

Why Do We Pay Our Plumbers More Than Our Caregivers?

By Terrence McNally and Riane Eisler, AlterNet

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Why does the stock market rally when workers are laid off? Why are working people consistently losing ground? Why do so many women and children live in poverty? Why is the average age of a homeless person in the United States 9 years old? Why are so many seniors forgotten? Why don't we plan ahead or invest well when it comes to things like the environment, education or healthcare?

Can the answer be that our economic signals are out of whack with reality?

An interview with Riane Eisler, author of *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics*, shows how our current economic systems aren't solving our problems. If we want to address issues like poverty and environmental devastation, Eisler says, we must realize that the answer isn't in money; rather, it lies in the "contributions of people and nature."

An excerpt from *The Real Wealth of Nations* follows the interview.

Terrence McNally: Can you share a little bit about how your childhood experiences have influenced your life's work?

Riane Eisler: In terms of the social categories introduced by my earlier work -- the domination system and the partnership system -- I was born in Vienna at a time of massive regression to the domination side. From one day to the next, my whole world was wrenched asunder.

I was a little child on the first night of official Nazi terrorism against Jews, called Kristelnacht because so much glass was shattered in Jewish homes and synagogues. A gang of Gestapo broke into our home, and I watched horrified as they pushed my father down the stairs. But I saw not just this cruelty, I also saw spiritual courage, the courage to stand up against injustice out of love. My mother, recognized one of the men who had been an errand boy for our family business and got furious. She said, "How dare you do this to this man who has been so good to you?"

She could have been killed that night, but she survived and by a miracle was able to obtain my father's release. Eventually, of course, some money passed hands. By another miracle we escaped to Cuba, where, having lost everything, we lived in the industrial slums of Havana.

Now all of these experiences brought questions. When we have this enormous capacity for caring, for empathy, for love, for what I saw in my mother -- why is there so much cruelty, so much insensitivity and so much violence? Is it inevitable, or are there alternatives?

Seeking answers to those questions, I discovered that the conventional categories such as right versus left, religious versus secular, capitalist versus socialist, or east versus west, simply are not adequate. I could see patterns through my research for which there were no names, so I called one the partnership system and the other the domination system.

TMN: *The Chalice and the Blade* came out in 1987. It was a best seller and has been translated into many languages. As you look back, what do you feel has been its influence over time?

RE: I am very honored whenever people say that *The Chalice and the Blade* has changed their lives. Doing the research for that book has, of course, also changed my life in many ways. Categories are lenses, and these lenses are ways of connecting the dots, of showing how things that seem random are actually connected. Once we have that clarity, it not only empowers us individually, but it also empowers us to be more effective agents for cultural transformation.

TMN: Why did you write your new book, and what did you hope to accomplish with a book about economics?

RE: This is the third in a trilogy. The chalice and the blade are two symbols of power. The blade appropriate for the domination system, the power to dominate, to destroy, to take life. The chalice, very important but much ignored as a symbol of power, the power to give life, nurture, illumine, to empower rather than disempower. In the next book, *Sacred Pleasure*, I used the same analytical lenses of the partnership and domination systems to look at sex. Now *The Real Wealth of Nations* completes the trilogy of power, sex and money.

TMN: I considered asking the questions, "Why write about economics? Do people really pay attention to economics that much?" Today other things like war or religion or global warming seem to dominate our consciousness. But I came up with this answer: Economics are important because they determine how we keep score, how we track progress, how we reward, how we incentivize, how we express value, how we punish, how we plan, how we anticipate, how we evaluate and even perhaps how we envision the future.

RE: So many people -- especially if they've had an econ course in college -- don't want to touch it. They say it's dull. Well, it doesn't have to be dull, and *The Real Wealth of Nations* shows that. They also think it doesn't affect our lives. But, as you just pointed out, it profoundly affects our lives. Finally, a lot of people say there's nothing we can do about it. And again, the book shows that there's a lot we can and must do about it.

TMN: What do you hope to accomplish with this book?

RE: The book is an analysis, but my work isn't just about deconstruction. It's about reconstruction: What do we do so that we can move to a way of living and making a living that supports our enormous human potential for caring, for empathy, for creativity and for love -- rather than inhibiting them.

