Given physical wealth, civilization has permission to focus on relational wealth - The Udon Lady

There is a small udon shop in Japan run by a woman in her eighties. It is not famous. There is nothing particularly remarkable about the building. It is simply part of the neighbourhood. She makes udon.

She makes enough money from the shop to live. But describing what happens there simply as an economic transaction — a customer buys a bowl of noodles and she receives money — misses almost everything that is important.

She knows her customers. She knows that one likes a slightly stronger broth. Another prefers less salt. Another likes a particular combination of ingredients. These differences are small, but she remembers them. The customers know her too. Over decades the shop has become part of the community, and the community has become part of her.

Next door is a small cake shop. It is run by a man in his mid-nineties. Every morning he gets up at about 5:30. When there is enough daylight, he goes to the local park and exercises with a group of people, young and old. They know one another. If somebody who normally attends does not appear, their absence is noticed. Someone may ask what has happened. Someone may telephone them. Someone may even go looking for them.

Nobody has been contracted to do this. Nobody is paid to notice. They simply notice.

When the cake-shop owner returns from his morning exercise, he meticulously sweeps the pavement outside his shop. And then he keeps going. He sweeps outside the udon shop as well. There is barely a speck of dirt left.

The udon lady does not employ him to do this. There is no invoice. Nobody records the time he spends sweeping. There is no agreement requiring her to provide something of equivalent value in return. Yet everybody notices. And everybody understands.

The Alcove

Beside the front of the udon shop is a small alcove. Over many years the udon lady has learned ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arrangement. It is not an easy skill. Someone once gave their time to teach her. She practised. She made mistakes. She developed judgement. Over years, perhaps decades, something that began as knowledge transferred from one human being to another became part of her. And then she gave it away. As the seasons change, she creates a new arrangement in the little alcove beside her shop. She does not sell it. There is no admission charge.

Nobody is required to look at it. A person walking to work may notice it for three seconds. An elderly neighbour may stop for a minute. A child may see a flower she has never noticed before.

The udon lady receives pleasure from making it. The passer-by receives pleasure from seeing it. And the udon lady may receive another pleasure from knowing that other people have enjoyed what she has created.

Something quite complicated has happened. A skill has been transferred from one generation to another. The recipient has developed that skill through effort. She has transformed the skill into beauty. She has placed that beauty into a shared space.

Other people have received it. Their appreciation flows back to her. And perhaps, somewhere else in the community, they do something for somebody else.

No money has changed hands. Nevertheless, value has been created.

A Different Kind of Economy

Economics has difficulty describing what is happening here. The cake-shop owner sweeping outside the udon shop probably contributes nothing measurable to GDP. The udon lady's flower arrangement contributes virtually nothing. The people exercising in the park who notice that an elderly member is missing contribute nothing. A neighbour checking on another neighbour contributes nothing. Yet remove these things one by one and the community becomes substantially poorer.

That suggests that there are at least two economies operating simultaneously.

There is the **transactional economy**.

I give you money. You give me udon. There are prices, contracts, debts, wages and accounts. Exchange can be measured. But underneath it is another economy.

It might be called the **reciprocal economy**.

I sweep your pavement. You create flowers for us. Someone taught you ikebana. Someone notices that I did not arrive at the park this morning. Someone remembers how I like my noodles. Someone asks whether I am all right. These exchanges are not priced. More importantly, they are not directly reciprocal.

The udon lady does not owe the cake-shop man three flower arrangements because he swept her pavement three times. That would destroy much of what makes the exchange valuable. The gift is given without a specified return. Yet it does not disappear. It creates a predisposition towards reciprocation. Not necessarily towards the giver. Not necessarily today. And not necessarily with something equivalent. The reciprocation can flow through the community.

A gives to B.
B gives to C.
C gives to D.
D may eventually give something to A.

Nobody keeps the ledger. The community is the ledger.

The Components

When we break the story down, a surprisingly sophisticated human system appears.

- There is skill. Someone had to learn how to make udon. Someone had to learn ikebana. Someone taught those skills.
- There is effort. Skill develops through persistence and practice.
- There is contribution. The skill is used partly for someone other than oneself.
- There is recognition. Other people notice the contribution.
- There is appreciation. They value what has been given.
- There is belonging. Repeated interactions tell people that they are part of something larger than themselves.
- There is trust. Nobody needs to specify every obligation in advance.
- There is care. An unexplained absence from morning exercises matters.
- There is reciprocation. Receiving something creates a predisposition to contribute something in return.
- There is continuity. Skills, habits and expectations pass through time and between generations.
- And there is meaning.

The udon lady is not simply occupying herself. She matters to other people. And they matter to her.

Ikigai

This brings us closer to ikigai. Ikigai cannot simply mean finding an activity that gives an individual personal satisfaction. That interpretation is too narrow.

The udon lady's ikigai exists partly between people. She develops herself, but what she develops becomes a gift. The gift affects others. Their response affects her. Their own gifts affect still others.

Ikigai therefore becomes recursive.

> *I develop because of others.*
> *I contribute to others.*
> *Their response develops me.*
> *They contribute to others.*

Meaning is simultaneously individual and collective. The individual remains distinct, but meaning flows through relationships.

