MONEY AND MEANING
By Gary Phillips

I was speaking in my head to Dorothy Parker and she said: “If you wanna know what God thinks about money just look at the people he gives it to.” In Guanajuato they like to say: *Dios les da el dinero a los ricos.*

It’s a good thing God gives money to the wealthy—because without it they would starve to death.

I believe there’s a lot of money *without* meaning out there, particularly inside the corridors of power.

But how do we make a path toward meaning; how do we as people and entrepreneurs and citizens and lovers hold ourselves accountable to our responsibilities and our vision, to our need and our love, to our families of belonging and the Earth to which we belong? How do we engage with joy?

*Some people say money is just a vehicle. I say it’s a 1957 Chevy with bad shocks and no brakes; looks good on the outside but that sucker can kill you.*

My father grew up in the last non-cash economy of America, in a sharecropping subsistence that translated to 14 hours a day walking behind a mule’s ass. He left that world to work half a century in cotton mills.

When I asked him why he put aside 10% of every meager paycheck for the Southern Baptist church he said: “That money’s not mine; it belongs to the Lord.”

We lived in a four-room house without benefit of indoor bathroom, but we were not poor. Wendell Berry writes that “To have everything but money is to have much.”

Here, in this community we share together, we have pleasures that money can’t buy and corporations can’t command. We have each other; we have a local economy of shared work; we have comfort when we need it. We have our stories, our long history in this bioregion. We are producers instead of consumers of meaning. This is important.

I have many disagreements with the industrial/corporate economy supported and comically typified by our orange-haired president. That economy tends to value private profit over public good, speed and efficiency over enjoyment and quality, utility over mystery and meaning. Ah! *Meaning,* again.

I hate that the industrial/corporate economy does not account for affection, therefore it does not account for value; that it tends to destroy what it cannot understand; that it is based on the invasion and pillage of the Earth and the poor.
There are some practical and elegant and redemptive alternatives: The business I helped found, Weaver Street Realty in Carrboro, North Carolina, is celebrating 35 years. We feed 10 families, allow part-time work at full-time scale, function as a team, have transparent books, own our own building, have never been capitalized, share profits with the community, try to be on the right side of history, have a primary environmental ethic in a field that is not famous for one. And we are inspired to account for ourselves even more strongly as the world of power trammels the powerless and attacks our Mother Earth.

I understand that every human enterprise requires factual knowledge, calculation and manipulation—we like to say we “run the numbers,” But a real and lasting economy as well as a good business proceeds by

Humility,
Sympathy
Forbearance
Generosity, and
Imagination.

Let us remember and remind the corporatocracy that the root word of property is proper, which implies right relationship.

And Economy? Economy was diminished to mean money and its accumulation of power. The true meaning of economy comes from a Greek word that means “the arrangement of households.”

So let us arrange our households together in a way that provides for the general not specific prosperity, that honors the Earth and the path of social justice, that brings us into right relation with others and the world, that provides in every workspace a living place of creativity, shared purpose, well-being and by that course deep and abundant wells of meaning.

Blessings on your thoughts and work. May they rise up on wings of integrity and compassion to protect the world, one small circumference at a time.