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Dear Reader,

It happens to me frequently that the most interesting things occur peripherally when my mind is focused in one direction. This time it was a radio program on National Public Radio in the US that aired the voices of several citizens articulating how they are dealing with the impact of the economic crisis. This inspired me to reflect on the Rescue Package, and to share their voices and my thoughts with you.

Enjoy the reading!

Isabel Rimanoczy
Editor

Quote of the Month

Number of escalators in the United States: 30,000
***Number of homes the energy from 30,000 escalators
can power: 375,000***

Elevator Escalator Safety Foundation,
www.yesmagazine.org/ptc (Spring 2009)

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The Rescue Package

by Isabel Rimanoczy

We have all been reading and listening news about the Rescue Package, also called the Stimulus Package, in whatever country we are in. Several governments have taken on the responsibility of providing exceptional support to the financial system, to corporations or to citizens. They are doing it to help weather the crisis by stimulating consumption, credit, production and employment. However there may be more in this crisis than what is obvious at first sight.

What if this crisis were the visible result of humanity's decisions, habits, behavioral patterns, consumption, ways of doing business and using resources? We may not be able to see the linkage clearly. We are used to connecting cause and effect in an immediate and localized context; but we aren't taught to search for signs of the interconnections that exist on a broader scale and on a longer-term dimension. And since we aren't trained to see them, we don't, and we live as if there were no consequences to our actions .

This myopia might bring us a measure of comfort, but it also poses a big problem after a while, since we find ourselves confronted by challenges and traumatic events that surprise us simply because we haven't noticed how we contributed to their occurrences. "Maybe most of us still have no idea how the effect happened but what is clear is that some fundamental thing is very wrong", says Careen Stoll, a potter from Portland, Oregon, in her posting on NPR's blog^[1].

For many this crisis is simply about money, and about irresponsible decisions made by so many in the real estate market in the US. Is this really the case? Or is this merely the visible manifestation, may be the most personally perturbing manifestation, of something much deeper that has gone astray in our society?

It's Money

Let's assume, though, just for a moment that the basic issue is about money. That it relates to defaults in repayment of loans, foreclosures that result in evictions and loss of homes, tightened family budgets that change purchase decisions and consumption choices, lowered sales and production figures that impact corporate margins, and even survival of the business itself and employee retention. The cycle persists since unemployment further impacts consumption, creates anxiety, stress and depression which in turn can impact health, family relationships, and even crime rates.

The need for money has become a goal in itself, "a sacred thing", indicates Khaled Kaman, a young man from New York City. Yet interestingly, when our life-as-usual approach is interrupted by an event, a crisis or a circumstance that forces us off our anticipated path, something curious happens. Author and adult learning theorist Jack Mezirow called this "the disorienting event", something unexpected that challenges our assumptions and generates a shift in our thinking.

We have, certainly in the USA, become used to defining our being by our possessions: we are all too often measured by what we own. Whether it's a home, a car—or cars—the brands we buy, our home location, our clothing, the technology we use, the advertising industry "coaches" us on what will make us be—be successful, be appealing, be happy. We also send a message of who we are through our education, language, membership in groups, appearance, health, where we go for vacations—or if we take them at all. "When any of these are challenged or taken away, it's a crisis. It is a spiritual crisis first and secondly may be a moral crisis, it is a crisis of identity", says Ellen Williams, a grandmother from Richmond, Virginia. Abeer Raazi, born in 1988, indicates that his religion,

Islam, teaches adherents to hold the material possessions in one's hand, not in one's heart, so if they're taken away we won't be affected.

"There is no doubt in my mind that this economic crisis is also a moral crisis. It may, in fact, be more accurate to say that a moral crisis spawned the economic crisis", suggests Daniel Everson, from Columbia, Montana, born in 1990.

Revisiting life

When something takes us out of our routines and disrupts our life, we realize we don't know how to deal with it, which creates uncertainty and confusion. At the same time something interesting happens: we become reflective. A crisis, a traumatic event makes us stop and reflect. We try to make meaning, we try to understand, we want to establish the cause-effect connections. We seek explanation in our behavior, in other people's behaviors, in destiny or fate. Suddenly we spend time observing what we normally take for granted. We notice what we had, what we lost or could lose.

