

Investing: Money versus Friends

by [Carl Nelson](#) (October 2023)



The Earth and the Sky, Patty Willis, 1942

You meet more people when you're poor. –Arnold 'Lucky' Zebro

When we moved to a little riverside town in southeast Ohio from the Seattle area nearly ten years back, we took a bit of a financial wallop. My wife's income from selling office copiers dropped to a tenth of what it had been in Seattle. (Our combined incomes actually, as I assisted her in sales.) We were able to sell our home in Seattle for about twice what we had purchased it. (A windfall which financed our son's college.) But currently, our home in the Seattle area is priced at twice what we sold it for. So, literally nowadays, as Thomas Wolfe wrote, "You can't go home again."

There is talk of a lower cost to living in the rural area to which we moved. The housing stock cost about what we'd paid for our last home in the Seattle area when we'd purchased it, so in this respect it was a lateral move. But most of our other purchases are either from franchised restaurants and supermarkets or the products of national companies. No price break there. And you don't save that much buying home grown tomatoes and corn from the roadside stands. Home repair help might be a bit cheaper and more available.

One large benefit is that back here a person can live in a safer neighborhood for much less money than in the Seattle area. In a metropolitan area you must purchase your safety through location. In the Seattle area we lived in a small suburban development among successful professionals in various fields from the tech industry to government to think tanks. Our current neighborhood is about as homogenous, but we live among nurses, restaurant employees, hospital employees, school employees, shade tree mechanics, builders, tech services, police service personnel, the unemployed (some felons),

retired, and clerks of all sorts. The area is quite safe. You can walk everywhere. Take a cute dog with you and you'll soon know everyone. (I recommend a ginger dachshund with the name: "Tater Tot.")

As the country implodes rapidly around us and our retirement investments are chewed up from below by inflation while wilting in a wretched economy—I've been lately considering which was the better investment, family or fiscal. It's rather disheartening to realize that the nest eggs we have worked our lives to collect can lose thirty to fifty percent of their value nearly overnight. When you invest money it is a situation in which you defer today's pleasure, so that you might have more of it later. That can prove optimistic.

However, an investment in family and friends is an investment in the here and now which will also bear fruit throughout the future. When you invest in friends and family it is an investment you reap readily which will continue to provide benefits later. Investing in friends and family is an "eat your cake and have it at the same time" positive paradox. Our son has a good working philosophy I think in that he always takes the opportunity to have as much fun as he can, wherever he finds himself. He's ambitious and works hard, but he also knows that these days will never come again. And having fun whenever you can is an excellent way to invest in family and friends.

Fiscal investments are as ephemeral as printed digits on an account form. The numbers can change slowly, or very quickly, often based on reasons outside of our ken or ability to control. Somebody drops a lab dish somewhere in Wuhan, China—and here we all are. The government spends like a drunken sailor and now your savings are worth a third less. During the Depression people tried to protect their savings by buying gold. Then the Roosevelt Administration made its possession illegal. And if your high flying investments go tits up, all you may be left with are high windows to jump out

of.

Whereas investments in friends and family are both well within our ken and malleable to our control. Moreover, they generally do not change rapidly as the numbers on an accounting sheet will. When the Depression hit, many of my wife's forbearers lost their jobs and then their homes. So they retrenched in the Appalachian hill farms from whence they had come. In economic terms the value of friends and family rose dramatically. As the years passed they were able to find new jobs and start new homes again. I've always held that the reason people end up on the street is not because they've run out of money; it's because they've run out of friends.

Possessions you have and can utilize personally respond best to personal initiative, and preserve better during calamity. Money invested and recorded on legal forms can vanish as quickly as the paper it's written on. Once it is beyond our experience, our investments are based mostly on faith and trust. And it is easy for people, who you don't know, to act in bad faith, or to sell you smoke and mirrors. People and communities you know and have grown to trust, stay in place better through tough times. It's poor strategy to steal from people you're going to have to live with tomorrow.

There are other ancillary benefits to investing in one's friends, family and community. An economist might call these "externalities". For example, when you buy a home, you get to live in it also. When you have a friend, they have one also, plus you both gain entry into the network of friends each has. And with a spouse, you've doubled your benefits which appreciate and accumulate with time as you become experts at your roles.

Another thing about money, either tangible or fungible, is that it is alienating. There is an inhumanity to money, ironically one of its benefits, as its use can prevent emotional entanglements and obligation. Nevertheless, there is

an emptiness, almost an echo within it.

