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NARRATIVE OF A MONEYLESS ELF

by elf Pavlik

Recounting the challenges and benefits of life in the commons, without currency or government documents.



Photo by Nathan Schneider.

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When I arrived in Gdansk, my brother had a flat of my mother's that he decided to sell. He said he'd give me half of the money from it. I think it was twenty-something-thousand euros, which I found unfortunate. I'd just decided to live without money, and right then I was about to get a lot of it.

My relatives had some debts, and they wanted to take another loan so that my grandma could keep the flat where she'd lived for fifty years.

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They had stress about money, so I told them, “I have all this money I don’t need, so why don’t you just use whatever you need from it?” I also left a little stipend for my cousin, who was not doing very well in her life. I was hoping she would take care of our grandmother.

In May 2009, I took a bus from Gdansk to Basel, where my mother lives, to visit her. And then I was going to fly to Porto, where I knew a nice permaculture farm. I got myself a backpack, a good quality laptop, a pair of shoes that fell apart a year later, and an electric shaver that I still use. When I got to Basel, I had this airplane ticket, and I took twenty euros with me, which I planned to use to get the bus from Porto to the countryside. From that time on I would not use money any more.

Of course my mother said, “How could you do that? That’s crazy.” She said, “You’re so talented, you can work with computers, you could get such a good job.” She said, “All those people who work in that field have such good lives.”

“It may seem like a good life,” I said, “but it actually doesn’t sound that appealing to me.”

I went to this small farm near Porto. They called it [Awakened Life Project](#). A couple and a few other people who dropped by were doing meditation and permaculture in a very beautiful place. I arranged that I could stay there for at least a month, and I ended up staying for three months, helping out in the garden and trying to work on the computer—slowly thinking about how I could move forward with the ideas I developed when I lived in San Francisco. I started writing simple things.

Next, I decided to go to [an eco-village near Lisbon](#). My hosts bought me a bus ticket to Lisbon; I didn’t hitchhike much yet. But then, to get from Lisbon to the eco-village, I realized I needed to take the train, and I didn’t know what to do.

Not long before, my computer had broken, and someone shipped me an older one that relatives had once given me when I was in New York, an older machine. But I got the other one working again, so at this point I had two laptops, which were really heavy in my backpack. I realized that I really only needed one; maybe someone wanted a laptop who could give me a ticket.

For me this meant breaking the calculation of valuing things in terms of money. The computer was worth much more than the train ticket. But I tried to use common sense. The computer was a piece of

electronics that I didn't need because I used another laptop. It was breaking my back. For me it had negative value. Someone could actually appreciate it, and feel happy with it. So, I went on the train, started walking around, and said, "I want to go to this place and I need a ticket. Do you want a laptop? I can offer you a laptop."

At some point there was someone who took me up on the offer. She was surprised I was willing to part with the laptop for just a ticket. It turned out that she was going to the same eco-village. When we got there, I set up the computer for her so she could use it. Something that had been useless before was making someone happy, and I was happy that I had made it there. I'm glad we didn't go through crazy calculations that would've kept us from that nice outcome.

It was challenging to negotiate staying there without paying because it was popular eco-village. But I negotiated with them. I think they had had experience with someone else living moneyless there before. I hadn't heard about this person. But that was when I started to realize that I wasn't the only one trying to live this way.

I stayed for three months, until the period ended when they were open for visitors. After the olive harvest they said it was time for me to go.

I found two new projects in Berlin. One was called the [Traveling School of Life](#), and the other was [Nomad Base](#). I'd never been to Berlin before. It was November 2009. I wanted to meet people from this Traveling School of Life because they were looking for someone to help with programming. They were using the framework I had been working with in San Francisco, so I thought maybe we could work together. The Traveling School of Life was combining traveling and skill-sharing, and it sounded like great project. It was a chance to help people learn from each other rather than being conditioned at schools.

But I was near Lisbon, and I needed to get to Berlin. I started asking around in the eco-village. It turned out the eco-village had a sister project near Berlin, and someone was driving there. I said I'd like to go along.

"Can you offer some money or something for the fuel?" he asked.

I explained, "I'm living here without money. I decided to quit using money, so I can't offer you money, but if you don't want to take me I'll find a different way."

It took him a day, but he said okay. No one else was going with him, and he would be driving alone, so it seemed like no loss to take me. We had nice trip together, and I helped a bit with the driving.

Back on the permaculture farm, I had decided not to use state documents. I had these documents that said I was a citizen of Poland, and I noticed that I was not convinced by this concept of having countries and nations. It was similar to how I felt about money. There was something really not nice about those documents. I was scratching my head—why should I use this thing that I don't agree with? I decided not to any more. It was so obvious. Before going to the eco-village, I put my passport in paper recycling, and my driver's license and state ID in plastic. They were thus very properly segregated, each in the appropriate recycling bins, and I could consider myself a resident of planet Earth. This also meant that, on the way to Berlin, I was driving without driver's license.

