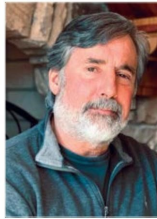


Photo by Melanie Johnson

GROSS DOMESTIC Happiness

Eat Your View



By ROBERT TURNER

The fax machine went the way of the telegraph. The iPod went the way of the Walkman. Phone books and printed maps; typewriters, slide rules and vacuum tubes; credit card imprints; dot matrix printers; 8-track, CD, VHS and audio cassette players; and my old Blackberry (which I loved)—all are gone now, replaced by new technology. Technology keeps advancing, but for some reason many believe we are going backwards as a society. At the national level, we use a measure of growth called the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the ultimate measure for economic and social well-being. Many politicians and others believe that if the GDP isn't constantly growing, we're all doomed to social disorder, lower standards of living and loss of hope for any kind of progress. Or so the thinking goes. But wealth does not equate to national happiness.

The late economics professor Herman Daly was quoted in a 2022 *New York Times* article as saying, "The art of living is not synonymous with 'more stuff.'" It's no wonder that Bhutan uses "Gross Domestic Happiness" as a measure of the country's progress.

Rising rates of depression in the West have been well-documented, and so have rising deaths from drugs, alcohol and suicide. In an August 2023 story for *The Atlantic*, columnist David Brooks says that other statistics are similarly troubling. The percentage of people who say they don't have close friends has gone up fourfold since 1990. The share of Americans ages 25 to 54 who weren't married or living with a romantic partner went up to 38 percent in 2019, from 29 percent in 1990, says Brooks. More than half of all Americans say that no one knows them well. The percentage of high-school students who report "persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness" shot up from 26 percent in 2009 to 44 percent in 2021. We have more gadgets, but we seem to have lost the ability to connect.

Is it possible that unchecked growth has a net-negative impact on human health and happiness? And is this more relevant now as the world experiences life-threatening storms, floods, heat waves and wildfires, likely related to climate change? This suggests a deeper question that I often think about: what if the pursuit of growth is incurring more costs than we bargained for? Is it possible that growth (economic and population) is ultimately a losing game? Are the true costs of growth—such as impacts to biodiversity and the environment,

more traffic congestion and pollution, and the yet unseen impacts on climate change—never fully considered?

It all raises a philosophical question that has been debated by economists and environmentalists for decades. Does a bigger economy that is devoid of natural, open space and depleted of its natural resources bring more costs?

The recent land conservation bonds that Buncombe County voters passed last year were a step in the right direction. I currently serve on the Land Conservation Advisory Board and the Passive Recreation subcommittee that will be making recommendations to county commissioners about where to spend that bond money to conserve open spaces and the natural environment. Nature is good for the soul; research suggests that being in nature for just 20 minutes reduces blood pressure and contributes to mental and physical health.

Cutting back on all the excess probably won't be the end of civilization. The World Bank estimated that the average US citizen emits 16.9 metric tons of carbon per year, while the average European citizen emits less than half that much, or 6.4 metric tons. The US could dramatically reduce our emissions by following Europe's lead: eating a more plant-based diet, driving and flying less, walking and biking more, and just buying less "stuff."

We can also stop doing the really dumb stuff. The mining of bitcoin, for example, with thousands of computers sucking up massive amounts of energy, uses more energy now than what is produced by all the solar panels on earth. We've wiped out all of the technological advancement and gain from solar energy made over the past 30 years in just the past few years, all in a scheme to sidestep the global banking system.

Our current social intercourse is marked by conspiracy theories and polarization. Kindness and common courtesy have given way to self-interest, intolerance and hate. In part, that is because our political leaders have made it seem okay—as if it's all right to speak and act in cruel, mean ways. The first rule of dictators and authoritarians is to divide people and control the media, now with tools like X (formerly Twitter).

We fight for democracy when we teach others, especially young people, the timeless moral principles that have guided human beings for millennia, like fairness (or justice, or looking beyond your own self-interest), understanding, spirituality, temperance, hard work and courage. Moral values and character strength also happen to be the surest way to personal happiness because they are a guide and source of inner strength. And, in this holiday season and, indeed, at all times, a little kindness goes a long way toward "Gross Domestic Happiness."

Robert Turner is a farmer and author of *Lewis Mumford and the Food Fighters: A Food Revolution in America*. Learn more at EatYourView.com.