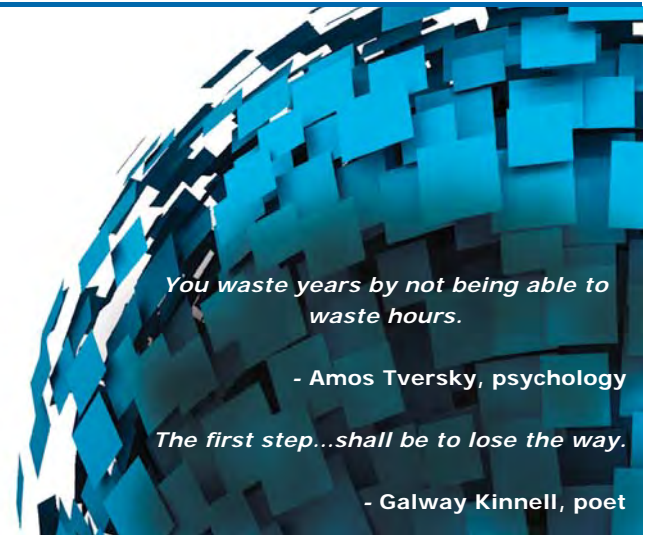


ON THE ROAD TO A BETTER LIFE: MOVEMENT FROM A FOCUS ON RISING STANDARDS OF LIVING TO HIGHER STANDARDS FOR LIFE



CONTEXT & DYNAMICS

As we have written, Americans are passing over a bumpy road to the New Economy. That rough ride is making the road to what we have called a Better Life more attractive, but still bumpy for individuals. But individuals are, bit by bit, action by action, moving ahead in their transition from focusing on a Better Living, including a focus only on increasing their standard of living, to concentrating on a Better Life, including resetting priorities and values to yield meaning, growth and happiness. They are making the transition by changing their behavior in a variety of ways and then changing their minds about the way they relate to the economy.

OPPORTUNITIES

- *Companies that focus on making work fit into the Better Life of their employees will be able to retain higher-quality workers.*
- *New metrics to measure the expansion of the New Economy will be matched by new metrics to measure the overall effects of a Better Life, such as Bhutan's Happiness Index. Those who develop such metrics will benefit.*
- *Servicing the needs and wants of individuals in their Better Life status finds a market.*
- *Consumer-facing companies that adjust their services and product lines to meet individuals' new concentration on a better life will benefit.*

RISKS

- *Companies that focus on driving employees to work harder could lose their most valuable workers.*
- *The historical line between work and income could get challenged in the long term.*



Two Metaphors

Actions can sometimes assume meaning beyond the observable details. Such has been the case in two observations we recently made. While these actions possess their own details, after we took a step or two back, they seemed to assume greater meaning. Seen from a little distance, they can serve as metaphors for something larger.

First, airline seating is getting smaller and smaller, as planes' seats shrink in size and in the amount of space they occupy. Recently, judges in the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit ordered the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to reexamine safety issues for the increasingly cramped seating arrangements. Airlines are crowding more and smaller seats into existing airplane spaces, creating greater discomfort, causing more incidents of air rage and, according to the court, increasing passengers' risks during crises. (*New York Times*, 8/1/17)

As a metaphor, the airlines' reducing seat size and making the flight experience less comfortable seems to fit a larger issue: the New Economy's cramping individuals' way of living, through years of stagnant salaries, part-time or "gig" jobs, fewer benefits, rising state and local taxes, increasing costs of tuition and the like. We have called this cramping of individuals' economic conditions the Three Squeezes, as a majority of Americans face weaker income growth, higher nondiscretionary expenses and higher health and housing costs (see [inF 1102](#)).