You Meet a Lot More People When You're Poor

*All those harbored yachts, and the mega-mansions where
the caretaker brews tea in a marble-topped kitchenette ...
looking out across the boat slips and the groomed lawns,
you don't see the rich owners who are rarely there.*

*Stroll that glass skyscraper
—it must cost zillions—
Sundays, in ghostly quiet.
Because when the money stops changing,
what more is to be said?*

*Fine things are made to look
clean, sleek, minimal, fast ...
Like the inner mind skating,
the expensive life is lonely:
a one-of-a-kind, exclusive, remote encounter.
You won't initially notice the echo.
You might mistake it for accolades.*

*Celebrity is the burden of the insolvent,
as they'll follow you down the block,
call in the wee hours,
even hire people to find you.
How you've been missed!
Just wedge yourself in around them
before the fire in a hobo encampment.
It's either too much or too little—
the Great Flea of Life—
everybody's got them.
Being a deadbeat is a gregarious act!
When I used to hitchhike
every ride was a conversation.*

Not that money is bad—but that ice cream cone tastes much, much better. You can lick it. It tastes good. You can laugh with a friend, hug a wife. If anything, money tends to have negative externalities. Once you acquire a lot, more and more of your time is spent trying to hang onto it. I remember reading of an investment lawyer telling a client who had recently received a huge price for the company she had created, “from now on money is going to be a small throbbing headache in the back of your mind.” Large amounts of money are rare and so tend to be exclusive and limit admission. They are gatekeepers. You will have a too broad lot to either hear or see your neighbors, or you will live higher from the street. Tasks, like gardening, which used to bring you closer to your neighbors will be handled by employees. Cleaning services and contractors will be in your home. Your social life will circulate in the moneyed circle. And if the money disappears, so does the circle; you simply can’t afford to do what they do; you can’t afford them—just as your former friends could no longer afford you.

But you can always afford family.

Positive Externalities

*When economists drink with mystics,
positive externalities is what they discuss.
Just as a rising tide lifts all boaters,
when my neighbors shoot their burglars—
others pass. And in turn, their homes
assess higher, when I mow my grass.
My flu shot protects others, somewhat.*

*And when I walk the carpet barefoot
my downstairs neighbor enjoys his sleep.*

*Virtue bleeds kindnesses that get tracked all over.
And mystics, who study positive externalities specifically,
claim the majority of us lie outside our bodies.
That our shine is reflected in our shoes.
That whatever you say, echoes.
That good Karma promotes better neighborhoods,
better sex and better meals they might add.*

When we moved to Appalachia our adopted son was immediately taken in by my wife's extended family. He's standing with a big smile right in the center of the family photo taken that fall.

In the Seattle area middle school where our son first attended after being adopted from Thailand one of the students told him to "go back to Mexico."

"Where's Mexico?" He asked.

Our liberal Seattle friends were concerned about the ignorance, lack of cultural opportunity, and racial prejudice our son would have to endure back here. But he fit right in, loved his high school, and became very active. People here didn't travel much. He was a resource. Due to my love of country music which we used to sing on his way to school, his friends found he knew more of it, and was a much better historian of it, than them. And he had lots of cultural opportunities, just different ones. He found out to be careful of what you said offhand as everybody back here is often related somehow or other to whoever you're speaking to. Good practice for the corporate world. But his cousins and their friends had his backside in high school. He attended innumerable school games and pasture bonfires, went mudding and exploring, fishing and camping. The shopping malls were

200 miles away, as were the big entertainment venues. But they could stay up to all hours of the night talking in the garage, sneak into the high school gym to shoot basketballs, and walk to the Donut House for food in the early hours.

Meanwhile, we didn't get rich, but made a living. My wife liked visiting some of the odd towns and coal mines in West Virginia. I liked hearing the secretaries I cold-called refer to me as "honey." (This doesn't mean they are your friend.) It was a quick 15 minute drive for my wife to get to work. And at 4:30 she was shocked when the lights went out and everyone left for home. The accounts were hard to get into as there is very little volatility. But the clients rarely complained. The copier could have been down for a week and the prospect would note that their vendor would be out to fix it soon. In Seattle, a customer wouldn't tolerate a copier down from more than two hours without seeing a service person and/or threatening to switch vendors. In Seattle the work day was 7am – 7pm, and if you were a "team player" you'd be there on Saturdays. The commute was about ninety minutes. Your employment was only as sure as your last month's sales. In the large urban areas it's possible to make far more money than you need. The trick is to stop when you're comfortable and enjoy your family life, because they'll fill the position with someone who will work till they are uncomfortable and then go out and drink to build team rapport.

Oddly, often with less money comes more control (of your life). A lot of the problems of the fast life just drift away. It's rather like driving slower than the crowd in heavy traffic; things clear away very quickly out ahead.

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Carl Nelson has recently finished a book of poetry titled,

Self-Assembly, which will be published shortly, and from which the above poetry has been selected. To see this and more of his work, please visit [Magic Bean Books](#).

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