What Abundance Changes

This becomes particularly important when we think about AI.

For most of human history, enormous amounts of human time have been required simply to produce the things necessary for survival.

- Food.
- Clothing.
- Housing.
- Energy.
- Transport.
- Administration.
- Information.
- Healthcare.

If increasingly intelligent machines can produce much more of these things with dramatically less human labour, something fundamental changes.

The traditional economic question has been:

> *How do we allocate scarce resources?*

But abundance creates another question:

> *What do human beings do when producing scarce material goods is no longer the organising purpose of most of their lives?*

The udon lady suggests one answer: We do not stop producing value. We change what we mean by value.

The scarce resources increasingly become human ones:

- attention,
- care,
- trust,
- recognition,
- beauty,
- belonging,
- wisdom,
- skill,
- participation,
- friendship,
- meaning.

Machines may help create material abundance. But material abundance does not automatically create these things. Humans create them for one another.

From Transaction to Gift

This does not mean that money disappears.

The udon lady still sells udon. The cake-shop owner still sells cakes. Buildings still have to be maintained. Energy has to be supplied. Resources have to be allocated. The transactional economy remains. But its relative importance may decline.

For thousands of years scarcity forced a large proportion of human relationships into transactions:

What will you give me if I do this for you?

Abundance potentially allows a larger part of life to operate differently:

I can do this, it has value to you, and therefore I will give it.

The distinction is profound.

A transaction closes an obligation. I pay you $10. You give me something worth $10. Our accounts return to zero. A gift can do precisely the opposite. It can open a relationship. There is no debt of $10. Instead there is recognition:

You contributed something to us.

And that recognition creates the possibility of future contribution. Not repayment. Reciprocation.

The Network

Now enlarge the picture. Imagine hundreds of people behaving this way. Then thousands:

- One person teaches.
- Another repairs.
- Another grows flowers.
- Another listens.
- Another cares for a child.
- Another visits someone who is lonely.
- Another keeps the street beautiful.
- Another preserves a tradition.
- Another invents something.
- Another coaches a teenager.
- Another tells stories.
- Another notices who did not arrive at the park.

Each person possesses different gifts. Each develops those gifts partly because other people previously gave something to them. Each contributes some of those gifts back into the community.

The result is not a chain of transactions. It is a network of contribution and reciprocation. And because the gifts are different, exact equivalence is neither possible nor desirable.

The ninety-five-year-old man can sweep the pavement. The eighty-year-old woman can arrange flowers. A young person can help both of them with technology. Someone else can teach the young person patience. The network works precisely because people are unequal in their gifts while equal in their capacity to contribute something.

No Contract, No Debt, No Price

This may be the most interesting part.

There is:

- no price,
- no contract,
- no defined debt,
- no specified repayment,
- no central allocator.

Yet there is order. There are expectations. There is memory. There is recognition. There is correction when norms are breached. There is reputation. There is trust. And there is continuous exchange.

This is not an absence of structure. It is an extraordinarily sophisticated human structure. We have simply become so accustomed to measuring the monetary economy that much of this other economy has become invisible.

The Economy After Abundance

Perhaps, therefore, the destination of abundance is not a world in which nobody works. That is asking the wrong question. Perhaps it is a world in which progressively fewer human beings are required to work primarily because scarcity forces them to.

Machines increasingly take care of production. Humans increasingly take care of one another. Not through some centrally prescribed system of compulsory benevolence. Through millions of small contributions based upon ability, interest, relationship and meaning.

That is very different from leisure. And it is very different from welfare. It is participation.

The great challenge of an abundant civilisation may therefore not be distributing money to people who no longer have jobs. That may be necessary, but it is only the beginning. The much larger challenge is creating social structures within which people can continue to matter to one another.

More Mores for More

And perhaps this is where More Mores for More eventually leads.

More physical abundance gives people greater freedom from necessity. Greater freedom allows more opportunity to develop individual gifts.

Those gifts can be contributed to others. Those contributions increase the abundance experienced by others.

Their recognition and reciprocation return value into the community. Which encourages further contribution. It is recursive.

> *Abundance → freedom → development → contribution → reciprocation → belonging → meaning → further contribution.*

The machine economy and the human economy therefore do not have to compete. At their best they can complement one another.

Machines create increasing abundance in things. Humans create increasing abundance in relationships. And the objective becomes not simply more goods for more people, but more opportunities for more people to give more of themselves to one another over more time.

Back to the Udon Shop

And so, we return to the little shop.

The udon lady rearranges the flowers. The old man sweeps the pavement. Someone walks past and notices that the flowers have changed. Tomorrow morning someone at the park notices that the old man has not arrived. A bowl of noodles is adjusted slightly because its maker remembers exactly how one particular customer likes it. Nothing spectacular has happened. No government programme has been announced. No corporation has reported an increase in productivity. GDP may not have moved at all. But skills have been exercised. Beauty has been created. Care has been expressed. People have been recognised. Trust has been reinforced. Belonging has been strengthened. Meaning has been created. Gifts have flowed from one human being to another without anybody keeping the accounts.

Perhaps the extraordinary thing about the world of abundance is that we do not have to invent its human purpose from scratch. We already know how to do it.

The udon lady has been showing us all along.