How bad that has been for employees can be envisioned by looking at how excitedly verbal some economists became this past month when the U.S. Census Bureau revealed that salaries had finally surpassed the adjusted figure for 1999. Nearly two decades of income growth had been lost, yet some economists saw mostly a revived economy. Lost in the euphoria, however, was

As a metaphor, the airlines' reducing seat size and making the flight experience less comfortable seems to fit a larger issue: the New Economy's cramping individuals' way of living, through years of stagnant salaries, part-time or "gig" jobs, fewer benefits, rising state and local taxes, increasing costs of tuition and the like.

the fact that, in 2013, the Bureau adjusted how it configured such salaries, and had that adjustment not taken place, salary figures would not have surpassed the 1999 level. The reality of the Three Squeezes is reflected in the results of a different study that revealed had wages continued to increase in line with productivity – as they had done in the first three decades following the Second World War – then wages currently set at \$40,000 would have been, instead, at \$61,000. As a result of the actual situation, financial squeezes on salaries and expenses have led **one-third of Millennials and Generation Xers to withdraw money from their retirement accounts**, and half expect they will need to do so in the near future (*Pymnts*, 9/13/17; *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 9/13/17; *Christian Science Monitor*, 8/7/17; *Workforce*, 7/17).

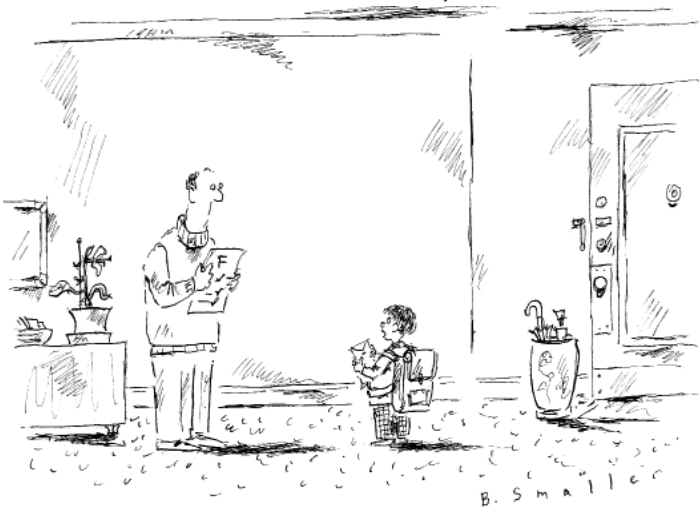


"And in what denomination would you like your 'every last damn cent'?"

Even with low unemployment rates and nearly a decade of official recovery, nearly three-quarters of Americans this past year believed the economy was still

in recession. A recent survey from the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau revealed that more than 40 percent of U.S. adults are struggling to pay monthly bills. Such a financial condition has made the discomfort of shrinking airline seats a fitting metaphor for most Americans' economic realities. (*Pymnts*, 9/27/17)

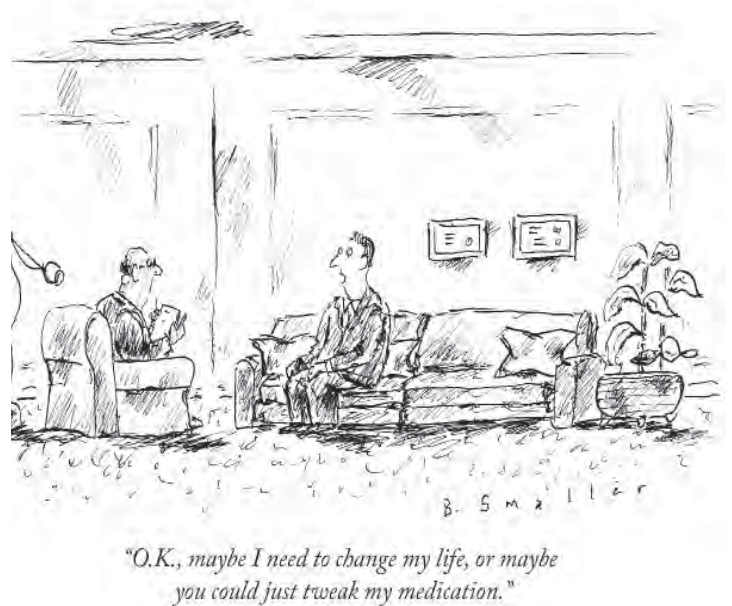
Second, the Mastery Transcript Consortium, an aggregation of more than 100 of the most prestigious private preparatory schools in the country, has launched a different way to evaluate students, eliminating the traditional A/B/C grading system, developed during the industrial era, and replacing it with digital narrative transcripts that describe students' competency in specific content areas as well as their overall development. Competency is proven by the student working through problems and lessons at his or her own pace, as registered through interaction with digital teaching tools. Public schools are assessing such an approach, with Windsor Locks (CT), for instance, starting to ease into such a system over the next several years. Several schools in New York City have eliminated the traditional grading system and advised students to focus on mastering specific areas of content...at their own pace. (*Christian Science Monitor*, 6/12/17; *New York Times*, 8/13/17)



"You really have to stop fetishizing grades."

