



# Gross National Happiness in Bhutan

A Learning Experience

by Nancy Warnock Harmon



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**Rationale:** Bhutan is a tiny Himalayan country that is developing into a 21st century nation guided by the Index of **Gross National Happiness** (GNH). This method of gauging the well-being of a nation is very different from the **Gross Domestic Product** (GDP) of the West and provides ideas that other countries, states and cities in the world have begun to consider.

**Goal:** Students will understand various ways of gauging the well-being of a nation and determine which are the most important.

**Objectives:** Students will be able to:

- Demonstrate understanding of the concept of **Gross National Happiness**.

- Demonstrate understanding of the concept of **Gross Domestic Product**.

- Evaluate the benefits of GDP versus GNH.

- Apply the concept of GNH to their own lives.

**Duration:** 2-3 weeks to complete all activities

**Hook:** What do you think happiness means to Americans? In small groups, make a list of qualities that contribute to happiness in America. Share your list with the class. Make a complete list from all the suggestions and save it for later in the lesson. If necessary, group suggestions into major categories rather than a long list of items.

**Presentation of new material:** Locate Bhutan on a map. Have students discuss what they think life might be like in such a mountainous area in that part of the world.

Read the introductory story about traveling in Bhutan. (Appendix 2) Ask, “What is your first reaction to the idea of Gross National Happiness? What surprised you about this description? What intrigued you? Would you be interested in visiting Bhutan? Why or why not?”

Watch YouTube video *Bhutan: A Kingdom of Happiness*. (7 minutes) Explore the same questions as above.

**Present the concept of Gross Domestic Product (GDP):** GDP is the monetary value of goods and services produced in a country over a specific time period. In very simple terms, it can be determined by adding together what is earned or what is spent by everyone in the country. It is the most commonly used indicator of the economic health of a country. Under capitalism, it is important for the GDP to grow to indicate a healthy economy. Read material in Appendix 3 by Dr. Denise Ames.

**Questions about GDP:**

Why was GDP chosen as a measure of the economy in the US in the first place?

Why is it not a good measure of the health of a country?

If GDP measures the total of goods and services produced by everyone, what does it not measure about an economy?

Look at your own list of what contributes to happiness. What does a GDP measurement leave out?

Do you think economies around the world can continue to grow year after year into the future?

What does it take to make an economy grow? What might stop it from growing?

The United Nations just completed its International Happiness Survey for 2012. The USA came out at #11, behind many European countries, New Zealand and Australia. What factors keep the US from scoring higher in the ranking, in spite of the fact that we are one of the richest (maybe the richest) countries in the world?



**Present concept of Gross National Happiness:** Watch YouTube video, *What is Gross National Happiness?* produced by GNHFund. (3 minutes) Gross National Happiness was first named by King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the fourth king of Bhutan, when he was still in his teens in the 1970s. He realized that Bhutan needed to come out of its historical isolation and modernize in order to enter the 21st century and improve the living standard of its people. However, he had witnessed the modernization process in other developing countries and didn't like some of what he saw—environmental degradation, rampant materialism, destruction of traditional culture, governmental corruption, for example. He understood that a focus on money and economics alone led to many of the undesirable results of modernization, so he looked for other ways to develop more thoughtfully. He first described the concept of Gross National Happiness with four “pillars,” or the four most important concepts. They are:

- |                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| Good government       | Fair and just socio-economic development |
| Cultural preservation | Environmental sustainability             |

Later, when government leaders wanted to begin to measure how happy people in Bhutan were, they identified nine domains relating to the four pillars. The nine domains include:

- |                                   |                                     |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Psychological well-being          | Health                              |
| Time use                          | Education                           |
| Cultural resiliency and diversity | Good governance                     |
| Community vitality                | Ecological diversity and resilience |
| Living standard                   |                                     |

### Questions about Gross National Happiness

How many of these domains have to do with money or the economy?  
What do you think this tells us about Bhutan?

Do you think each category is important to happiness? Why or why not?  
If you had to put them in order of importance, how would you do it?

Write a definition of each category, using two or three factors that break each domain into smaller pieces that can be measured. For example, Good Governance might include:

- How many people vote.
- How people feel about government leaders.
- How women are represented in government.
- How information about government is reported in the press.



