

Telling a New Story: Information We Can Use

An excerpt from *Finding Real Wealth: A Portfolio of 17 Assets More Powerful than Affluenza*, by David Wann (St. Martin's Press, 2007).

From the Chapter, "Infinite Information: Channeling the Flow."

I believe we need to use a martial arts approach to redirect the awesome power of the media. They are already scrambling for market share – newspapers are taking shelter on the web and companies like Sony are selling devices that enable TVs to access the Internet; network TV producers are scrambling to become as innovative as cable TV producers, who are hiring "youtube" free lancers to teach them what the younger generation wants. Book publishers are tracking the reasons why we're reading less literature (a 2004 study by the National Endowment for the Arts documents an overall decline of 10 percent in the last twenty years). Now's the time to vote with our credit cards and the clicks of our computer mice, showing those that gather such data that we want information we can *use*?

We are at a turning point with our infinite supplies of information, similar to a child who's learned to speak. Having mastered the technology of talking, she must now figure out *what she wants to say*. To reduce consumption, we need to tell an ingenious story about the incredible value of nature, social connection, cultural richness and human creativity. The new story is also about substituting information for resource use. In *Earth in Mind*, educator David Orr advocates transforming knowledge into products, cities, and systems that fit nature like a hand fits a glove: "Ecological design requires the ability to comprehend patterns that connect, which means getting beyond the boxes we call disciplines to see things in their ecological context."

The term "value added," as used in the business world, refers to taking raw materials and shaping them into products. Yet, as many indigenous populations as well as enlightened economists know full well, it's also critically important to *retain* value. One great example is the decision New York City made in the 1990s. Required by U.S. EPA to provide safer drinking water for its nine million residents, city engineers and scientists were at a crossroads: either build a huge water treatment plant or preserve the natural purification assets of the upstate watershed, where the water comes from. They wisely chose nature over expensive, high-maintenance technology, saving more than \$5 billion just for construction.

As naturalist Edward Abbey once said, "We must learn to think not only logically, but biologically." Movies, documentaries, journalism, literature, the Internet, and TV can help shift our thoughts; and nature can serve as a model. Mature ecosystems use nutrients much more efficiently and are more diverse, cooperative, and web-like than immature, wasteful systems, whose species haven't yet co-evolved resource conserving designs and approaches. Similarly, a more mature version of our economy will accommodate diversity and local strengths, focusing on *preserving* nature rather than dismantling it; and tapping into its renewable flows and cycles, like wind, sun, decomposition, water and air purification, natural pest control, pollination, and so on. This is what futurist Lester Brown calls the "eco-economy," which relies on information

and innovation to restore ecological systems like wetlands; produce biofuels and bioplastics; recycle and compost materials that are specifically designed to break down; and in general, substitute efficiency for waste. The new story is not just about economic growth - which often generates fear and insecurity – but human growth and natural regeneration, which generates joy.

The American public is hungry for a sense of mission, and the media can give it shape. By tuning out junk media and tuning in stimulating, coherent media, we can emerge from this gooey pupa we are currently trapped in to become a nature-friendly, butterfly culture.

For example, by acting quickly to prevent the worst effects of global warming, we can save huge amounts of money and prevent unimaginable misery, too. A recent British study estimated that the annual cost of climate change will eventually exceed hundreds of billions of dollars, and that it will be far less expensive and inconvenient to limit greenhouse gases than deal with the impacts later. Stalled, or faulty, information prevents political consensus and action. In the documentary and book, *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore points out that there were more than 600 articles about global warming in the popular press from 1991 to 2005, 53 percent of which presented global warming as unproven. However, in 928 peer-reviewed articles in scientific journals, scientists were unanimous in their certainty that human activities are a primary cause. The discrepancy comes from a perceived need to present both sides of an issue in newspapers, magazines, and other media—especially if one side brings money. In many cases, the experts who dispute that humans cause global warming received funds from the fossil fuel industry, a primary sponsor of the media.

In a recent issue of YES! Magazine (a perfect example of butterfly media), Co-op America's Alisa Gravitz gives us information we can use: a very achievable 12-Step program for reducing greenhouse gases that contribute to climate change. The steps, to be achieved by 2054, include:

Double vehicle efficiency;
Reduce vehicle miles traveled;
Increase appliance and building efficiency to reduce energy use in buildings by 25%
Eliminate tropical deforestation and increase replanting;
Increase organic agriculture to stop soil erosion;
Increase wind power 75-fold over current capacity; Increase solar power 1,000 fold over current capacity;
Double the efficiency of coal-fired power plants with no net increase in coal generated electricity (for each new plant, take an old one out of service);
Increase natural gas-fired generating capacity four-fold to replace coal plants as a temporary measure;
Develop fuels from biological waste (not crops);
Capture and sequester CO₂ at exist coal plants;
Develop super-efficient plug-in hybrid vehicles and electric vehicles powered by renewable energy.

Says Gravitz, “Just doing seven of the ten steps perfectly would at least keep emissions at current levels, rather than doubling by mid-century, as is projected.”

In our everyday lives, we can substitute information for consumption by purchasing products that use fewer materials in their packaging; that are recyclable and durable; and that provide the service precisely -- with no wasted energy or materials. In fact, the new story is largely *about* events that happen right in our daily lives: the way we prepare meals, stay warm, travel to a concert, design new clothing and new buildings, and the way we take care of each other. It’s about cooperating to use information wisely rather than wasting it. It’s about creating a country-scaled suggestion box that chooses which technologies will deliver the most value, overall. We can even vote in our own backyards, by planting “biointensive” gardens that use profound knowledge and skill to optimize every square foot of garden space. By allowing useful information into our brains, we can support new policies and new technologies that result in more pedestrian-friendly communities, and information-rich innovations like “living machines.” The living machine is an alternative way to treat wastewater -- which we all are responsible for. It mimics the natural intelligence of a wetland, treating human or industrial wastes with snails, fish, flowers, cattails and other living things.

Similarly, a whole new universe of natural solutions is waiting for us if we study the way other species meet their needs – without any monetary system at all! Says biologist Janine Benyus, “Life shows us there’s plenty to go around.” Benyus reports on innovations in the fascinating world of “biomimicry.” (See her book of the same title). By studying how the lotus leaf stays clean without detergents (a bumpy surface that doesn’t enable dirt to accumulate), engineers have invented bio-inspired, bumpy-layered paints. By seeing how peacocks and Morphos butterflies create pigment without dyes (they use transparent layers to refract light), we learn how to make our world more colorful, naturally. Although our primitive technologies use a philosophy of “heat, beat, and treat,” which leaves piles of waste behind, the abalone shell self-assembles layer by layer, without any waste -- selecting minerals from the palette in seawater. In the same way that the cocklebur inspired Velcro technology, we can learn how nature lubricates, communicates, recycles materials, purifies water, weaves silk, muffles sound, reduces friction, repels microbes and heals itself. “From A to Z – amoeba to zebra – nature has already compiled the information we need,” asserts Benyus.

If we are smart enough to redirect the flow of information, we can learn to create a benign economy that doesn’t require so much money; that creates wealth – *real* wealth --- the way a bee creates honey. Without harming the flower.