Khaled Kaman, a former financial analyst who lost his job, says "I was too busy to do things. I am wealthier now that I have time although I have less material things. Sometimes I don't do anything." He observes that the "capitalist urge of consumption" makes us fill all the empty spaces with activities or with objects, and if we don't we are seen as irresponsible or lazy. This attitude ignores, however, that creative leisure has been the cornerstone for the development of inventions, art, philosophy and literature throughout human history.

But progress, as we came to understand it, means material, scientific and technological progression. "Does science provide all our solutions, answer the questions of suffering and death?" wonders Abeer Raazi. "Maybe man will not always be progressing, maybe the material progression has caused us to lose sight of the importance of intellectual and spiritual progression. We relied on the material society to solve our problems, and by doing so we neglected the more important questions and problems of life", reflects this young college graduate of Ohio.

Marc Mullinax, professor of religion and philosophy in a liberal arts College in North Carolina uses the movie "Matrix" to provoke reflection among his students. He points at the message that we are either "agents" or "unplugged", and invited his students to "unplug" for 24 hours from whatever technology they were bound to (computers, texting, cell phones, MP3 players) and write about their experience of being unplugged. The papers were astounding. One student wrote: "I had never heard birds on campus before!"

And in the name of progress we have come to accept many conditions. We don't question the hours spent commuting to and from work, nor the hours spent sitting in rush hour traffic in all the larger cities of the world; we don't question the 24/7 rhythm of Blackberries that don't even have a feature to turn them off—only in sleep mode; we don't question food-on-the-go, sitting in offices with no windows or that our closest contact with Nature may be sometime during the weekend. Yet, as Ray Anderson, CEO of Interface illustrated at one conference, when asked to think about a time when we felt in harmony and peace, in a full audience of 500 participants only one or two thought of an indoor situation.

It is specially when we interrupt our daily rhythm of "busy-ness" that we can pay attention to what

we have become used to, and we can make changes.

The American Dream, redefined

The American Dream was originally defined by historian and writer James Truslow Adams in his 1931 book *Epic of America: The American Dream* is that "dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" This interpretation expanded over time into becoming synonymous with wealth and material progress, and into being adopted by individuals in many other countries especially in the developing world as a symbol of desired standard of living. However, as Professor Marc Mullinax sees it, the American dream is unsustainable if we think that 6-7% of the world's population consumes 40-50% of its resources.

How are we living and what is the next American Dream? asks Krista Tippett, journalist and host of NPR's program *Speaking of Faith*^[2]. "America needs to shape a new dream, one not based on financial status. The American dream needs a spiritual basis — one where what people seek out is kindness, freedom from prejudice, unity and community, and happiness for all. We should abandon those American dreams centered on ownership of things", posts Roy Reichle, from Saint Helena, UK.

For another blogger, David Hill from Albuquerque, New Mexico, living the American Dream was having "stuff", until he realized that what he was seeking was to truly know himself. The economic downturn has shown him in a physical way that wanting and having is temporary, and doesn't bring peace. Professor Mullinax thinks that the American dream can become another term for 'human right', not an 'American purchase'.

Stimulus and Rescue Package, from a new angle

What all this is telling me is that the Stimulus and Rescue Package is actually not about funds allocated to a specific project, nor is it something that any government provides. The new interpretation for me is that the real stimulus is the crisis itself, that is hitting us in our pockets, on our couch, in our sense of entitlement, and most importantly, in the soul and making us finally pause and reflect. In words of Abeer Raazi "it may inspire a deeper awakening, a return to what is important."

Yes, we are in over our heads—and hopefully deep enough so that we can find in this challenge our own rescue package from the wrongs and habits we have become used to. As with many bloggers from the site I mention, there is a critical mass of people that see these as transforming times. We are stepping into self-examination, we are revisiting our priorities, who we are, what matters in life and what sustains us. We are rediscovering community, service, and we are beginning to recognize the limitations of the bubble in which we have been living.

I want to close with the post of Oana Marian, a Romanian immigrant born in 1979, and working for the film industry in Los Angeles: "It is an exciting time to be alive, almost overwhelmingly exciting".



[1] http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/www_publicradio/applications/formbuilder/your_story/story.php?name=repossessing-virtue&response=587097#story

[2] <http://speakingoffaith.publicradio>

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