**Read material in Appendix 1.** Compare indicators in each domain with how students themselves described the domains. Ask students: How would you feel about living under a system of Gross National Happiness as described by these domains? Why might different generations react differently?

Group the nine domains under the four pillars.

Read the quote below by Robert F. Kennedy, the brother of John F. Kennedy who ran for president but was assassinated in 1968, written shortly before his death . (Appendix 4) What problems does he see with using GNP (GDP) as a measure of America's progress? Do you think he would be in favor of an index of GNH? Compare his analysis with that of Denise Ames. How are they similar? How are they different?

Create four or five "pillars" of happiness for America, based on RFK's words and your own list.

### **Possible Activities for Using and Evaluating Understanding of Concepts**

The following activities can be used to evaluate and deepen students' understanding of the ideas in this unit. Teachers will need to create rubrics, based on the requirements of each classroom, and decide how information will be gathered and presented by students. These activities require the use of all four communication skills, as well as research and critical thinking. They can all be done individually or in a group.

Guide students in creating a survey instrument to be used to determine the happiness of their fellow students, their families, or other groups they are interested in evaluating. Encourage them to use the lists they created above and the nine domains to formulate questions. Discuss how they will determine the degree of happiness. Provide sample questions such as, "On a scale of 1-5, 1 being Never and 5 being Always, answer this question: I look forward to the day ahead when I get up each morning." Have students write up the results of their surveys and compare them with the rest of the class in an oral presentation. (See Sustainable Seattle website for sample survey)

Guide a discussion with the class about the effects of television on each of the nine domains of happiness. For example, how does television impact the physical health of a nation? What happens to the way people use their time? Have students write a description of how a very traditional way of life as seen in Bhutan might change with the introduction of television. The final paragraph should be advice to Bhutanese parents (based on the experience of a young American TV viewer) about how to help their children use television wisely under the policy of Gross National Happiness.

Research the topic of how other countries, states or cities may be using the idea of measuring the happiness of their people. Present an oral report to the class about these other efforts in the world. Be sure to include discussion of the hurdles that need to be surmounted in order to create a policy. (See Sustainable Seattle, for example)

Create a list of nine domains that could be used to measure Gross School Happiness and provide goals for the school to work toward. Define each domain and break it into measurable pieces.

Write a letter to the editor of your school or community newspaper to try to convince the audience that your school or community needs to adopt a policy to promote happiness. You will have to provide background and examples as part of your argument so the issue is clearly introduced to an audience who may know nothing about it.

## Additional Resources

*Between Earth and Sky* by Jamie Zeppa, A young teacher's experience in Bhutan

*Treasures of the Thunder Dragon: A Portrait of Bhutan*, by Ashi Dorjii Wangmo Wangchuck, former queen of Bhutan

*The Cup*, a film about Buddhism, television and soccer

*Travelers and Magicians*, a film about a changing Bhutan

The Happiness Initiative [www.happycounts.org](http://www.happycounts.org)

Centre for Bhutan Studies [www.bhutanstudies.org.bt](http://www.bhutanstudies.org.bt)

Understanding Gross National Happiness [www.grossnationalhappiness.com](http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com)

Books by Ed Diener on the scientific study of happiness and website, [www.diener.socialpsychology.org](http://www.diener.socialpsychology.org)





## Appendix 1

### Nine Domains to Measure Happiness

Here are the Nine Domains contributing to gross national happiness, described according to the Centre for Bhutan Studies with indicators that can be measured, so that Bhutan can collect research statistics to assess their progress. Included with each domain is what happiness research says about the importance of the domain and what we witnessed as travelers. Of course, it is very difficult to evaluate anything in just a few weeks of contact, so I'm mostly going to describe what we saw as it relates to the domains.

**Psychological Well-Being:** indicators include life satisfaction, positive and negative emotion, and spirituality. Research on what creates happiness finds that people with a spiritual practice have more positive feelings than those without. We saw indications of the importance of spirituality throughout our journey in Bhutan—prayer wheels and prayer flags everywhere sending prayers throughout the universe, religious festivals attended by thousands, many temples and monks, and a sense of compassion in the way people treated us and each other and how children are taught. A common prayer/chant is “May all beings be at peace, and may this begin with us.”

