

Are we Making Progress?

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When my son, Jake, graduated from high school a year ago he decided not to go on to college. Instead, he took "a year off." What did he do? He bailed hay, repaired fence, painted houses, collected trash, worked as a tour guide, bused tables, packed meat, sold ski equipment, fixed boats, and made furniture, among other things.

Seeing Jake now, I think it strange that as a society we say that those young men and women who decide to take a break from formal schooling are taking a "year off." Often, just the opposite is the case: These young folks are taking a "year on"; they are taking charge of their lives and in the process receiving a genuine education.

All this has me thinking about growth and the meaning of genuine progress. It appears, on the surface, that Jake's education has come to a halt--that his "progress" has stopped. After all, our culture has instructed Jake that the sure way for him to succeed is to stick at his studies; this is what will land him a high paying job and lots of spending money which, in turn, will ensure economic growth--the central determinant of national progress.

But is our ever-growing economy really an indicator of progress? What kind of progress is it when students are often treated as receptacles for information--memorizing "facts" which they soon forget? And when, upon graduation from college, our youth enter the work force with an increasing likelihood of spending much of their lives sitting in front of a computer?

Fortunately, there are other ways of thinking about progress. Researchers at an organization called "Redefining Progress" (www.rprogress.org) in San Francisco have developed an index of national well-being called the "Genuine Progress Indicator" (GPI). The GPI is as an alternative to the Gross Domestic Product. According to conventional assumptions, when our Gross Domestic Product rises, the economy is improving (growing) and we are better off (making progress).

Like the Gross Domestic Product, the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) represents well being in monetary terms but with some important differences. For example, the GPI recognizes that the citizen doing volunteer work (e.g., building houses for Habitat for Humanity) or the mother who is at home caring for children are productive members of the economy just as surely as the baker or computer programmer and, hence, their contributions are also expressed in monetary terms and added to the GPI (rather than ignoring their contribution, as in the case of the GDP). Meanwhile, economic activity which has an adverse impact on human welfare (e.g., the money spent to clean up oil spills or to increase the size of the police force) is subtracted from the Genuine Progress Indicator (as seems sensible) rather than being added, as in the case of the GDP.

When we use this more honest accounting system, we get a different picture of societal well being. For example, while the GDP has been rising fairly steadily for several decades, indicating continued economic growth and well being, the Genuine Progress Indicator has been falling since the mid-1970s which, incidentally, fits with the perception that many people share--i.e., that "genuine" quality of life has declined in recent decades.

Just as the research team at Redefining Progress prompts me to rethink the meaning of "genuine progress", my son Jake challenges me to reconsider the elements necessary for a genuine education. Now, he informs me that he plans to take a second year off. . . Opps, I mean "year on". He tells me he is Miami-bound--plans to work for Habitat for Humanity. As I sit here reflecting passively on the meaning of genuine progress and genuine education, Jake is setting forth--walking my talk.