

On Mutuality and Reciprocity as Systemic Medicine for What Ails Us

by Ruth McCambridge

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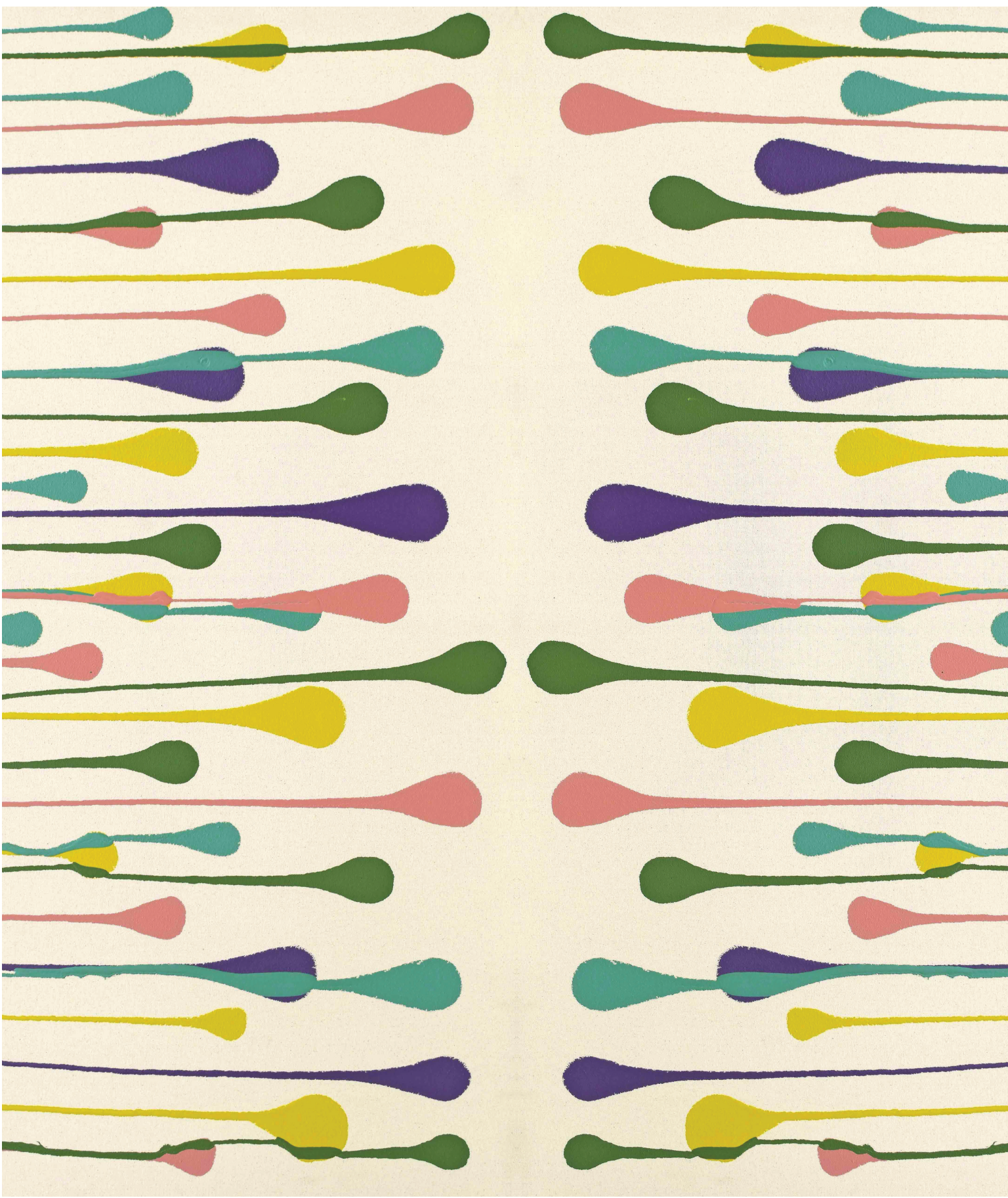
THE ECONOMIC/POLITICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE United States needs to be changed, and it can be changed, because the time is ripe—there being at least as much of an impulse toward the common good among the populace as there is toward careless self-enrichment at the expense of others. This much has been proven by community responses to COVID-19 and subsequent mass protests against systemic violence perpetrated by the police but reflective of systemic racism that invades every aspect of society.

