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The Economics of Bouncy Balls

Melanie Springer Mock

Melanie Springer Mock has two eight-year-old sons, Benjamin and Samuel, and two stepchildren, Melissa (30) and Ryan (26).

She is an associate professor at George Fox University and has written for a number of publications, including *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Adoptive Families*, and *Christian Feminism Today*, among others. Her book, *Writing Peace: The Unheard Voices of Great War Mennonite Objectors*, was published in 2002.

Even though her kids stopped naps five years ago, Melanie still takes one every afternoon, even at her office.

THE FIGHT IGNITES. One minute, my sons are chattering nonsense in the car's back seat, and the next, I can hear the thwack of fist against winter coat, then a barrage of retaliatory hits. Both boys stretch arms across the Subaru, seatbelts restraining them from a full-on war. Before I can even slow the car to intervene, Benjamin and Samuel are crying, each injured by flying limbs, jabs to the eye, well-placed kicks.

"What in the world?" I speak into the rearview mirror, guiding my car to the curb. "What in the heck is going on back there?" (I may not say *heck*. I don't know.) Turning into the darkened back seat, I can just barely see my sobbing seven-year-olds, holding their wounds. Discarded between them is the subject of their battle: a broken paddle-ball game, sold for less than a dollar at any discount store.

"This?" I scream. With some restraint, of course. "This is what you are fighting over? This is worth hurting your brother?"

Each boy sputters a rationale, tears and slobber blurring their faces. Sam won a paddle game at the elementary school carnival, earlier that very afternoon. But so had Ben. Sam's paddle game broke a short while later, the ball disconnecting from the paddle, making the toy useless. Recognizing the sudden paddle-ball-game inequity, Samuel—like his brother, a tireless crusader for fairness between siblings—took Ben's game and ripped the ball from its string. Justice has been restored, at least in Samuel's mind: Both boys have the same thing, a broken game. Benjamin, of course, has a different understanding of justice—at least in this instance.

"It's not fair!" Samuel sobs, still smarting from his brother's punches.

"It's not fair!" Benjamin cries, upset by his brother's destruction.

And I want to wail, too: *It's Not Fair*. Because my peaceful ride in the car has been lost to an argument over a stupid, cheap toy. Because my boys are fighting over something so silly. Because I would never, ever, be able to convince them that this life—the life they lead—is more fair to them than they could ever imagine.

I want to wail, too, but I don't.

* * *

Long before I have children of my own, my sister calls to complain about her kids—or, at least, about their latest Happy Meal prizes. A few hours post-McDonald's, the Happy Meal-filled children are no longer happy. My niece and nephew, probably about six and four at the time, fight over their toys, neither of them satisfied with whatever Ronald has tossed into their meal bags along with the fries and nuggets. Plus, the toys

play an annoying tinny song, eternally stuck in a maddening loop. The arguing, the music, the late-afternoon chaos: all of it somehow makes my sister snap.

"I couldn't help it," she admits to me over the phone. "I took their toys into the garage, and smashed them to bits with a hammer."

I offer her the bemused laugh of a woman without children, of someone who has never confronted the tyranny of Happy Meals toys or the agony of kids arguing over molded plastic junk. But while she continues to unwind her story of temporary insanity, I think to myself, *Wow, my sister is nuts. There's no way I'd ever go crazy over a toy.* I wonder if I should tell her she is making too much of nothing.

For obvious reasons, I don't.

* * *

Every year, our small town of Dundee, Oregon, holds several kids-oriented events, including the elementary school carnival, at which my boys win their soon-broken paddle-ball toys; and a fall festival, where neighbors gather to celebrate our community. At both events, kids can play any number of carnival games, for free, and are given prizes at each gaming booth. Awards never seem based on actually winning a game: A kid could wildly miss making a free throw, or could toss a dart far off the balloon mark, and still be given opportunity to choose his or her prize. (Never mind the lesson this teaches children: Go ahead and fail! You will be rewarded no matter the quality of your effort!)

At these events, children are offered either candy or cheap plastic toys from overseas businesses that excel in creating children's ephemera: bouncy balls, finger rockets, temporary tattoos, plastic rings and bracelets. And while I know the event organizers are giving parents a choice between unhealthy prizes, like candy, and the other stuff, I beg my children to take

the sugar. As they rifle through a bucket full of temporary tattoos, I plead, voice locked in a sincere plaintiff cry: "Please, have some candy instead. You like Tootsie Rolls, right? Look, there's some Smarties! And a sucker! Anything but the finger rocket."

What kind of parent goads her children into taking more candy?

The kids rarely listen to me, at any rate, and by the time we've left the carnival, both boys have bags stuffed with worthless toys and one or two Tootsie Rolls. At home, they dump their loot on the kitchen table, rub a few temporary tattoos on to their faces (of course!), put on some of their new rings and bracelets, then leave the detritus from their outing—the toys no longer appealing, or already broken—scattered all over the table top. Within hours, I will find plastic rings on the floor; finger rockets shot into our house plants; bouncy balls, half chewed by our dog, in the corners of rooms.