I had to go very deep, as I always do in my research -- first of all to show that, as strange as it may sound, you can't change economics by just focusing on economics. You really have to look at the culture and the values in which economics is embedded. One of the most shocking things that I found -- though if we think about it, it's very clear -- is that present economic systems, be they capitalist or socialist, fail to give visibility and value to the most important human work, to real wealth, to the contributions of people and of nature.

So every one of us can do something very simple to change the conversation about economics. We can start talking about what I call a caring economics. I'm well aware that just putting caring and economics in the same sentence is not exactly conventional, is it?

TMN: I suspect that when you say something like "caring economics," a lot of people hear it as some soft notion that doesn't apply in the real world. But you make clear that there are at least five economies in action in our everyday world. There's the market economy, the political economy and the grey or underground economy -- and economics tends to spend some attention on those three. But you point out that it fails to account for two other economies: the nonmonetary economy of care and the natural economy of resources and environmental services.

Yet, if one really thinks about it, these two form the foundation on which all else rests. So, while someone may discount a word like caring as soft, and dismiss you as not being hard-nosed enough, you're actually the one who's being realistic. It is unrealistic and false to think that an economics that *doesn't* deal with caring or with nature can have any validity at all. That kind of abstract economics will inevitably lead us down the wrong path.

RE: I love the way that you have summarized it, because that's the point that I make again and again in this book. Caring pays, and it not only pays in human and environmental terms, it pays in dollars and cents.

TMN: Can you supply some of those hard numbers?

RE: Let's start with the market. It doesn't really take a neurosurgeon to figure out that when people feel cared for in a company, they come to life, they want that company to succeed. I have a lot of statistics on higher employee retention levels, less absenteeism, higher productivity, and greater company loyalty. Not surprisingly, companies that regularly appear in *Working Mother* or *Fortune* on the lists of the "best companies to

work for" -- and it's a relative matter, they're not perfect companies -- show a higher return to shareholders.

So here, just staying within the market for a moment, a lot of data shows that caring pays in dollars and cents.

Economists love to talk about the high quality human capital that we need in a post-industrial economy -- more flexible, more creative, able to solve problems, able to work in teams, etc. Again in purely economic terms, when it comes to social policies, the best investment -- and this has been documented by study after study -- is in caring for children.

I write about nations as well as companies and families because they're all part of the same system. Nations like Norway, Sweden, and Finland were very poor at the beginning of the 20th century, but because they invested in caring policies -- healthcare, child care, very generous paid parental leave -- today they are not only regularly in the top tiers of the United Nations Human Development reports, they are also in the top tiers of the World Economic Forum Global competitiveness reports.

So the data is there. We have to go beyond the data, however, and deal with the emotional, the unconscious, with the values that we have learned. Values inherited from earlier times, values oriented more to the domination style, have distorted not only economic indicators and economic models but also economic practices and policy.

TMN: Americans tend to be very provincial and believe the way we do things is the way of the world. You were just pointing out other countries that do the right thing. Likewise, in his new film, *Sicko*, Michael Moore spends some time on the problems in American healthcare, but then he points to countries that do it right.

Let me ask you to clarify something. You say the Scandinavian countries pay more attention to quality of life, and it pays off in terms of competitiveness. Are they actually employing a "new economics" or just using the current economics more sensibly?

RE: Both. When you talk about single-payer healthcare, Americans very often say socialism. Whereas in England, people talk about a caring society. That takes it beyond socialism to where the issue really lies. The former Soviet Union was a disaster environmentally, and there were huge gaps between haves and have-nots. People stood in queues forever while the elite ate caviar. So we're not really talking socialism versus capitalism.

Caring is a soft word, and that's precisely why I use it. Economists will often say that the market determines value -- you know, supply and demand. But that's just a small part of it. To a huge extent what determines economic value are the underlying cultural values.

Professions that don't involve caring, like plumbing or engineering, are uniformly higher paid in the market than professions that do involve caring, like child care or elementary school teaching -- both highly skilled, highly important professions. We have this bizarre situation where people pay \$50 to \$90 to the plumber, to whom we entrust our pipes. But according to the U.S. Department of Labor, the child care worker, to whom we entrust our children, averages \$10 an hour, no benefits.