If anyone needed anything else to reinforce the fact that the economic ethos of extractive

capitalism has played itself out, the COVID-19 pandemic was there as a painful highlighter. In the midst of the pestilence, the rich once again got richer and the poor got even poorer and even more marginalized, and fell ill while doing their essential jobs. Not even a thin patina of a fair-shake narrative is left. And the immutable evidence of the effects of systemic racism continues surfacing everywhere: in the illness and death rates, in the job and business loss rates, and as always in the ongoing violence against Black people that has once again ignited calls—not just for police reform but also for justice in every aspect of our society.

So, what is the narrative that might replace the principle of sometimes pathologically heedless extraction?

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There is much in research literature that asserts that the notion of selfish self-interest is not an immutable rule of economic behavior but rather a chosen cultural assumption that establishes a landscape where antisocial behavior is encouraged. Choosing away from that and into an economy that promotes collective self-interest, available through cooperation and a cultural drive toward fairness and foresight, would, therefore, be a break with the central belief system of the U.S. economy. This requires that all of humanity see ourselves in common cause with each other and with our offspring many generations out. These notions are far from new, but they are not generally associated with the kind of colonialist mentality that now retains control of our economic and social imaginations. But, although it may mean a break with the central system that drives the U.S. economy, it is not out of step with the psyches of many—even the majority—of this country's residents, and that gives us a foothold.

Indeed, the central theme that has emerged from the recent pandemic—even over and above the confused incompetence of current leadership—is the essential worker who continues to hang in there for others and themselves even as things become dangerous. These are the people running toward the fire to find and help their neighbors. It is what many imagine this country to be at its core, but so clearly never has been—a place where we consider not only ourselves but also others in the actions that we take or refuse to take. That is the essence of reciprocity, and it is what is being ignored in the ethos of our economic system even as community after community calls for recognition of its human resonance, unifying value, and good sense. Reciprocity requires an understanding of interconnectedness and foresight as morality; it is about mutual dependence and action for the public good. It is what comes forward when no one is there to tell you what to do when there are common and immediate threats to safety. I would argue that reciprocity is as natural an urge as self-interest, which has exerted such a tenacious hold on our culture—and it is looking for avenues of organized action.

Pair that with the concept of mutuality, or mutualism, where we work with one another in a way that does not control or proscribe to build a future that makes most use of the hopes and dreams and intelligence of its inhabitants. These ideas are core to an active democracy, and they are largely missing from public discourse in any way other than a kind of fetishization of the quirky: the out-of-step caring impulse that is to be celebrated but not mutually expected.

Elizabeth Castillo addressed the concept of mutualism in her 2017 article “Restoring Reciprocity: How the Nonprofit Sector Can Help Save Capitalism from Itself.”¹

Nature offers an excellent model to understand this principle. Organisms have three primary ways of interacting. *Parasitism* benefits one organism at the expense of another, such as a flea feeding off a dog. *Commensalism* benefits one organism with neutral outcomes to the other, such as a bird nesting in a tree. *Mutualism* benefits both organisms, and their exchange produces larger systemic benefits. An example is a bee gathering pollen from a flower, which enriches both. Repeated interactions among different bees and flowers lead to cross-pollination, in turn increasing biodiversity and *ecosystem resilience*.²

So, what if we refused to take parasitism as a given design principle? What if instead we took as a central assumption that addressing the needs and concerns of everyone was in everyone's own self-interest and was ultimately a more richly sustainable and liberatory way of life?

Over the last few months, global media have shown communities celebrating people who act as heroes even while the systems treat them as disposable. Indeed, communities tacitly benefiting from these systems have banged pots for essential workers but not necessarily extended those accolades to action by insisting that they be respected or supported in any reasonable way on a more permanent basis by new systems. The notion of the “essential worker” epitomizes

the dichotomy between what we need as a mutually beneficial nation and what these systems choose to reward.