**Health:** Indicators include physical and mental health. There is a school of traditional healing in Thimpu as well as a hospital of Western medicine. Both are subsidized by the government and both were crowded the day we visited. Health care is free to all. Bhutan has been deemed a biodiversity “hotspot” by the UN, and many of the plants in the high Himalayas are medicinal. There are only two psychiatrists in the whole country. Life expectancy has increased from 44 to 65 in one generation, which says a lot about improved health care and nutrition.

**Education:** indicators include literacy, schooling, knowledge and value. Happiness research indicates that people with at least a primary education are happier, but higher education does not seem to make a big difference in level of happiness. While in Bhutan, we visited several schools. We were impressed by the tidiness of the campuses. Many have gardens and anti-litter campaigns. Information about Gross National Happiness is posted around the school. One school had banned plastic bags and all junk food. While Buddhism is not taught outright, meditation began the day at one school. All classes except the national language are taught in English, and students seemed eager to practice their English with us. Many in Bhutan are worried that as more people become well educated, traditional values will disappear, and young people will flock to the city rather than stay in villages. This has already begun to happen and is one of Bhutan's greatest challenges.

**Cultural Diversity and Resilience:** Indicators include language, artisan skills, socio-cultural participation, and code of etiquette and conduct. Bhutan has a rich and colorful cultural tradition that, on the surface at least, seems to be alive and well. We visited several festivals where young and old alike attended, sitting in family groups. The whole community appeared to be involved, all dressed in the national costume. Folk songs and dances are taught in schools and performed by young people at these festivals. Schools also often present their own cultural performances at the time of these festivals, and we were impressed by the way even the teenage boys participated enthusiastically in the dancing and singing. On the night of the celebration for the king's wedding, the young waiters and waitresses at a hotel happily and spontaneously (with a little encouragement from us) performed some folk songs together and taught us some folk dances. It was a highlight of the trip for us! The Bhutanese government supports a school of traditional arts,