As I walk through the house, picking up junk, surreptitiously throwing stuff away, already cursing our afternoon at the carnival, my blood boils. Like my sister, pounding cheap toys into her garage floor, I seethe with righteous anger, swiping up toys and railing—silently, at least—about the stupidity of it all. Why do we have these carnivals? Why do event organizers think kids need all this junk, cheap and easily broken, dumped into landfills within hours of being "won"?

My own anger seems fueled by the larger issue these crappy toys represent. It's hard for me to teach my kids economic justice when they are treated to material goods each time they attend a school carnival or purchase a kids' meal or even say a Bible verse at church; when they are rewarded for doing nothing much; when the toys themselves show me how much they have, especially compared to the children whose parents probably made the very items we so easily discard.

I vow that at the next carnival, I will demand my kids not take any toys at all, that they will win candy or nothing whatsoever. I make my silent pledge, but at the next kids' event where cheap toys are de rigueur, I don't keep it.

Of course I don't.

* * *

It happens about once every month: I succumb to buying my kids a fast-food kids' meal. Usually, I do this because I'm harried, driving them from one son's baseball game to another's soccer match. Or because I realize the food is cheaper, and more plentiful, than anything I could buy from the restaurant's regular menu. Or because my defenses are weak, and I've decided the fight over Happy Meals is not one I'm willing to wage from my car's front seat.

I rarely regret my decision until the boys have finished their fries and Cokes, and are digging in to the kids'-meal prizes that always accompany their orders. When I'm unwrapping layer upon layer of plastic to reveal a trinket that does little except shill for the latest television show or movie, I feel my rage building, again. *Why do I let myself buy this stuff?* I wonder.

And then, I think about people in the majority world when I'm handing my kid a plastic Spongebob that shoots discs from his slotted hands; or a Spiderman figure that moves his arms up and down; or a wind-up R2-D2 that gurgles something unintelligible. I imagine a Chinese worker, shoving these toys into plastic, bemused by the kind of junk that appeals to American materialists. I imagine a child worker in Vietnam, screwing Spiderman's arms to his torso, for hours and hours every day. I imagine someone in India, designing the R2-D2 doll my sons will wind up half a dozen times before its inane garble fails to keep their interests.

I'm tempted to tell my boys about the people who make their kids'-meal toys and the junk they readily win at carnivals and just as easily discard. When they fight over a paddle-ball game, or discard cheap plastic toys into all the corners of our house, I long to give them intricate lectures about economics, about the injustices of sweat shop labor, about the children their age who may be working in factories, creating toys so their families can live. I want to talk with them about the poverty in other nations, and the ways our own country's wealth has contributed to the destitution of others. I want to tell them about what I think Jesus himself would say about economic injustices.

But for some reason, I don't.

* * *

We are in India, traveling to the Himalayas for my step-daughter Melissa's wedding. Before striking off into the mountains to meet our new in-laws, my husband, my boys, and I spend some time in New Delhi as tourists, driving through the crowded city streets in a comfortable air-conditioned car. Even though we've only been in India for twenty-four hours, my boys already appear overloaded by what they see, taste, smell. The hotel's breakfast is too spicy for them, the yogurt too tart. The Delhi smell of dampness and trash and incense overwhelms. The appearance of families sleeping on sidewalks, cattle wandering nearby, green and yellow tuck-tucks weaving through traffic: It all overwhelms, and the boys sit close to me in the car's backseat, unfettered by restraints or seat belts, another sensory change from their normal lives.

At each stoplight, our car is accosted by young beggars, children my sons' age, wearing dirty, too-small clothes. Many of them hold out goods for sale, the same kind of cheap toys my kids win at the Dundee carnival. The beggars tap on our closed windows, holding up their wares so we might see. Be-

cause we are easily identified as Westerners, and therefore wealthy, even more children rush to our car. They yell into our closed space, pleading with us to accept their superior products, letting us know they are hungry by holding their clearly bloated stomachs, or by putting their hand to their mouths, communicating that they will buy food with the money we give them.

I've read enough about India to understand begging collectives. I know that many, if not most, of these children work not for their own food, but for gang leaders who confiscate their meager profits in exchange for inadequate meals and, perhaps, a place to safely sleep. Child beggars sometimes learn how to evoke sympathy through feigned illness or, in some cases, through disability forced on them by the criminals for whom they work. Giving the beggars a few rupees—or, even, buying what they sell—only perpetuates an evil system, one that essentially enslaves children.

And so, at the New Delhi stoplights, we remain silent. We stare straight ahead, refusing to acknowledge the poor children knocking at our window. Or, I should say, my husband and I refuse to acknowledge. My boys are intrigued.

"Mom! Look! That boy has Hello Kitty pencils. Can we buy one?" Benjamin asks.

"Why are they selling this stuff here?" Samuel wonders aloud. "Why can't Indians just go to a store?"

"Mom! Look! Can we buy that balloon?" they plead, in unison.

