led to ever more exotic securities and contempt for the tenets of risk. Thomas Geoghegan, Chicago labor lawyer, writing in April's Harper's magazine, estimated that the "notional" value of these bets in 2007 totaled \$516 trillion.

But what has been lost is greater than any balance sheet can convey. The Harvard Crimson reported recently that for the class of 2007, 58 percent of male graduates and 43 percent of women entering the workforce did so in the finance and consulting industries. Throughout American higher education and particularly at the nation's elite institutions, the percentages were the same. Dan Rather reported that over half of the University of Pennsylvania engineering graduates entered the finance field.

The tradition in America of making money is nothing to scoff at. But our history is one of brilliant and determined entrepreneurs and scientists and artists who created goods and services that spoke to the needs of society. They created an avenue to the future and an identity for the nation that has been admired from every corner of the globe. But now one has to wonder how many doctors and lawyers, teachers and

musicians and inventors have missed their calling, and how much their communities and their country will miss them.

As our infatuation with a particular notion of wealth breathes its last, perhaps we are rediscovering a different quality of wealth. A remarkable professor of education at Miami Dade College once told me he witnessed the rediscovery often. “When that quickening happens, when that flash of insight happens, I’m there. And what these students understand is often beyond content. They rediscover a piece of themselves, their own capacity to learn. Their fascination. God knows what they can accomplish when that happens.”

I had a friend many years ago who wondered what the world would be like if work didn’t equate with a paycheck. “Earning a living” struck him as an odd turn of phrase and an odder reality. He told me that he wanted to do something with his life that, under different circumstances, he would do for nothing. He wanted to do what he loved.

There are two forces at work here. The momentum that propelled the recent era is only in hiding, primed to roll out the next big thing at the slightest murmur of economic life. And nothing in our sound bite society points out how imperative it is to do what you love. But it is imperative. And it’s crucial to understand that the world didn’t spin out of control on its own. Holding fast to what you love, discerning real value—these are the anchors in a world that stops to reflect only in the wake of disaster.

The President recently called it a “poverty of ambition,” the quick-buck mentality that “asks too little of yourself.” We need to live in a state of integrity. We need to balance quick turnarounds with more quickening. We should ask ourselves more often, “When was the last time I felt that quickening?”

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