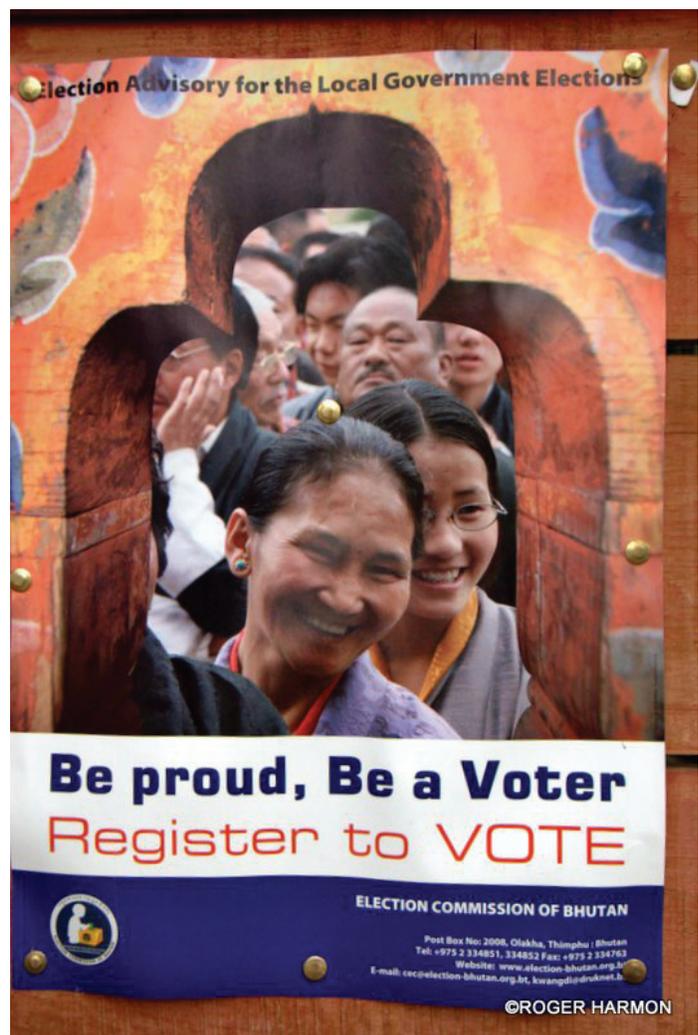


where young people from all over the country are provided with scholarships to spend at least four years learning traditional arts such as painting, wood carving, sculpture, and embroidery. Bhutan's most skilled artisans teach there. This was a very busy place when we visited before the king's wedding in 2011 as these young people helped decorate the kingdom. While everyone now learns English in school, Dzongka, the national language, is also taught and spoken in everyday life.

**Time Use:** indicators include waking time and sleeping time. As travelers this is hard to assess, but the awareness of time use is interesting. It is not given a great deal of attention here in the US, I'd say. In fact, people who work long hours here are admired. I think time spent relaxing with family and watching TV should be indicators as well. TV was only introduced in Bhutan in 1999 because leaders feared the cultural changes it would bring. Already, a respected Bhutanese author has found that the traditional stories are disappearing as people spend more time with TV. There is an organization that educates Bhutanese about the effects of new media in their lives.

**Good Governance:** indicators include political participation, services, government performance and fundamental rights. Happiness studies have found that a sense of well-being correlates with greater “direct democracy” and government that is effective and trustworthy. This is another area that is difficult to observe during a short visit. We did learn from several speakers, however, that the power of government was, in fact, transferred from the king to a parliament formed in 2006. Signs in cities and along the road encourage people, and especially women, to vote and run for office. The constitution states that “the state shall strive to promote those conditions that will enable the successful pursuit of Gross National Happiness.” There is still a lot of enthusiastic support for the monarchy, though. We were there at the time of the royal wedding; photographs of the king and his new bride were everywhere and the wedding was an elaborate affair. The king’s opinions and initiatives are still greatly respected. There appears to be an open discussion of issues in the English press.

**Ecological Diversity and Resilience:** Indicators include wildlife damage, urban issues such as traffic and congestion, responsibility towards the environment, and ecological issues. Happiness research indicates that contact with nature brings people more positive emotion, but there’s actually not yet a lot of research that connects the two. The Bhutanese know that the beauty and pristine quality of their environment are national treasures and have government policies to protect them. More than 50% of all land in Bhutan is in parks or refuges, and 60% must always be covered by forest. Tourism is a growing source of income but the government carefully controls the number of visas it issues—only 23,000 tourists visited in 2011, which seems like a very good idea considering the narrow twisting roads and lack of infrastructure in outlying areas. Tourism can leave a big footprint. Hotels are clean and comfortable but most are not luxurious. We saw monkeys in the wild and a refuge for takin, the deer-like animal native to Bhutan, and we visited the valley where the black-necked cranes come to winter. Fishing and hunting are illegal. Biologists expect that as surrounding countries destroy more and more habitat as they develop, Bhutan will become a refuge for tigers and other animals. In the capital city, urban sprawl is happening already. One of Bhutan’s major worries is the number of young people coming to Thimphu to look for jobs and enjoy the excitement of a city, but there aren’t enough jobs. Very few people own cars, so traffic is not a huge problem, and even in Thimphu is controlled without a traffic light. This is changing, however. The night before the king’s wedding, we got caught in one of the very first traffic jams in Thimphu! Litter is also a concern in Thimphu, but we saw very little in the rest of the country. Plastic bags are rare, and instead we received our purchases in cloth bags that can easily be re-used.



**Community Vitality:** Indicators include safety, community relationship, family, and donation of time and money. Research on happiness shows that people who feel a strong sense of community and have social connections are happier than those who are more isolated and that acts of kindness increase happiness for the giver and the receiver. We visited several festivals attended in family groups. Children roamed around the edges of the dancing but were well-behaved without parental intervention. We were disappointed, however, to see some boys, even small novice monks, with toy guns, playing in the wings of the temple. No adult stopped them. This in a country that outlaws hunting! We never witnessed an altercation, although these festivals were very crowded and we could barely find a path between people seated on the ground. Someone helped me weave my way through the seated crowd at one point. People were friendly and curious about us, and they offered food, places to sit, and explanations of what was going if they spoke English. After the festivals, we attended two evening school performances, packed with parents and friends of the performers. The crowd was noisy but respectful and appreciative. Based on the elaborate costumes and the number of acts involved, there had to be a lot of community participation to pull off such a show. We were treated as guests of honor at the school performances, ushered to the front row and served tea and sandwiches.