The shift in grading systems is intended to remove pressure on students, deemphasize competition among students and enable students to focus instead on what is, after all, a key element of education: the mastery of content and thinking, not just the ability to take tests. Students learning at their own pace and getting measured on that progress is a metaphor for the individuals' quest to find a different way to operate personally, one with less pressure and more personal growth, with less of a focus on making money and more of a focus on learning and finding meaning.

Together, these two metaphors outline a larger societal shift in priorities. Economic pressures have made the goal of working harder to get ahead financially and to pursue a higher standard of living more difficult to reach. As that upper limit to financial betterment becomes more obvious to many, individuals seem to be turning to other ways to make themselves happy. Whereas they might have once anticipated and then celebrated a salary increase or a work promotion, they now celebrate an unusual and valuable experience or a meaningful activity outside of work. This kind of changing perspective is indicative of the larger shift from individuals' concentrating on making a Better Living, where individuals are actually getting financially squeezed, to working toward finding a Better Life, where pressure to perform is less important – that is, a shift away from focusing only on increasing one's standard of living to focusing more on raising one's own standards for life.



A Bumpy Road

One of the motivators for the shift of focus from a Better Living to a Better Life is the transition from the Old Economy to the New Economy. The New Economy offers considerable financial rewards for the few with the special skills needed to advance the economy's progress toward automation, software and data. It also advances the potential for growth in a few other areas, such as healthcare. For those working in roughly half of all jobs in the U.S., according to an Oxford University study, acknowledging the likelihood of being replaced by

machines is part of reality. Retail stores laid off 6,200 workers in June alone this year, and since 2008, U.S. banks have closed 10,000 branches, with most humans being replaced by machinery and online services. Lower salaries are also part of that shift, as automation creates a surplus of would-be workers seeking the shrinking number of jobs that machinery presently cannot do. Take, for instance, mining, where companies such as Barrick Gold are converting to digital systems, which include Wi-Fi in the underground tunnels to enable automated operations that will eliminate even more human miners. That means fewer jobs available in mining for humans (see [IF 3810](#); *Christian Science Monitor*, 8/21/17; *The Week*, 8/11/17; *Northern Miner*, 1/9/17).

Federal and state governments are pulling back to reduce costs, actually lowering the number of employees by six percent since the Great Recession. During the recovery, state and federal governments' spending on infrastructure actually declined by 50 percent; in the past two years, 24 states have increased taxes; and already this year, 33 states have lowered their forecasts of revenues as spending in the economy produces lower tax revenues. Corporations are also cutting back employment in general, such as Goldman Sachs reducing currency traders from 600 to two, while hiring 200 computer engineers to handle the computers and algorithms that are doing what humans once did. Companies seem to be focusing primarily on efficiencies and stock buybacks to sustain profits and stock prices. That leaves individuals caught short to deal with shrinking financial realities (see [IF 3819](#)).

Changing Behavior, Changing Minds

Just as the economy is changing in ways that challenge long-held beliefs about a steadily rising standard of living across all of the economy, more and more individuals seem to be downgrading in value the work and the jobs that in the past made those beliefs feasible.

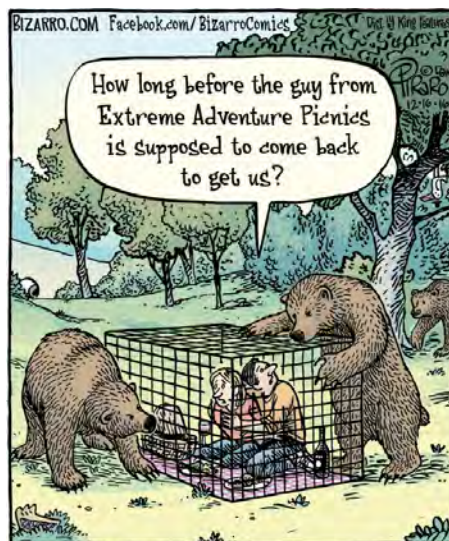
Individuals are shifting from a focus on work and its financial rewards to a search for unique experiences, the best being ones that provide some deeper meaning or offer personal insights.

