

Is a well lived life worth anything?

By Umair Haque, MAY 12, 2011 :: Harvard Business Review

How would you define a good life? It's a bafflingly tough question. An even tougher one: does the economy we have today value such a life? Does it help us create one?

Here's what I see when I look not just at the surface, but deep inside the heart of the economy today:

Instead of an "energy industry," I see a resource addiction that saps money and preserves self-destructive expectations. I see, instead of food and education "industries," an obesity epidemic and a debt-driven education crisis. Instead of a "media industry," I see news [that actually misinforms](#) instead of enlightening — rusting the beams of democracy — and entertainment that merely titillates.

In short, I see gaps: a yawning chasm the size of the Grand Canyon between what our economy produces and what you might call a meaningfully well-lived life, what the ancient Greeks called *eudaimonia*.

The economy we have today will let you chow down on a supersize McBurger, check derivative prices on your latest smartphone, and drive your giant SUV down the block to buy a McMansion on bad credit. It's a vision of the good life that I *hedonic opulence*. And it's a conception built in and for the industrial age: about having more.

Now consider a different vision: maybe crafting a fine meal, writing a poem, or building something with friends or family. That's an alternate vision, one I call *eudaimonic prosperity*, and it's about living meaningfully well. Its purpose is not merely passive, slack-jawed "consuming" but living: doing, achieving, fulfilling, becoming, inspiring, transcending, creating, accomplishing — all the stuff that [matters the most](#). Consider the following differences:

Living, (working, and playing) not just having. Where the pursuit of opulence is predicated on having more, bigger, cheaper, *eudaimonia* is a more nuanced, complex conception of a good life. It's about whether or not the pursuit of mere stuff actually translates into living, working, and playing meaningfully better in human terms.

Better, not just more. The key word is “better” — and where opulence asks, “Did you get the latest car, yacht, gold-plated razor — or are you just a loser?” eudaimonia asks, “Did any of that stuff make you meaningfully better — smarter, fitter, grittier, more empathic, wiser? Or are you just (yawn) a pawn in the tired, predictable game called ‘the pursuit of diminishing returns to over consumption?’”

Becoming, not just being. If eudaimonia’s about living, working, and playing better, not just having more, well, Houston, we have a problem. Economic “growth” as you and I know it is probably fundamentally inadequate to tell us much about it, because how we measure growth is just about stuff. But measures of “happiness” don’t cut it either, [because eudaimonia is more complicated than that](#). The multiplication of eudaimonia can be gauged neither by “GDP,” then, nor by tracking self-reported happiness, nor by basic, simple measures of basic human development, but rather, by understanding whether or not people are becoming their better, wholer, grittier, wiser, fundamentally more accomplished selves. Those real-world measures and tools largely haven’t been invented yet.

Depth, not just immediacy. The pursuit of eudaimonia demands serious depth. What does it mean to work, play, and live meaningfully better? It’s not an easy question to answer, and I’m not offering you any easy, pat answers. Rather, the pursuit of eudaimonia itself demands time, space, and room to reflect on questions of gravity and depth, preferably together: deliberately, associatively, consensually.

Eudaimonia isn’t asceticism, a world where we’re all monks, [and the Stuff Police jails you if you buy that 3D TV](#): plenty of stuff can be eudaimonic. But where opulence is about having stuff that’s envied, desired, and coveted less for what it is than the jumbo-sized, couldn’t miss it if you tried logo, and what it says to people you’re trying probably a little too hard to impress.

Eudaimonia’s about stuff that’s loved, treasured, adored — because it adds up to living well.