

## BlueWolf: The power of social pressure

Contributed by James BlueWolf  
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It's soccer season and suddenly the circle has come round and my wife and I are re-creating our lives from the early 1980s.

Instead of three children, it's four grandchildren. But times have changed and where we originally had to scrape and scurry to come up with money to sign them up and buy shin guards, this year we faced higher signup costs, uniform and cleat costs, shin guards as well as being asked to buy balls &ndash; one for each child &ndash; and almost all these costs are mandatory for participation.

The total cost for our grandchildren approached \$400 and we haven't paid for pictures yet (or the balls). None of our grandchildren could have participated without our support.

It got me thinking. Last year I was amazed at how many times during the year our grandchildren came home from school saying they had to have \$2, \$3 or \$5 for this or that. Field trips required a contribution. Class photos and participation in book-buying or candy sales, fundraisers and pledge drives all required that we pitch in financially. After all, no one wants their child to be the only one in class with no signatures on that pledge form and who doesn't purchase a class picture or individual photo?

Of course, I don't want to forget the nonschool-related but socially demanding holidays and events throughout the year &ndash; the county fair, Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, birthdays, other kids' birthdays, school plays, costs to attend high school sporting events, etc. For parents living way below the poverty line, who can't rely on grandparents support, these costs can be overwhelming.

We can provide anecdotal evidence that in many cases local families regularly use monies earmarked for rent, utilities, clothing or food to cover these costs to protect themselves and their children from embarrassment, ridicule or denial of participation.

I know what many of you are thinking: Don't be concerned with sticks and stones and all that, be fiscally responsible like the US government or Wall Street. Rent comes before food, food before entertainment, and to all these superfluous expenditures one should &ldquo;just say no!&rdquo; After all, aren't home budgets about deciding on priorities and shouldn't those who are unable to stick to solid economics be deserving of ruin? Shouldn't we be expected to follow fiscally responsible policies like the state of California?

These kinds of responses are representative of the traditionally conservative economic line most of my generation grew up with. Basically, we were taught, &ldquo;If you can't afford it &ndash; don't spend it!&rdquo;

While the previously stated point of view was appropriate for my generation, times began changing even as our children began to grow. We lived significantly below the poverty line but we almost always paid our bills and managed to provide the basic necessities.

While they were growing up our standard of living did not provide for enough income beyond our basic expenses to allow them to participate without depending on the offer of credit. Our children suffered ridicule, embarrassment and taunting because their tennis shoes and clothing didn't come from the right stores.

Although we counseled them not to pay attention and quoted platitudes about &ldquo;money not buying happiness&rdquo; and &ldquo;wealth not being an indicator of success,&rdquo; it was difficult to compete with the endless barrage of consumeristic exhortations coming from TV and their peers. We were unaware, until much later, how great an effect those taunts and slights had on their perspective and self-esteem.

The most recent economic calamity is a direct result of unexpected changes in the socio-economic paradigm. Where we lived through periods without running water, utilities and sewer, eating rice and beans for dinner, believing that possessions were secondary in importance to cultural enrichment and family &ndash; subsequent generations have been educated (by the media) and encouraged by their peers and society around them to participate wholeheartedly in a consumer frenzy.

Thirty-something and younger adults grew up with feelings that they were entitled to a standard of living far beyond their means. It was no longer about keeping up with the Joneses (as it was in our time) but in sharing in the entitlement of the American Dream. After all, they saw it on TV every night &ndash; everyone should have a new car, a new house, new clothes, a new body, the latest toy, a well-paying job, a Super Bowl party, a well-heeled Christmas, store-bought Halloween costumes, Easter candy, etc. And it isn't just about families shedding balanced budget ethics.

Point 1: During most of my life loan sharks were prosecuted for charging greater than 10 percent interest on credit, but today corporate credit organizations can charge 18-, 25- even 30-percent interest without blinking. Recent health insurance corporation documents show that their industry would like to have 35 cents on the dollar.

For many years now, young people have been encouraged to rely on credit if their income was not compatible with their desired standard of living. Many of them simply cannot imagine making do, they have to have the latest phone or techno gadget to make them feel like they are a part of the technological main stream.

Point 2: Despite an older generation's perspective that it's just common sense to stay within your means economically, that comes from a different time. I won't open the discussion of why it was a different time &ndash; just emphasize my point of view that social and individual priorities, both nationally and individually have changed. For the sake of argument and this article, let me make that assertion.