**Standard of living:** Finally, the domain that has to do with money! Indicators include household income, assets and housing. Of course, people's income has something to do with their sense of well-being, but happiness research shows that once basic needs are met, more money does not lead to more happiness. As we traveled through the country, we didn't see evidence of grinding poverty such as malnutrition, although 23% of the country still lives below the poverty line. This could be due to isolation, since there are still quite a few villages that are not accessible by road. Most people still live through subsistence farming. Some houses in rural areas look small, cold and dark, but others seem sturdy and large and are beautifully decorated.



Land reform in the 1960s provided land ownership to many farmers and broke up what had been a feudal system. We saw a lot of road construction on the national highway, and the goal is for every village to have electricity in the next three years. One village we visited the first year did have electricity when we returned the next year. Markets are busy and full of a large variety of vegetables, grains and yak meat. In the city, most people live in apartment buildings that have running water and electricity.

While Bhutan faces many challenges, a recent survey based on the domains and their indicators revealed that more than 40% of its people qualify as happy in 6 of the 9 domains. Another 35% are ranked happy in 5 of 9 domains. Only 3% were deemed unhappy. Almost all of what we experienced supported the claim that Bhutan is walking its talk and gross national happiness is, indeed, taken seriously.

## Appendix 2

### A Journey Through Bhutan

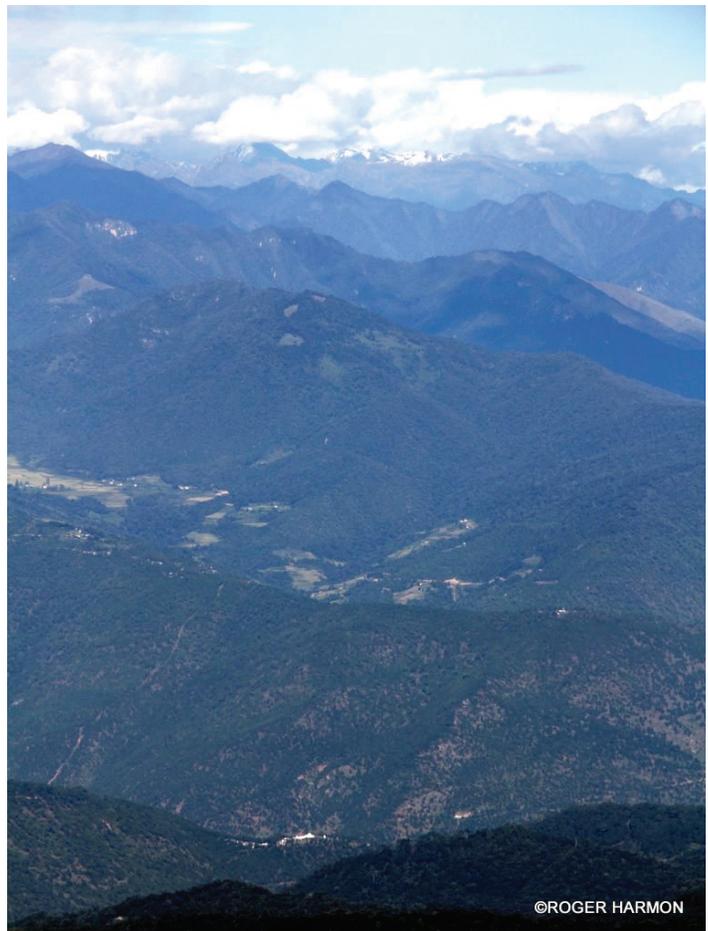
By Nancy Harmon

Craning my neck to see as far as I could from my cramped seat, I gazed out over the wide expanse of cloud, broken here and there by a jagged snow-capped peak. I could hardly believe I was flying over the legendary Himalayas. As we landed and bumped to a stop I looked at my travel companions. Their eyes shone with the same anticipation I felt. We had arrived in Bhutan, land of the thunder dragon. It is also the place where success is measured by the index of gross national happiness. In an age when progress usually is tied to profits and economic growth, we were hopeful that Bhutan had found a way to do it differently. What would we discover in this place so recently opened to the outside world?

