

value equals opportunity

We are living in an opportunity economy. How can we deal with it?

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.COMMUNICATION

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KURZFASSUNG

Der Artikel in 20 Sekunden

Popular culture celebrates the futurity of value as "opportunity." **Opportunity** is a temporal opening, a movement from present into potential abundance. Value lies in the felt possibility, not in the given static facts. Factual value can threaten the abundance of possibilities. Present success endangers the riches of opportunity. Opportunity may inject value, but the present moment is where we must live. Each of us faces the daily challenge of fine-tuning the opportunity economy. But can such a dynamic economy maintain our credibility for long?

Wealth is liquid gold spray-painted across the billowing sails of a speedy economic juggernaut. Formerly heavy metal, gold is now liquefied under the pressures of modern distribution, risk-investment, and speed. The value stream of money sprays outward on the breeze of an ever-less-tangible future. Money has become future opportunity or credit. Wealth is "plastic" – materially and functionally plastic – with far greater motility than paper bills. Credit cards embody more lightweight futurity than the slips of paper distrusted by fundamentalists. Chasing after Mammon, the root of Evil, is no longer a paper chase. Value moves through Internet transactions – quantity transformed qualitatively into data.

Gold and silver were once the royal standards of abundance, but now wealth is information compressed and transmitted non-materially, like the music of great orchestras shrunk onto 5-centimeter Seagate portable hard drives inside miniature MP3 players in the shirt pockets and purses of a mobile generation. The heft of property hovers like the malleable titanium of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. Elastic value stretches forward into credibility and credit ratings. US-American companies in the business of providing personal credit ratings consider home-loan mortgages or existing credit-card debt not as negatives but as positive manifestations of vibrant opportunity in a dynamic economy. Value resides – if "reside" is the right word – in a futurity built on past futures. Like bubbles, monetary capital floats in the just-out-of-reach future.

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When actress Hilary Swank, for example, is asked by interviewer James Lipton of the Actors Studio about her award-winning achievement in the Clint Eastwood film "Million Dollar Baby," Swank does not discuss acting technique or memorable anecdotes from the movie set. Instead she points out similarities between her personal background and that of the character she portrays in the film: Maggie Fitzgerald is a 30-something, down-on-her luck restaurant waitress whose scrappy resolve and work ethic create opportunities for her. Maggie Fitzgerald leaves her white-trash trailer family to become a champion woman boxer.

Hilary Swank, too, we are told in the celebrity interview, grew up in a trailer park, was a high school dropout, and while working on the film, rode the New York subway to Gleason's Gym in Brooklyn where she could develop the muscles to perform a dozen pull-ups on the bar. Swank turns her celebrity interview – found in the bonus materials on the Clint Eastwood DVD of "Million Dollar Baby" – into the story of how at age 15 she drove with her mother from Washington to Hollywood with only \$75 and a Mobil credit card. They lived out of their car while looking for an agent so that Hilary could become an actress. She describes not how she won a previous Oscar or how she played a role in the TV series "Beverly Hills 90210" but rather how she went from

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acting in school plays to landing the role in "Million Dollar Baby." At the interview table, director Clint Eastwood supports Swank's story by explaining why he chose her: because he saw in her the fighting determination of a boxer. The interview paints Eastwood as the older boxing trainer (Hector Rocco was Hilary Swank's real life trainer) who views the girl as an opportunity to accomplish in old age what he could not previously accomplish with the male boxers he had coached.

The real-life back-story on the DVD transforms the celebrity interview into an appreciation of the struggle for opportunity that went on behind the making of the film. The DVD bonus feature bends the Hollywood drama to point back to the road to Hollywood, California.

Another dramatist of opportunity is legendary Werner Herzog. In re-telling how he made his movie "Fitzcarraldo," Herzog draws parallels to the narrative of the film itself. The story of Herzog's spectacular efforts to make "Fitzcarraldo" over five years matches the narrative told in the film where Europeans relentlessly pursue the bizarre goal of bringing classical opera to the Amazon jungles, a dream which mirrors Herzog's own quest to make the film. During movie production, Herzog's crew encounters hostile tribes and unfriendly governments in South America, and some members of the crew lose their lives while hauling a 320-ton steamship over a small mountain. Making the movie becomes more harrowing than the narrative told by the movie. The questions posed by the European project to transform raw nature through art – whether 19th century Grand Opera or 20th century cinema – stand as the enigma: Was it worth the price of the lives lost in making the movie, or in conquering the New World?

Another movie-maker, Les Blank, made a documentary on the set of Herzog's "Fitzcarraldo" and the documentary interview shows the director Herzog shaking his head pensively at the end of five years of making "Fitzcarraldo" and asking aloud: Was it worth it? Was it worth losing lives of members of the crew and spending years of frustration in making the film? No confident answer appears on the troubled face of the film-maker but clearly, Herzog embodies the opportunity seized as value. The title of Les Blank's documentary is "Burden of Dreams."

After making subsequent movies, Herzog still refers to "Fitzcarraldo" as a signature work, not as a successful achievement. It remains an abiding puzzle, and we viewers are left with an artist's vision as confused as mad Fitzcarraldo who arrives with his burden of Caruso recordings in a dense, unfriendly jungle or the Spanish colonists in Herzog's "Aguirre: The Wrath of God" who climb hot jungles clad in heavy European armor as they force themselves onto alien

landscapes and onto misunderstood indigenous peoples. The European conquest – whether through colonialism or through movie technology – seems unreasonable and extravagant, yet as audience, we see value in viewing the spectacle, in recounting the opportunities seized but never mastered. We look "into a mirror darkly" and remain fascinated by the unfolding tragedy. Herzog's recent "Grizzly Man" continues contemplating the mystery.

Real estate is becoming more future-oriented opportunity than "real" solid shelter. Critics of urban sprawl in Los Angeles deplore the housing developers who build new homes right up to the property lines, with no room for lawns or trees but with paved driveways and gigantic interior rooms. The interior living space, in direct contradiction to Rudolf Schindler's ideal of LA architecture closes off connection with the outdoors. In August 2005, the LA City Council passed its first ordinance to prohibit what it calls "mansionization."

In the San Fernando Valley, homes on 4,000 square-foot lots will be limited by law to just 40 percent of the property, to conform more closely to the bungalows and ranch-style houses that have shaped housing since the 1950s. These "McMansions," as they are called, dwarf older homes with their extravagant sizes and gaudy displays of wealth – not the wealth of "Dinge" in Rilke's sense but the value of investment, of opportunity for future value, of the bubble. The Tarmac that paves over urban neighborhoods represents an investment in the urban future. Past futuristic homes in Los Angeles become the target of bulldozers as the monetary value of empty land increases much faster than the value of permanent structures.

Opportunity may inject value, but the present moment is where we must live. Someone must actually inhabit the new McMansions, just as someone has to pay the monthly bills in the new economy. Unconventional forms of the extended family are taking shape and adapting to these urban dwellings. More than one family may, for instance, inhabit a single-family mansion. Similarly, someone has to be employed in the transition to the economy of opportunity. Bills have to be paid this month, and the work world is slowly adjusting to the data flow of credit and credibility.

The financing of daily life becomes more complex, synchronized by computer accounts, automatic bill-pay, and instant transfers. The expectations and habits of the older era persist under shifting conditions. Occasional breakdowns push us to adjust and re-organize. Each of us faces the daily challenge of fine-tuning the opportunity economy. We learn the new currency and prepare ourselves for the next shift in value exchange. But can such a dynamic economy maintain our credibility for long? Can we feel true abundance as we continually adapt to the next opportunity? ■

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