My generation was big about not caring what others thought. We tried, and failed, to engender that belief in our children. The last two generations (except for a few) care very deeply about what others think. In fact, I would go so far as to say that with many of them it is of paramount importance that others view them positively. They desperately want to

fit in and be viewed as successful. They want, as most people do, to have their children have what others have, and to participate with their peers. And so they constantly overextend themselves financially to make that happen, often ending up on the brink of economic disaster every month.

But that's only part of what I am writing this article about.

Consumerism created the monster &ndash; demanding through seasonal media blitzes that everyone participate in the holidays and events that drive the retail machine. Children have expectations, built by television and movies, that everyone is entitled to a bountiful Thanksgiving and a blitz of presents at Christmas and birthdays, candy at Halloween and Easter, participation in sports and events at school, etc.

The commonly held belief is that these are choices that people can make &ndash; whether or not to participate in these events and holidays relating to their economic level. But many of our young people are no longer setting priorities or making those judgments based on what they can afford. Why? We have simply misunderstood the dynamics of social pressure and peer influence.

Native people have a closer understanding of what has happened. Indigenous peoples seldom codified their lives into laws and ordinances. That doesn't mean we didn't have rules and regulations, values and mores, it simply means we enforced them differently.

We used, for the most part, public opinion and social pressures to enforce our precepts and manage our governments. Why was social pressure so effective? Because in native society people wanted to be a part of the whole. We cared what our neighbors and relatives thought and only occasionally did people stray from the norm. In those cases we didn't ostracize those who sought a different path, we built special roles and recognition for them within our societies &ndash; everybody had a value and a place. We understood how important and how powerful social pressure was when people wanted to belong and their self image depended on how they were perceived within the whole.

For reasons I won't go into here, much of the American populace under 40 has embraced similar values of caring and wanting to belong and be included. Unfortunately it is not values and culture that is at the center of what they want to belong to and share &ndash; it is that specific promise of entitlement to a wealthy standard of living that they have grown up expecting to be a part of.

They have grown up feeling assured it is their right to share in the wealth, whether they earn it or not. They rationalize that they must insure their children can participate in every way and their self-esteem is defined by that participation &ndash; for themselves and their families.

That perception is reinforced by their peers and children's schoolmates in the form of ridicule and ostracism if they don't live up to contemporary standards. Many children blame their parents for not being able to provide what others have and think less of them &ndash; diminishing the respect and family bonds that used to buffer families against the inequities of lack of wealth and economic status.

They simply must have everything and how they get there, or the potential future consequences of their indulgences, is less important to them than the momentary feeling of belonging and sharing in the success of the whole.

So they overspend at every holiday, birthday, and social event and participate in every school function to make sure their child isn't the only one left home during the field trip, or the only one without a signature on the pledge form &ndash; even if they have to overdraw their bank account to make it happen.

Go ahead and criticize them all you want, but we have a generation or two living like that today. The power of social pressure and the misinformation that consumerism is the end-all, be-all of the American Dream has co-opted their values. It's more important to fit in and participate now than to worry about the consequences tomorrow.

So we are enduring the resulting economic crisis &ndash; caused by those that encouraged default and those that embraced it. It doesn't do us a whole lot of good to bemoan our circumstances, after all, we all share the responsibility for letting it happen and even Native people are suffering the same problems on the wealthier reservations and rancherias.

The old story about the fiddling grasshopper ignoring the turning of fall and failing to prepare for winter is a perfect allegory to describe our present situation. So many important issues directly related to our future standard of living, even our survival, are ignored in favor of selfish, petty or philosophical fanaticism, and a tendency to ignore the mainstream for the fringe.

What can we do?

We can talk about openly curtailing our indulgent habits and returning to responsible economic practices.

We can begin to limit our consumerism and encourage our children and grandchildren to be satisfied with one present at a birthday rather than purposely inviting 10 other poor kids (all expected to bring a present) to the party so afterward we can experience a glut of things so we can feel rich (and teach our children the wrong lesson).

We can emphasize free music and art and sport without overhead, pot lucks and dances, poetry and prose events, social bonding and responsibility above buying and selling.

If we can do that we'll have a chance &ndash; if not we'll have to wait until the standard of living falls so far that the void between those that have and those that don't create the forces that demand change and upheaval. It's not rocket science&mdash;it's history and sociology.

But I'm not one to cast the first stone cause I'm just as guilty as the rest. I'm hoping others, more disciplined and capable, will lead the way.

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