Bhutan is a tiny country nestled between two giants, India and China, in the midst of the Himalayas. Its geography and lack of roads isolated it from the rest of the world for centuries. IN the 1950s, a wise ruler recognized the need for connection with the outside world. China's invasion of Tibet around that time added emphasis. The country began to plan its emergence into the modern world under the leadership of a 17 year old king who instituted the Index of Gross National Happiness (GNH) as the core of its development plan. GNH is based on the principle that wealth alone does not lead to happiness. Economic growth and modernization should not jeopardize the quality of life of the people, their traditional values or the environment. All regions and segments of society should benefit equally from development through education, health care and a voice in the new government . Could these ideals truly be reality in this tiny remote country?

We journeyed for ten days on 12 foot wide roads , through misty mountain passes where ropes of moss dangled delicately from fir trees. We passed prayer flags flung across bridges, ravines and mountain passes where prayers could be sent out quickly into the world on the wind and water, prayers that ask that all beings may be at peace. Rushing waterfalls turned prayer wheels. We walked through dripping silent virgin forests. It didn't take long for the pristine beauty and spirituality of this place to invade our being.

The people and their culture are equally enchanting. At the request of the king, most everyone still wears the traditional dress woven by hand. Villages perch on hillsides layered with terraces of rice. As we filed through a village on the way to visit a temple, we watched a crew of men and women build a house by pounding mud between the walls of a wood frame. Houses are large and sturdy and covered with bright paintings of flowers and Buddhist symbols. Painted phalluses protect each entrance.



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In Wangdue, we stayed in a small hotel so close to a rushing river that we could barely talk inside our room. At the town's temple, we watched entranced as monks dressed in layers of colorful brocades leaped and whirled to subdue demons and keep evil at bay. Children surrounded us wanting to practice the English they were learning in school. Two young girls stayed by our sides all morning and invited us to their school performance that evening. We went and were astounded by the incredible combination of traditional songs and dances, the sexy flirtatiousness of Bollywood, and complicated hip hop numbers. Parents and teachers had obviously spent a long time on costumes. The next day, we maneuvered around mudslides moved from the middle of the road with shovels and picks, and that night we slept in a cozy farmhouse inn covered with layers of heavy bedding.

We arrived days later in the Thimpu, the capital, where the busiest intersection is regulated by a traffic cop spinning in four directions from the middle of the street. The only traffic light in the whole country had been removed because of objections of the townspeople. We visited a primary school where children all dressed traditionally and began each day with a few minutes of meditation. Imagine looking across a totally silent school yard, 300 children with hands folded and eyes closed. The school song immediately followed, these words belted out with great enthusiasm. "It's the feeling inside that fills us with pride, Growing together side by side in perfect harmony, I give to you and you give to me."

By this time, we were totally bewitched by all we had experienced, and we had questions. We met with several people—an author, a businessman and a legislator—who confirmed that many areas of GNH are working quite well so far. For example, food is grown without chemical fertilizers and distributed locally in markets. Very little is imported or advertised on billboards, though that is changing. Life expectancy has increased from 45 to 65 in just 20 years. Bhutan has attained international acclaim as one of the ten hotspots of the world for its biodiversity and management of natural resources.. Government supported schools of traditional medicine and traditional arts such as weaving and tanka painting in Thimpu attract students from all regions, who are encouraged to return to their villages with their skills.

Bhutan is not without its challenges, of course, and leaders seem to be aware of what they are. Television was introduced only in 1999 and is having an influence as we saw in the school dances. Can the people continue to look beyond the lure of materialism broadcast by TV to the environmental degradation and greed it can cause? As more children become well educated, can they find rewarding work? Will they continue to honor the traditional life style of the village? Already youth unemployment is growing in Thimpu as young people are drawn to the bright lights of the city. Leaders are optimistic, however, and as one said, "Bhutan still has the luxury of ethical choices."

