

## The Oil Drum: Campfire

### Discussions about Energy and Our Future

#### The Role of Service in this Community?

Posted by [Prof. Goose](#) on August 9, 2009 - 10:40am in [The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

Topic: [Sociology/Psychology](#)

Tags: [learning](#), [service](#), [volunteering](#) [[list all tags](#)]

Nate is traveling and asked me to put together a campfire for this weekend. Now, dear reader, please keep in mind that I've not written a piece in a while, and never one of these...so be gentle. :)

I realized that I'd been thinking about something quite important and related to the Campfire theme for a while now: the role of service as it relates to this community and its purpose. So, let's talk about it.

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When Dave and I started TOD seemingly decades ago, we did it out of curiosity and a desire to create a space where the many energy-related "angles" could be discussed in an evidence-based, non-polemic manner. We didn't do it to create some vitally-important website that would grow to the extent that TOD has--and, though I can't speak for Dave, I am humbled by the relevance of this space and its ability to remain interesting and provocative on a weekly basis. There are some amazing people who hang around here on our couch. :)

The point is that we did this because a) we wanted to learn, and b) we wanted to help.

One of the reasons this site has worked is because we set an academic and empirical tone from the beginning: this site is defined by a unique symphony of ideas AND evidence.

TOD is also not about making financial profit--though there is little doubt that some/many readers have made money from the analyses done here--something that is not lost on us in the least (\*cough\* [click here for the donation box](#) or look in the upper left-hand corner of the site \*cough\*). Still, that's not why a single person here, at least that I know of, has continued to contribute over time.

Not to sound elitist (but I fear it's going to), but part of me thinks the reason this site isn't geared in that direction is due to some norms that existed here from the beginning, norms that persevered because the founders, and many of our staff who joined since, have been affiliated with academia or at least achieved advanced degrees. I would argue that while there are some academics who make really good coin, most don't; they do their jobs as a noble service: to educate, to try to help people learn, think, and therefore empower themselves about the bigger picture.

The priority here at TOD has not been to raise our standing or make a profit--it has been to reason, to educate, and to spread that discourse as far and wide as we can with our scant resources, perhaps influencing people along the way--just like a professor.

No one on staff has materially benefited directly from the (small) donations this site has received.

That's not to say that we haven't been invited for a few interviews, been given awards, and/or received laud for the materials developed on this site. And that is gratifying in and of itself...of course, somewhere in the back of my head, I can hear Nate saying something about the dopamine/social capital from laud or "being right" is a powerful "feel good" force when it happens. Even so, dopamine can't be all of it, can it?

To the point - what I have been thinking about lately is the daily drive that keeps this whole enterprise going, whether it's Leanan, Gail, Nate, Super, or any of our staff. I have observed that this staff of roughly 25 keep it going from a combination of desires: to spread ideas, to educate, to build community - there are many others, but from what I have observed, they do it from a place of kindness, of caring, and of genuine concern for the direction society is heading.

But WHY?

Our staff sticks their nose in it over and over, putting themselves and their ideas out there for all to see; and folks use those ideas as they will, critique them, laud them, disabuse them. There aren't very many people who are naturally inclined to run through the TOD meat grinder, folks. You are an overly intelligent bunch of people--and it is that combination of the members of this community who uphold the norms, who call for rigor, who ask the hard questions, and a staff who are willing to work tirelessly to continue this model.



So, my questions for you tonight are these:

*Why do \*you\* think these people are doing this? Why is it successful? Is it successful?*

*Many would say it is not so--at least not in a traditional sense...which of course begs the question: how does one define success for an endeavor like this? Is it educating and developing a community? Is it educating others? Is it becoming immensely powerful and influential? Is it rolling in cash? Is it developing a new kind of altruism? Is it serving one's kind and making us "better?"*

*Further, are we really serving others in doing this? If so, how can we here better serve our*

*fellow humans as a community? What else can we do to improve this site in that regard? What else can we do to continue to push the message of the problems of resource depletion--a message that seems to be slowly, steadily growing in traction each day?*

*And, another angle, after reflecting on all that: why do \*you\* come back?*



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