And, of course, we insist the plumber be trained. How could we entrust our pipes to somebody who isn't? But we don't insist all child care workers be trained. This is not logical, it's pathological. And we have to look at why we have such a distorted system of values driving our economic system?

TMN: At one point it sounds like the economics might drive the values, at others that the values might drive the economics. It seems to me it's probably a dance in which neither is actually leading. You point out that as the status of women rises in a nation, the value system changes, and that actually has measurable effects on things like public health and mortality.

RE: We did a study at the Center for Partnership Studies, comparing measures of the general quality of life with measures of the status of women. And the status of women can be in significant ways a better predictor of the general quality of life than gross domestic product, which by the way is a very poor measure.

The reason that we have such bizarre comparative values, like the plumber vs. the child care worker, is that unconsciously we've inherited a larger system of ranking for domination -- ranking of one half of humanity over the other half, man over woman, man over man, nation over nation, religion over religion, race over race.

I talk in this book about everything from history to neuroscience, because you can't really understand and change economics without also understanding the larger context. It is a dance. Economic changes will change the culture, but, at the same time, we have to become aware of the pathological values that drive economics.

TMN: Do you really expect to change the way economists account or the way that economics is taught? Or do you simply hope to change the way people think, so that it might not matter as much what's taught in Econ 101?

RE: It'll be hard to penetrate the academies and economic establishments because people don't like to say, "I was wrong, you know, isn't it wonderful?" On the other hand, there are economists who are moving in this direction, and I cite some of them in *The Real Wealth of Nations*. It's very clear today, however, that we must demand from our political leaders and policy makers, different policies that invest in nature and in humans. It's a matter of survival at this point.

TMN: If your book has been successful, in five years what will be different?

RE: We'll be talking about economics differently. There will be much more emphasis on funding for caring policies. Businesses will become much more aware that caring pays. Families, of course, will be far less stressed.

It won't all happen within five years though, but it will begin to happen. And every one of us can help make it happen. Call-in shows, op-eds, send *The Real Wealth of Nations* to elected representatives, start study groups, action groups. I want this book to be a tool for people to use.

I'm very passionate and deeply concerned about this, not only in terms of my research and my writing, but as a mother and a grandmother. Change only happens because people make it happen.

Excerpt: *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics*

Much of my life has been a quest. This quest started in my childhood, when my parents and I fled my native Vienna from the Nazis. It continued in the slums of Havana, where we found refuge, and later in the United States, where I grew up. It was a quest for answers to a basic question: Why, when we humans have such a great capacity for caring, consciousness, and creativity, has our world seen so much cruelty, insensitivity, and destructiveness?

In the course of my quest I looked for answers in many areas, from psychology, history, and anthropology to education, economics, and politics. And again and again, I came back to economics.

I saw that in our inextricably interconnected world none of us has a secure future so long as hunger, extreme poverty, and violence continue unabated. I saw that present economic systems are despoiling and depleting our beautiful Earth. I saw that there is something fundamentally wrong with economic rules and practices that fail to adequately value the most essential human work: the work of caring for ourselves, others, and our Mother Earth.

An economics based on caring may seem unrealistic to some people. Actually, it's much more realistic than the old economic models, which strangely ignore some of the most basic facts about human existence -- beginning with the crucial importance of caring and caregiving for all economic activities.

Consider that without caring and caregiving none of us would be here. There would be no households, no work force, no economy, nothing.

A new economics

To move forward, we must include the *full spectrum* of economic relations -- from how humans relate to our natural habitat to intrahousehold economic interactions. This requires a complete and accurate map that includes *all* economic sectors.

This new economic map begins with the household as the *core inner sector*. This sector is the real heart of economic productivity, as it makes possible economic activity in all other sectors. The household is not, as most economics texts have it, just a unit of consumption. Its most important product is people -- and this product is of paramount importance in the postindustrial economy where "high-quality human capital" is a business mantra.

But no attention is given in conventional economics to what is needed to produce high-quality human capital: caring and caregiving.

Nor is that all. Not only is the work of caregiving given little support in economic policy when it's done in the home. Work that entails caregiving is paid substandard wages in the market economy.

