

ALL THEM ZEROES

Have you ever gotten the feeling that money has become somehow pointless lately? I don't mean philosophically or ethically, I mean in real operation. Internet moguls making \$3 billion one day, and losing \$4 billion the next. Movies needing to make \$100 million just to break even. Business mergers that two generations ago would have been made a respectable gross national product. The numbers quoted in the news are beyond gargantuan. After all, Gargantua was only a giant with an eating disorder.

But what's worse is how everyone is able to throw these numbers around like confetti. The sheer size of everything is pushing the limits of comprehension, like talking to a theoretical physicist, the kind who are only understood by 15 other people in the world, all of whom are also theoretical physicists.

I guess I just don't know what numbers of this kind mean anymore. I get shortchanged at the toll booth, and I'm furious for hours. The dot-com set—both investors and entrepreneurs—shovel money out the door as a standard part of business. And the moguls like Bill Gates, who at least puts a face on the computer explosion, lose billions in a day when their stock dips. Now, this loss would upset a normal person, a normal business, or a normal member of the UN. But these guys get more upset when the FedEx guy is late. How could you lose \$12 billion in one day and not get at least a little mopey about it?

Now of course, the money being lost here isn't real money. It's not stacks of crisp tens and twenties hauled out of the basement in armored cars at the end of the day. It can't even be truthfully called "paper money" anymore, since the numbers now come and go, shrink and grow electronically. (Small charges of electricity and magnetism are causing all this commotion, but small charges of electricity exist all around us in nature and have no effect on us.)

What does all this lack of proportion do to the meaning of money? It's no longer a way of "keeping score," any more than Mike Tyson boxing a five-year-old. And if we are keeping score, I'm man enough to tell these guys, "Hey, champ, you win. Now please don't talk to any more reporters because I'm sick of hearing about you."

Money is no longer an insurance against the future, since these billionaires would need a couple of lifetimes to spend it all anyway. And who's got time to spend it? The mansions these guys have been buying look nice in the pictures, but you and I both know they never live there—they sleep on the floor in their offices. Are these then "virtual homes"? What did their money really buy them? Anything?

So it may be that these billionaires have made money completely meaningless. What can it possibly mean to lose \$12 billion in one day? I can lose my keys, my temper, my joie de vie, but \$12 billion? For that kind of money, I'd want to lose it in a cascade of sparks, explosions and earth tremors, like I'm the villain in a James Bond movie.

At the same time, we know that people in general refuse to pay to access the content on the Internet. Software should be free, services gratis, music downloadable at no cost. How can you make money offering services that no one is willing to pay for?

News stories have identified the dot coms who decided to advertise during the Super Bowl, failed to be embraced by the public at large, and are now stiffing the ad agencies who did work for them.

As an antidote, or a bracer, or a reality-check for all of this, I'd like to suggest that all these virtual millionaires spend a weekend with my mother. The phrase that jumps to my mind is "as tight as the paper on the wall." Mom was a Depression baby, and while she wasn't a hardship case, she carries lessons in stinginess to this day. She can't stand waste of any kind—she even keeps her bread in the freezer lest one slice get stale. In the past few years, we've had Christmas dinners where we've actually run out of food at the table. Not a leftover to be had.

She'll proudly point out that she's owned the same dustpan for 43 years, and the same ironing board for 48. If we ever go out to dinner, she'll know the exact size of the portions. She'll advise us, "Don't all order entrées. The ravioli here is big enough to serve three people!"

While this can be maddening at the start, after a while, it begins to make sense. Mom's attitude moves from stingy to thrifty, and that's not all bad. She doesn't want for anything, and she doesn't make herself sick hungering after things that other people have. She's pretty content.

After a weekend with my mom, money seems to have meaning again. I think time spent with her would be good for the moguls who keep borrowing money from investors, only to see it evaporate. I'd advise them first, though, to have a few good meals under their belts before they go. Mom's house isn't exactly a smorgasbord.

