



PERSPECTIVES

by Rinaldo S. Brutoco



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Let Them Eat Cake

Queen Marie Antoinette famously quipped “Let them eat cake” when she and Louis XVI were confronted by the Women’s March on Versailles demanding bread for their hungry families in October 1789. Her remark, and the forced return to Paris by the royal couple, marked the beginning of the end of the French Monarchy which continued to unravel until the king was executed on January 21, 1793. The women were complaining that they had no bread to feed their starving families. How callous could a devastatingly rich woman be to sneer at them that they should “eat cake” when they couldn’t even afford bread? What was that all about?

Clearly, Marie Antoinette is the poster child for wealthy individuals who have no sense of obligation for their fellow humans. She was aristocratically blind to their hunger. She was so entranced by her own extraordinary wealth that she couldn’t begin to see the pain of those less fortunate than herself. And, we don’t need to be as rich as the Queen of France in the late 1700s to see all around us today a certain callous disregard for the plight of the less fortunate in our land.

My friend Abby Disney has been vocal as the great niece of Walt himself. She is upset with the amount Disney corporation pays its executives while leaving many of their employees below a livable wage. In 2019 she famously asked CEO Bob Iger to distribute half of his \$139M+ paycheck to the struggling employees of Disney’s theme parks who make pitifully low wages. Abby believes, as I do, that “pay equity” is top of the list for improving the way corporations meet their responsibilities to their employees, rather than solely enriching executives, shareowners, and investors. Abby, born a wealthy heiress, retained a deep concern for the less fortunate. No mere affectation, it is a core belief that those of us with resources have an absolute duty to share the riches of our society with everyone—particularly those struggling to afford their “daily bread.” Abby is the opposite of Marie Antoinette, and as such, is a model for us all.

Yes, food insecurity is a major challenge in the USA today...and it’s getting worse. Watch what happens now that the \$600 weekly Federal supplement for unemployment benefits has run out. According to Erik Talkin, who runs the Santa Barbara Foodbank, we have already experienced food demand doubling in the past few months as a result of the pandemic. And, he believes it will go far higher in the weeks just ahead. Ok, that’s the problem. What’s the solution?

Remarkably, it isn’t that hard to figure out and not much more difficult to implement. As noted previously in this column, the economy cannot be repaired or “re-opened” before getting the

pandemic under control. From looking at every other major industrial country around the world, we know exactly what they did, and we can copy it to bring the virus under control here. It starts with everyone wearing a mask everywhere outside the home—even the beach, as they do in Europe. Everyone wearing a mask and observing social distancing guidelines together with observing good personal hygiene, will dramatically “flatten the curve.” Once the curve is flattened, we can contact trace and use testing to bring the pandemic firmly under control. Then we can begin to thoughtfully re-open. That doesn’t include bars, concerts, or other large gatherings. But it does include being able to get your hair cut or a pedicure if you’d like. It also means being able to go to work without fear of contracting a deadly disease. Yes, once we can go back to work we can rebuild our economy. And every day we delay means further structural damage is being done to the economy which will make it that much more challenging to climb out. We just sustained the largest one quarter decline of GDP EVER, meaning, about 39 percent on an annualized basis. And, current unemployment statistics are dramatically worse than anything Roosevelt dealt with in the 30s.

We have a problem of significant food insecurity for over 30M Americans. Will we, like Marie Antoinette, mock the hungry with taunts of “let them eat cake” or will we, like Abby Disney, take it upon ourselves to argue for a more humane distribution of society’s wealth? Everyone had to all pull together to fight the Second World War. Not only the soldiers who sacrificed their lives on the battlefield, but all the women like Rosie the Riveter who had to take up their place with sacrifices made here at home. These were big sacrifices. We went without the convenience of being able to buy what we wanted when we wanted. There were huge restrictions on everything from butter to nylons. All for the war effort.

Those sacrifices were far more difficult than having to wear a mask. We made common sacrifice in the spirit of working for the common good. Every citizen mattered. Everything we did really mattered as we battled the Nazi’s Third Reich. Well, we did it before. We can do it again? We have to.

As we wage this twin battle against the pandemic and the economic collapse it has created, we cannot fail to care for our neighbors. We need to help them find bread. We need to help them stay in their homes even as eviction is threatening. This is not a time to be callous. This is a time to exhibit a renewed sense of commitment to our community and to each other. It is time to act. We can help out at the local foodbank, or volunteer at the local homeless shelter, or put a little extra change in the Sunday

collection plate at our favorite church. The number of folks who need real help is too great. And, most of all, the opportunity to see ourselves as members of a community which takes care of its own has never been more real for our personal growth.

Many of us are blessed with jobs where we can telecommute. Many of us have incomes still intact. We're the 70 percent of our community that can afford to help the other 30 percent find the bread they need to survive or help them make it! No one can do everything in a crisis this large. But everyone can do something. Let's commit to leave no one behind. Let's commit that there will no longer be food insecurity on our Central Coast. Let us see the plight of our neighbors as our challenge, not something "they" have to fix. The truth is that "they" can't possibly fix what is broken in their lives without the active support of us who are fortunate enough to still have our health and our jobs. No, Marie Antoinette, we don't want to arrogantly taunt those who hunger. We want to recall and live by those immortal words of the poet John Dunn: "No man is an island unto himself alone and complete... do not ask for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee.

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