On our last day in Bhutan, we climbed to the Tiger's nest, a temple 9000 feet up, clinging to the side of a cliff. A monk sat inside near a small window and began to chant. We sat quietly and as the mist swirled around the soft syllables of the chant, it was easy to believe that a tigress had flown a guru to this lovely place to meditate. And I knew that indeed, there was happiness in this peaceful little kingdom and that I would carry some of it away with me.





## Appendix 3

### From *The Global Economy* by Dr. Denise Ames

“Several reasons went into the promotion of growth as an economic principle. One was that economic growth meant that more consumer goods would be produced and consumed by Americans who would in turn make more wages in factories and businesses and thus spend this surplus on more consumer goods. Americans were eager to shed the austerity and hardship of the depression years and embark upon a new way of life based on plentitude and a seemingly endless supply of comforts. The principle of growth and consumer spending went hand and hand. Also, growth could be scientifically measured, in the form of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The GDP is a measure of a country’s overall official economic output. It is the market value of all final goods and services officially made within the borders of a country in a year. Since Americans have an abiding faith in numbers, the GDP was widely considered to be an accurate measurement of living standards in a particular country. It was assumed that if the GDP went up, the country’s living standards also correspondingly improved. The joining of what was considered to be a reliable scientific number with rising living standards proved to be an entrenched principle that became ensconced in American (and later global) thinking.

As mentioned above, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is an official measure of a country’s overall economic output in a year. A high GDP is often used as a stand-in for measuring the standard of living, although this measurement has come under increasing criticism and many countries are actively exploring alternative measures to GDP for that purpose. Hence, an economy is said to be growing if the financial value of all the exchanges of goods and services within it goes up. The absence of growth gets described, negatively, as a recession. Prolonged recessions are called depressions.

Yet, it is not that simple. The fact that an economy is growing tells you nothing about the quality of economic activity that is happening within it. For example, when British Petroleum's (BP) oil leak spewed crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico beginning in April 2010, it actually contributed to an increase in the GDP! The number of dollars spent on cleaning up after disasters, such as the BP oil spill, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, pollution clean-up of the Love Canal, New York in 1978, the control of crime caused by the increase in drug trafficking, or the costs of containing widespread disease such as H1N1 (swine) flu in 2009 all contribute to an increase in the GDP. "Jobless growth" is being experienced in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, which means that approximately 10 percent (some say 20 percent is the real unemployment rate) of the American population is unemployed, yet GDP rises modestly. New employment is not generated, and environmentally destructive growth in which a kind of false monetary value is created by liquidating irreplaceable natural assets is taking place. For example, those in the logging industry contribute to an increase in the GDP by cutting trees for lumber products, but if the forests that are cut are old-growth forests that take centuries to replace, it is actually harmful to the general well-being of the population at large. Therefore, growth in GDP can't tell you whether the specific activity is good or bad. Spending on prisons, pollution and disasters pushes up GDP just as surely as spending on schools, hospitals and parks."



## Appendix 4

Address by Robert F. Kennedy, University of Kansas, 1968

“Too much and too long, we seem to have surrendered community excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things. Our gross national product ... if we should judge America by that - counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for those who break them. It counts the destruction of our redwoods and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl. It counts napalm and the cost of a nuclear warhead, and armored cars for police who fight riots in our streets. It counts Whitman’s rifle and Speck’s knife, and the television programs which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children.”

“Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages; the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage; neither our wisdom nor our learning; neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country; it measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile. And it tells us everything about America except why we are proud that we are Americans.” Robert F. Kennedy Address, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, March 18, 1968.



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Nancy W. Harmon has been an educator for more than 30 years with a MA degree in multicultural education from University of New Mexico and certification in English and English as a Second Language. She has taught and developed curriculum in a variety of situations, including a community school on the Navajo reservation, teacher training for Peace Corps in Eritrea and Thailand, and an environmental management graduate program taught in English in Bangkok, Thailand. Most recently, she helped implement a nationally recognized service learning program at an innovative charter high school in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She travels widely with her husband, Roger, who owns a small travel business.