And so, they are shifting from a focus on work and its financial rewards to a search for unique experiences, the best being ones that provide some deeper meaning or offer personal insights.

Three years ago, when we first raised the idea of individuals shifting from "a principal focus on expanding their wealth to support a better material standard of living to a more concentrated focus on expanding their experiences and engagement in order to create a better life," we acknowledged that one of the reasons for the change in perspective was that individuals were running "out of ideas of how to keep up with keeping up." The middle class has lost ground economically, and most of its

members were simply worn out trying to keep up with their past dreams (see [IF 3516](#)).

Since that *Briefing*, Americans have run into harder limits to their upward mobility, and as our second metaphor on how to measure quality and what to value suggests, more and more individuals are starting to change how they operate. They have started Changing Behavior and eventually Changing Minds.



Changing Behavior – One of the early ways in which many individuals are making it easier to pull away from the old routines and beliefs is through humor, more specifically, satire – the ability to laugh at the failings of the old model. Those who study humor know that laughing at something puts distance between the one laughing and the one being laughed at. Late-night programs, comedic news programs and weekly reviews focus on the actions (or inaction) of the political elite. "It feels like everybody's a comedian," suggests

Michael Che, who plays host on *Saturday Night Live's* "Weekend Update." "Even news articles are written with a humorous twist, and the headline is funny....People are holding comedians accountable, not for being funny but for being on the right side of history. It just feels like audiences want somebody who will get up there and say what they've already been thinking." (*Guardian Weekly*, 8/4/17)

On a more personal level, individuals seem to be learning that working hard, really hard, is not so good for them. Fatigue with the whole enterprise is starting to force rethinking about what individuals are doing to themselves. According to a recent book, *Rest: Why You Get More Done When You Work Less* (2017), the nine-to-five work schedule is a holdover from the fading industrial economy; the knowledge economy requires sharper minds...working fewer hours each day, namely three to five hours per day. In France, Sebastien Bras, chef at Le Suquet, has asked Michelin to remove his coveted three-star rating, the highest accolade Michelin awards, granted to only a very few restaurants. "I want to be liberated from the pressure," he told reporters. Such pressure carries over into personal lives, with roughly a third of adults in the U.S. not getting enough sleep, which the Centers for Disease

Control has called a national emergency. As a "cure," Drew Ackerman shares bedtime stories for adults on his podcast; they are downloaded at a rate of 1.3 million each month. Addressing lack of sleep is a critical dynamic in the shift from Better Living to a Better Life. Meanwhile, recent studies have undercut the belief that finishing a job or task first will make the fun that follows more enjoyable; they have called that sentiment a remnant of the industrial era. In fact, fun is fun, and it is just as enjoyable, one study concluded, whether it comes in the middle of a larger task or after or even before. Essentially, work and working hard are being lowered on the personal priority lists of more and more individuals. (*New York Times*, 4/9/17 and 9/21/17; *The Week*, 4/7/17; *Guardian Weekly*, 9/1/17; *Psychology Today*, 9/17)

Individuals have also started to shift their buying habits away from brands and popular imagery and toward ease and comfort, often preferring lower prices that enable them to save money for other, more



In France, Sebastien Bras, chef at Le Suquet, has asked Michelin to remove his coveted three-star rating, the highest accolade Michelin awards, granted to only a very few restaurants.