Because while some have run toward the fire, others appear to be looking for any available plunder, in terms of additional power or treasure. Bill Gates, for example, has volunteered to remake the New York City Department of Education, despite the fact that his track record vis-à-vis such reforms is deplorable. Nonetheless, he has been welcomed into the “fold” where, in the midst of the chaos that is this country’s educational system, rich white people make decisions for children they do not know. Working families might want to be included in such discussions, but not only has Gates been disinclined toward such inclusions in his past projects on education, many families are also in the position of having to work two or three jobs to survive. Jeff Bezos has made additional billions even while Amazon’s workers are daily suffering dangerous working conditions for a pittance. Meanwhile, for those Americans not still working, a wave of evictions is headed their way as Bezos throws alms at programs addressing homelessness.

There has been much recently written about the function of philanthropy within a system that generates ever-greater injustice. In “How Liberatory Philanthropy and Restorative Investing can Remake the Economy” (in this edition), Rodney Foxworth writes:

Curiously, philanthropy is used to address problems created by an economic system that engenders radical wealth inequality, thus making philanthropy necessary in the first place. That we live in what has effectively become a winner-take-all economy is not seriously in doubt. According to Credit Suisse, the wealthiest one percent now own 47.2 percent of the world’s wealth. In the United States, the numbers are only slightly better, with the wealthiest one percent of U.S. households owning 39.6 percent of the country’s wealth. In 2017, 82 percent of all new wealth created worldwide went

to the richest one percent. In 2017, the world’s richest 500 billionaires’ net worth grew 24 percent to \$5.38 trillion while the poorest 50 percent saw no increase in wealth at all. The world’s billionaires saw their collective wealth increase by \$762 billion, enough money to put an end to global extreme poverty seven times over.

This massive concentration of wealth among the wealthiest comes during an era when worker rights are often perfunctory at best, an oxymoron at worst—a world where, despite talk of shared value, Wall Street maintains an unrelenting focus on shareholder returns. Further, according to *The Road to Zero Wealth*, a 2017 study by Prosperity Now and the Institute for Policy Studies, if the U.S. racial wealth gap remains unaddressed, Black median household wealth will fall to zero by 2053, while white median household wealth is projected to rise to \$137,000 by that same year.

These statistics may have been worsened significantly by the pandemic.

All of this coincides with a trend toward structures associated with the so-called “sharing economy,” including platforms and networks. Many platforms have also been captured by big corporations recreating systems where the few benefit as much as they can from the work of the many. But networks that emphasize mutual trust, reciprocity, real asset sharing, and the development of a sustainable commons have not necessarily gone the same way, perhaps being loose enough to avoid systems of control and exploitation. People are there, presumably, voluntarily, and they are at least arguably a part of governance as long as they choose to stay—if only by mere virtue of their ability to freely choose to stay or to go. Loose networks do not work for everything, but they have long been powerful as shapers and implementers of big society-changing concepts.

But how does one govern such loose structures, or impose the form needed to pursue a

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unified purpose? That, too, must call for both a certain amount of looseness and a reciprocity not only of goods but also of faith and energy. And all of that must be based upon a discourse that seeks always to be guided by principle, but be informed by the diversity of intelligence that makes up the world.

Essential workers should be centered in our economy; and racism and other forms of not just discrimination but also structural subjugation are in the way of any sense of solidarity. And here one must, again, look at the value of networks. Over the past few years, as the virulence of race hatred has trickled down from the highest echelons of government, networks have developed and strengthened to address the political and economic disempowerment that feeds systems of dysfunction.

It is a rule of systems that they abhor vacuums, so simply promoting that greed be abolished—regulated away—is not the key to remaking our economy and the social structures and culture that support it. The very organizing ethos must be replaced to remake the world as a place that nurtures life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all, but especially for those who have daily proven themselves invested in community. To make this happen, we must choose leaders who are unbendingly on the side of essential workers and their families.

In an interview in 2018 with the *Nonprofit Quarterly*, Douglas Rushkoff suggested that civil society organizations have core structural assumptions that are better suited to building businesses that attend to the common good and ensure that profit is rightly shared.³

Think about it like this: if you had a furniture company, what if the thing that mattered most to that company was the quality and sales of the furniture? I know it sounds like I'm being ironic or strange, but that's not the way business works. What you care about is the company making revenue.