When we arrived, I remembered that a friend at the eco-village had told me about these *volkskuchen*—community kitchens that activists organize with donated food. They were often in squats. But when I went to one, the woman serving said, “Everyone has to pay. We need to pay for our electricity and stuff.”

I said, “Okay, then I won't eat.”

I stayed longer, and I asked people if I could crash overnight, and they said okay, and then they shared food with me. From my perspective it was a dirty place—not horrible, but still quite messy, with people drinking beer. Not the nicest environment.

I connected with the people from the Traveling School of Life, and I may have crashed at their space overnight. I think that was the first time I went dumpster diving, with one of them. We went for a big container in Berlin next to a bread factory—I think five meters by three meters by three meters—which was often full of bread and pastries and even cheesecakes. We cycled over there and filled up our bags.

I stayed there for only a day before this Nomad Base un-conference started, and one of the people there offered me a couch. It was a sustainable hospitality exchange. Some people were from this Nomad Base network, and some people were from the [BeWelcome](#) project, which is a non-profit, open-source alternative to CouchSurfing. At the conference there were hitchhikers, and people who had dumpster diving experience. We were going dumpster diving over the course of the event to provide food for everyone, and I also learned about

[HitchWiki](#), which I now use regularly when I hitchhike. It was very useful event. I still stay in touch with many people I met there. I learned a lot of tricks that, while living moneyless, can help you get through your day.

I stayed there for a week, I think, and then I heard about this place called [Kesselberg](#), a countryside community that used to be a squat. I went over there, and they let me stay with them in a guest room. It was a very simple house. Sometimes we went dumpster diving, and sometimes they had a big bag of lentils, flour, or rice. There were potatoes from a nearby farm that the farmer had left on the field after the harvest.

That was tough winter, the winter of 2009. I stayed in that place for a couple weeks, and I think I hitchhiked to Gdansk to visit my relatives for Christmas. Then I came back and stayed for probably three months, but the winter was crazy. It was minus fifteen to twenty degrees for a couple weeks in a row. It was one of the heaviest winters I remember, and everything was running on wood. We'd run out of wood probably in mid-January. Pretty much every week we had to go with tractors and trailers to the forest to cut down trees—just small trees and dead wood—to collect and burn it. I think it was minus five or six in the bedroom. If we burned the wet wood, the chimney got clogged, but if we tried to heat it up in the oven to try it, the humidity released would make the wall get moldy. For few weeks our whole life was centered around staying warm and cooking food.

They had Internet, so I could also go online. I still had a computer with me. I was watching lots of videos from conferences, catching up on software development practices. When I left that place, I again started working again with the people from the Traveling School of Life and stayed with them for a couple of weeks—from March, I think, to April, something like that. But it didn't work so well because they were also doing some commercial jobs, and that created some tension. I said I wouldn't do any commercial jobs, so it didn't work very well. But that's okay because I got to move on.

Then I stayed at another countryside project near Salzburg. It was quite interesting, an old school building where there was some kind of unorganized community with people staying up all night and doing random stuff. I was trying to do some development over there with a few of the programmers staying there, but it wasn't very productive. Lots of experimentation, but not anything that really succeeded.

Next, I started doing more moving around, staying week here, a week there. I don't remember all the places. The spring made it easier to

travel. I got involved with projects on alternative education, and some software development, and some experimenting with doing the economy in a different way.

The first two years I found all this a bit of a struggle in the sense that I didn't know so much. I didn't know many people, and I didn't know how to find my way. I spent most of the time going from place to place, finding food, finding place to stay—of course, meeting people and developing connections, but no focused work on the computer, not really focused developing time. It was rather frustrating because I had ideas, and I wanted to experiment with all these technologies, and I started to have clear goals about what I would like to apply them to. But it took so much time just to take care of the basics. At that time I didn't go to homeless people's dining halls any more, but I was couchsurfing, and sometimes camping a bit, and dumpster diving or eating with people together who were kind enough to host me.

After traveling more, and seeing various places, I started to know better who could work on which projects, and where I could find community. By then I was often staying in Berlin, because I met lots of great people there and doing interesting projects, and then I was sometimes going to places like Munich, Barcelona, and Amsterdam, and Strasbourg. I don't remember the details, but slowly, at that time, once I met more people, and more people were welcoming toward me, life became more of a flow. It was taking less time for me to take care of all the basics, and I could start participating more in computer-oriented projects.