“valuable” experiences. Americans have dropped shopping at, say, one grocery store, and according to a recent study, they now use at least three different grocery stores to buy what they need, seeking better prices and evidently ignoring the appeal of branded stores and goods. Women’s shoes have gone from *de rigueur* heels to omnipresent flats in one year, and this year, Crocs, the old-style (and slightly ugly) comfort shoes of years past, have found a new market. Crocs stores enjoyed a 12 percent increase in foot traffic this past back-to-school season, and profits increased by 54 percent in the most recent quarter. “I think I have gotten to a point in my life where I need to let things go that don’t bring me enjoyment.” That line came from a person who had stopped going to Cleveland Browns football games, not because the team was weak but because he did not feel excited when they did good things. That sentiment sounds like the core message of Marie Kondo in her top-selling book, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* (2011), in which Kondo suggests looking at each possession, and if it does not bring you “joy,” discarding it. That mindset has already

led to the development of the so-called shared economy, in which access to services and goods is preferable to spending to own them. (*Washington Post*, 7/24/17 and 9/19/17; *New York Times*, 1/13/17)



“Do I need it? Does it spark joy?”

These are conditions that change people's behavior. They can also lead to changes in mindset.

Changing Minds – Our observations over the years have revealed that people can actually change the way they act before they consciously alter their minds about such a change. They act on decisions made unconsciously, only later consciously changing their minds. Then, in turn, the mind change reinforces behavior changes. One area in which a Better Life perspective is creeping into everyday life involves rethinking excessive dependence on digital communications. In 2010, Steve Jobs told a reporter that his children had never used an iPad. “We limit how much technology our kids use in the home,” Jobs admitted. Chris Anderson, former editor of *Wired*, said every digital device in his family's house has limits on how much it can be used “because we have seen the dangers of technology firsthand.” Also, Evan Williams, a founder of Blogger, Twitter and Medium, gave his two sons lots of books and refused to buy them iPads. The behavior of these icons of Silicon Valley indicates a different mental attitude about using digital technology: essentially, that balance is a desirable objective. Recent studies have linked extensive use of Facebook and other social media with diminished life satisfaction and higher levels of anxiety. The idea of reducing online time for better personal balance matches what one writer called the “Shultz Hour,” a practice of former Secretary of State George Shultz, who, each week, set aside an hour to do nothing but think. Heavily involved in tactical and transactional routines as Shultz was, the hour in silence and alone was the only time he could focus on larger contexts. Such larger contexts can be strategic or they can be personal, but they usually come with quiet, a condition gained through solitude, mindfulness, meditation, yoga, daydreaming or, as one writer has suggested, “probing and poking at ordinary space.” That last item on the list matches what more and more doctors are doing: writing prescriptions for people to take a walk in the park each day. And then there is *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F**k* (2017), which in September made it to the top of *Publishers Weekly's* Bestsellers list. In the book, author Mark Manson suggests that readers accept failure and choose just a few things that they really care about in life and focus on them. Part of that change in mindset, according to a different author, Pico Iyer, is to forego the Bucket List idea – that is, making lists and marking

In 2010, Steve Jobs told a reporter that his children had never used an iPad. “We limit how much technology our kids use in the home,” Jobs admitted.

items off, which, as a legacy of the industrial mindset, actually converts vacations as well as any kind of activity into a productivity task, thereby focusing the mind on a “job” at hand and causing it to miss important impromptu and interesting possibilities. Iyer, Manson, Shultz and others are reflecting what Lin-Manuel Miranda got from his experience creating one of the most popular Broadway shows ever: “‘Hamilton’ forced me to double down on being awake to the inspirations of just living my life.” (*Saturday Evening Post*, 7/17; *Vox*, 6/20/17; *Time*, 10/2/17; *New York Times*, 4/18/17; *Utne Reader*, Spring/17; *Guardian Weekly*, 3/24/17; *Publishers Weekly*, 7/31/17 and 9/25/17; *Travel & Leisure*, 4/17)



“You’re the first person I’ve met who didn’t become a pastry chef after suffering a nervous breakdown working in a corporate job.”

These are the ways individuals are moving along the bumpy road to a Better Life: not in a sweeping “Aha!” moment that turns everything upside down, but piece by piece, bit by bit, action by action and insight by insight.

One More Metaphor

This year, Boston public schools started placing new maps of the world in classrooms. In the earlier Mercator projection maps, distortions in relationships were common. As the depicted landmasses reached

toward the poles, geographies grew disproportionately to their actual size. On the Mercator map, South America looks the same size as Europe, even though it is actually twice as large. Greenland appears larger than Africa, even though it is 14 times smaller. The distortions, it was assumed, were necessary to convert a round globe into a two-dimensional image.