Right now, the product of most businesses is the shares that they're selling to investors—and if the share price isn't

going up, then an activist investor comes in and figures out how you can hurt the company in order to give more money to the shareholders. So, the object of the game becomes: How do we squeeze our suppliers? How do we fool our customers? How do we outsource our production? All to the detriment of the actual business.⁴

But Rushkoff admits there is work to do to remind people that the notion of the fate of the whole being in the hands of each individual is key.

... all the cells in your body may not be conscious of the fact that they're all part of this one big body. They're just doing their individual jobs, and they have little walls. There are some membranes and permeability between them, but they might think—for as much as they think—"I'm just me." They don't think, "Oh, wait a minute, there's this thing called Doug that we're all part of." And I think of human beings the same way—that we're all part of this large team, this human organism. And even if we're not part of one organism, we'd better start acting like we're part of one organism, because we're sharing a scarce resource of planetary abundance. So, if we don't orient to the planet as a commons rather than a property, then we're going to continue to exploit it at our peril rather than maintain it for our collective benefit.⁵

In the end, we can conclude that the civil sector has acted lazily—to put it kindly—when it comes to addressing the dominant overarching definers of culture and economy, even when the effects they cause are chronic, generationally tragic, and right in their wheelhouse. Castillo argues that what is needed is for the basic organizing principles to be replaced.

Value creation at its core is a process of values creation. It is therefore paramount that the nonprofit sector find its voice and articulate its values of equity and reciprocity. Nonprofits must become "sensegivers," helping commerce make

new meaning of its exchange practices. How exchange gets enacted (parasitically or mutualistically) reflects who we are as a society. It also determines what kind of soil we cultivate, expanding or limiting our future possibilities. If we want our country to thrive in the coming centuries, we must develop the wisdom and will to make reciprocity as America's guiding economic principle.⁶

So this is not just an exercise in conceptual gymnastics—a matter of removing this system and replacing it with that system. Rather it has to be a change of ethos. In his wonderfully nuanced article “Bridging or Breaking? The Stories We Tell Will Create the Future We Inhabit,” John A. Powell, director of the Othering & Belonging Institute at University of California, Berkeley, describes it as a belonging built on active bridging:

Belonging requires both agency and power to cocreate. But true belonging means we are not just creating for our group(s), but for all. One of the major ways of promoting belonging is by bridging. Bridging requires that we create space to hear and see each other. It does not require agreement. As the neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky states, we recognize each other by recognizing our respective sacred symbols. Bridging is about creating compassionate space and practices where we can acknowledge each other's stories and suffering. We have to construct stories that allow space for others. Our story cannot just be about us in the narrowest way, nor can it reproduce othering by consigning an other to be just a villain in our story. At a deeper level, bridging is about co-constructing a larger *we*, with shifting differences and similarities. Through bridging, people experience being heard, being seen, and being cared for.⁷

Further on, Powell writes:

What I would say to people in philanthropy—and in movement building and

civic engagement as well—is that while policies are important, the essence of the struggle is about who we are. For funders, you should be funding work to help people exercise this muscle. Don't only fund separate issues or separate groups.⁸

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As this article is finalized, *NPQ* is watching the landscape of response to the latest incidents of police violence; over a three-week period, hundreds of localities have seen protests against police violence targeting Black people. Police departments and local governments are hearing calls to defund the police, and corporations have been weighing in—perhaps because they know that things must change—but they are weighing in while the president fights with Twitter about whether or not he is allowed to continue to lie and incite violence on social media platforms. Finally, organized philanthropy and the nonprofit sector have been largely silent to date—which has to change. It is well past time that the sector acknowledges that we all need the organizing power of a central national racial justice agenda and a conscious change of economic ethos.

NOTES

1. Elizabeth A. Castillo, “Restoring Reciprocity: How the Nonprofit Sector Can Help Save Capitalism from Itself,” *Nonprofit Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 61–64.
2. *Ibid.*, 63.
3. “Organizing Our Economy as if We Lived on a Single Planet: A Conversation with Douglas Rushkoff,” *Nonprofit Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 20–24.
4. *Ibid.*, 22.
5. *Ibid.*, 23.
6. Castillo, “Restoring Reciprocity,” 64.
7. John A. Powell, “Bridging or Breaking? The Stories We Tell Will Create the Future We Inhabit,” *Nonprofit Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (Winter 2019): 49.
8. *Ibid.*, 50.

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