I tell them no, we will not be giving money to the beggars. I even try to explain why: that the children work for grown-ups who force them to sell these toys. Helping my then-kindergarten-aged boys understand an unjust problem perpetuated by poverty is exceedingly difficult. And the image of beggar children does something to my sons too. They seem

more subdued as we continue our trip through New Delhi. During the rest of our travels in India, they will ask about the children, and about the toys they are selling, often at inexplicable times: at breakfast, or right before bed, or as we are walking through the Himalayan woods. Their questions suggest to me they are trying, again and again, to get their heads around a situation they may never fully understand: that some children are so poor they lack a home or food; that some children do not go to school, but spend their days begging, forced there by grown-ups; that some children do not play with the toys they sell street-side.

This seems like the perfect opening, the opportunity to lecture them about economic justice. Far away from home, in a country overwhelmed by poverty, I could explain how much better off we are as middle-class Westerners. As my boys wonder about the children knocking at the car window, I could easily talk about how Jesus demands we give up all we own to care for the poor, and that I think our desire to have more stuff probably makes Jesus sad.

I could say these things while we're in India, but I don't.

* * *

How do I keep my boys from feeling guilty for the lives they've been given, even as I hope they seek justice for others who have not been so similarly blessed? I want that to be the question at the heart of bouncy-ball economics, and maybe it is: My despair about the junky toys they receive at every turn—and the global inequities those toys represent to me—is countered by a desire to let my kids be kids, shooting finger rockets at each other without fretting about the exploited workers who made them.

To be honest, though, my kids' lust for cheap goods pricks my anger precisely because of my own problematic relationship with materialism. I imagine I could hold tight to my impo-

tent rage, railing at my kids about those exploited workers, about the begging collectives in India, about the oppression wrought by Happy Meals toys. I suppose I might dismantle my kids' sense that life is unfair when their paddle games break by reminding them of the children in India, holding dirty hands to our windows. I could smash all their cheap carnival-won toys to smithereens (oh, believe me, I could!). Yet when I'm tossing half-chewed bouncy balls into the trash, I sometimes remind myself of this: that, as an adult, I also struggle to navigate the challenges of materialism. Living simply isn't so easy, especially when your culture lures you into believing you will be more content with fashionable clothes, or a well-designed kitchen, or a sweet-looking car. Or a temporary tattoo, for that matter.

I would like to say my husband and I model economic justice for our children, showing them how to live simply out of care for the world's poor. But I have the same fascination with shiny things that they have, though on a much larger scale: I don't want finger rockets, but I'd love a new Subaru Forester; I'm not partial to plastic bracelets, but would like to wear a North Face jacket. I find it's hard to teach my children economic justice and simplicity when I purchase clothes, jewelry, cars, household goods, without much—if any—regard for where they were made, and without much thought for how my own materialism further divides a world into "haves" and "have nots."

If anything, then, my boys' own lust for cheap toys reflects my failure to live simply, as well as my own rampant materialism, my lack of consideration for the poor, perhaps my own sense of entitlement about the things I own. And so, if I'm to take bouncy-ball economics seriously, I will first need to accept Jesus' message in the Gospels, and will need to acknowledge what Jesus means when he says if we are to follow him, we

must sell everything we have and give the proceeds to the poor (Luke 12).

Everything? I ask, fists curling around my stuff. Surely not.

Oh, certainly I try to justify my own economic choices, try to convince myself we are doing what Jesus says: We drive old cars, wear inexpensive clothes and cheap jewelry, have a house that is in need of updating and remodeling. We give to charities, avoid lavish vacations, use the *More With Less* cookbook, for goodness' sake. But if I am honest with myself, I am just as much a consumer—and, by extension, a potential oppressor of the poor—as anyone else who has rejected the idea that when Christ means we should sell everything, he really means everything.

As my kids grow older (and as I also grow older) we are learning—little by little—what economic injustice looks like, and as a family, we have made some efforts to live by Christ's call to simplicity. Still, more often than not, we fail that call. But we muddle forward, slapping temporary tattoos to our faces and throwing bouncy balls against living room walls—before the dog swallows them, of course. We journey on, hoping that some day, Benjamin and Samuel will learn what living simply—and caring for the poor—truly means. And, hopefully, some day I will learn as well.

Because I really want to live in a world that is economically just. But I don't.

Wealth Isn't in the Crayons

Dorcas Smucker

Dorcas Smucker lives in a ninety-nine-year-old farmhouse in Harrisburg, Oregon, with her husband, Paul, and their six children.

She is a columnist for the Eugene, Oregon, *Register-Guard* and has written three books. She keeps busy with her family, her Mennonite church, writing, sewing, and the family's grass-seed business.

You can read more about Dorcas on her blog, "Life in the Shoe" (dorcas-smucker.blogspot.com).

EVEN NOW, I am not quite sure why I bought it. I was at Costco a few weeks ago, scanning the office supplies, and there it was, a thick box of sixty-four Crayola crayons, with the familiar green and yellow lines slanting down the front.

Perhaps I was simply falling for a clever marketing ploy, but those crayons called to me from thirty-five years ago, when to own such a box would have meant that God was smiling on me, life was saying, "Yes!" and all the doors were opening at last.

So I bought it, and it sits on my desk. The top bends back to reveal tiers of pointed crayons in four neat sections. Wild strawberry, turquoise blue, cerulean, chestnut, and carnation pink. I check and yes, they still make crayons in both green-

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