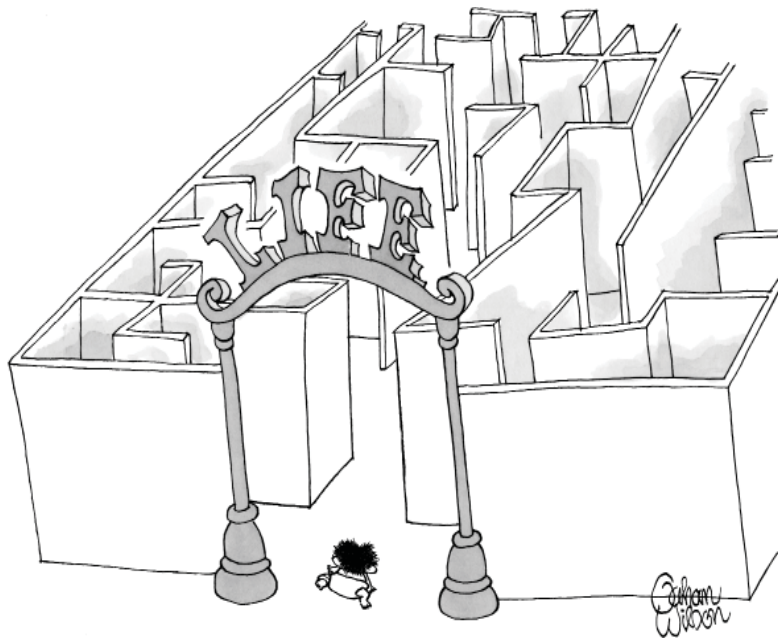
The new map – also two-dimensional – creates accurate relationships among the continents. Called an “equal area” map, the Peters map – named for its designer, Arno Peters, a German historian – presents each area on the map as proportional to its actual size relative to everything else. As a result, Africa and South America are larger than they were depicted on the Mercator map, and once-dominant realms such as North America and Europe, which were all quite large on the sixteenth-century map, are sized

downward to their true relation to other lands. (*Guardian Weekly*, 3/24/17)

The geographical undoing of past imagery and the resizing of landmasses into depictions in accord with reality can serve as a metaphor for individuals rearranging their priorities to fit the New Economy. When they make the transition to focusing on a Better Life, their perspectives

on their entire lives change. They see work, family, beliefs, money, experience and everything else differently, in a new proportional way, so to speak. Such a radical redoing of everyday life, however, does not come by taking down one image and replacing it with another, as Boston schools will be doing. Rather, such a significant change takes place slowly, over time. From being squeezed financially to finding a new way to relate to changing realities, Americans are On the Road to a Better Life.

When they make
the transition to
focusing on a Better
Life, they see work,
family, beliefs,
money, experience
and everything else
differently.



Some of our previous looks at this topic:

- IF 3819** A Bumpy Road To A New Economy: Governments, Businesses And Individuals Waiting For Something To Happen, 9/27/17
- IF 3810** What The New Economy Has Wrought: Anomalies And Changes In How The Economy Works, 6/1/17
- IF 3718** The Great Digital Experiment, Part II: Attitudes Shift, But Is It Too Late For The Young?, 12/5/16
- inF 1102** The Three Squeezes Strike: Economic Risks When There's A Lot Resting on Equities, 2/18/16
- IF 3618** This Can't Go On: Individuals Move From Coping With Troubles To Reassessing Conditions And Causes, 11/25/15
- IF 3613** A Moment to Reflect: Assessing and Addressing Some Unwanted Effects of Society's Focus On Performance, 7/31/15
- IF 3606** What's So Funny? A Cultural Shift in the Way the World is Perceived, 4/8/15
- IF 3603** The Right Mix: Consumers and Companies Seek A More Effective Blend Of Digital and Physical Activities, 2/6/15
- IF 3516** A Better Living Or A Better Life? Individuals Shift Personal Priorities And Start Redoing An Economy, 10/29/14