So in the U.S., people think nothing of paying plumbers, the people to whom we entrust our pipes, \$50 to \$60 per hour. But child care workers, the people to whom we entrust our children, get an average of \$10 an hour according to the U.S. Department of Labor. And we demand that plumbers have training, but not that all child care workers have training.

This isn't logical. It's pathological. But to change it, we have to look beyond areas traditionally taken into account in economic analyses.

Our beliefs about what is or is not valuable are largely unconscious. They have been profoundly affected by assumptions we inherited from times when anything associated with the female half of humanity -- such as caring and caregiving -- was devalued. In our Western world today, the ideal is equality between women and men, and men are increasingly embracing "feminine" activities, like fathers caring for young children in ways earlier considered inappropriate for "real men." But the failure of most current economic systems to give real value to caring and caregiving continues to lie behind massive inequities and dysfunctions.

Values and policies

If we look at our current fiscal priorities, we see that policy makers always seem to find money for stereotypically "masculine" control and violence -- for prisons, weapons, wars. But we're told there's no money for caring and caregiving -- for "feminine" activities, such as caring for children and people's health, for nonviolence and peace.

This imbalanced system of values is deeply entrenched in our unconscious minds. Most of us aren't aware that much of what we value or devalue -- and thus our economic

system -- is based on a system of gendered values. As a result, the devaluation of caring - and its real-life consequences for us all -- remains largely unrecognized.

It's not realistic to expect real changes in world poverty rates unless we address this gender economic double standard. As long as the devaluation of women and anything associated with women remains unchanged, women and their children will continue to swell the ranks of the world's poor. Even in the wealthy United States, government statistics show that women over 65 (most of them caregivers or former caregivers) are twice as likely to be poor as men of the same age.

This is not to say that economic inequities based on gender are more important than those based on class, race or other factors. But a basic template for the division of humanity into "superiors" and "inferiors" that children in dominator families internalize early on is a male-superior/female-inferior model of our species. As long as people internalize this mental map for relations, it's not realistic to expect changes in the in-group versus out-group patterns of thinking that lie behind so much injustice and suffering.

Nor can we realistically expect more generally caring social and economic policies unless the life-sustaining work of caring and caregiving is no longer devalued as "just women's work" by both men and women. If caring is not socially valued, it will not be valued in economic policies and practices.

Caring pays -- in dollars and cents

I want to say that when I speak of caring and caregiving as "women's work," I'm only echoing conventional beliefs we inherited from times when gender roles were much more rigid. The goal is an economic and social system that supports caring and caregiving in ways that put food on the table and a roof over people's head -- one that no longer bars women from areas traditionally reserved for men and no longer views caring and caregiving as fit only for women or despised "effeminate" men.

The reality is that caring pays -- not only in human terms but in strictly economic terms. Nordic nations such as Finland, Norway and Sweden (where women are approximately 40 percent of national legislators) have found that investing in caring policies -- from universal healthcare and child care and education for caregiving to family stipends for caregiving and generous paid parental leave -- is an investment in a higher general quality of life, a happier population, and a more efficient, innovative economy. In 2003-04 and 2005-06, Finland was even ahead of the much richer and powerful U.S. in the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness ratings.

Businesses are also finding that concern for the welfare of employees and their families translates into increased competence, creativity and better business relations. In short, a caring orientation is good for people and business.

We also cannot solve our environmental problems by just trying to introduce less polluting technologies or changing consumption patterns. Even if we succeed in these

efforts, which is doubtful without going deeper, new crises will erupt unless we make more fundamental changes.

In our time, when high technology guided by values such as conquest, exploitation and domination threaten our survival, we need economic inventions driven by an ethos of caring. We need a caring revolution.

Interviewer Terrence McNally hosts Free Forum on KPFK 90.7FM, Los Angeles (streaming at kpfk.org). Riane Eisler is author of the international best-seller The Chalice and the Blade; Our History, Our Future; Sacred Pleasure: Sex, Myth, and the Politics of the Body; The Power of Politics, and her newest, The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics. She is president of the Center for Partnership Studies and a fellow of the World Academy of Art and Science and the World Business Academy.

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