It was 2011, or something like that. I was focusing at that time on how to use Internet technologies for collaboration, cooperation, sharing resources—really practical networking, not just sharing pictures of cats and commenting and liking them. I wanted to use the technologies for organizing ourselves. My main emphasis became how to do networking in a distributed way, so rather than developing more centralized platforms we can have more autonomy. The systems inter-operate, and you don't have a central point of control, a central point of power.

The people I was with in Berlin organized [a summit about federated social webs](#). The work was becoming much more exciting. I was connecting with people through networks like OuiShare and Edgeryders. It wasn't just like, "Hey, I have some ideas that I would like to do," but instead I could say, "Hey, all these people have all these ideas, and we can work together and look for synergies, and

meet for hackathons.”

In the past three years I have been more and more in the flow. More people were happy hosting me and inviting me places, and I was participating in different events. It required less effort to eat, find a place to stay, and find place to work, so I could focus more on working. Establishing a network of friends and people who want to support what I do, or who just feel sympathy for me, enabled me to focus. I'd like to find ways to document better the ways people can secure food, accommodation, working space, travel, and so on, so that people don't have to be stuck doing commercial jobs and can do something they consider meaningful.

Often, nowadays, people just ask me, “When do you want to come over here?” The question for me now is more like, “Okay, how do I want to dedicate my time, and where I want to stay?” I also got better at hitchhiking. It still sometimes takes a lot of time, and not knowing French and Italian makes it harder. I still dumpster dive, but not so much as before, because often people share food with me. I don't take much time to plan ahead. I can usually go somewhere, contact a few people, and usually someone has a place to host me. Just by having all those relationships—or establishing those relationships, since “having” sounds too possessive. I'm often paying attention to the way I speak. I try to speak, for instance, in [E-Prime](#).

E-Prime is a form of English with forms of “to be” removed. When you use E-Prime, you don't say “this is this way” or “they are this way.” You say, “I see this way,” “I think of it that way.” You try to emphasize the subjective aspect of the statement, and don't try to define things, but say how you experience and interpret them. You leave open different ways of experiencing and interpreting. I find it more precise, since I acknowledge that what we say comes from our experience and interpretation. An additional practice is the non-possessive thing. Rather than saying, “I have,” just say, “I use”—from ownership to access. With people, I usually try to say “we have a relationship,” or something like that, to emphasis some mutual connection, and not “I have a friend.” Even more so with stuff. It's not “my computer,” it's “the computer I use.” I use this clothing, but I can also give it away, and someone can let me use other clothing.

Often when I hitchhike, I talk with random people who pick me up. Sometimes they complain about this and that—all this negative stuff. I'm sitting there, and I'm thinking that I just met with people working on amazing projects, and participating in great events. So much creativity, so much positive intention, and so many meaningful

things happening. I don't watch major media, so I don't know about most of the stuff they're talking about. It's like we live on two different planets. They have all this negative stuff, and I have been immersing myself in all this positive, creative stuff. We experience a different reality.

Small, grassroots developments are happening everywhere, and often you don't hear about it. I quite like this saying of [possibly unknown origin](#): "A falling tree makes more noise than a growing forest."

Unless you really stay connected and pay attention to it, and listen to the birds—I'm not talking about Twitter, though it's still better than major media—you don't know about what's going on. I feel very happy about all the great things happening. But I know many people feel stuck in commercial jobs. They say they need to pay rent and pay for food and buy tickets, and all that stuff. Some people manage to get paid to work on the meaningful things, but so many people I know just stay stuck in doing something they consider meaningless.

Again, that's the E-Prime approach. I don't say, your job *is* meaningless or stupid. I can say that I consider it meaningless, and you can disagree.

If you yourself consider what you do meaningless, I think that puts you in a quite interesting situation. Why wake up in the morning and do something that you yourself consider meaningless? I find that very unhealthy. I lived this way myself, and I can remember it. Now I live in a way that I consider meaningful—though some people might find it stupid or something, and we don't have to agree. But at least I stay consistent. I'd like to help enable more people to do what they find meaningful.

You can also use a method of feedback, so that we can verify with each other if we really find something meaningful—for instance, as a way of supporting people who work for the benefit of a community. If you disconnect this from money, the feedback becomes clearer. The really important assets in life—food, accommodation, transportation, health care, equipment, and so on—are things that many people can provide for work they value. But if we stay attached to money and finances, only a minority of people control most of the finances, and they don't necessarily use it for the good of society as a whole.

Now I'm getting more out of my personal story and into the conceptual work I've been doing. If you look at money, it just exists as a fantasy between human beings. It has no physical presence. One

cannot touch money, you cannot smell it. You cannot interact with it with your senses. You can touch a metal coin or a paper bill or a plastic banking card, or whatever else, but these are just symbols that cause our minds to trigger this association—"oh, money." Most people do not understand that. I also don't fully understand it. But I think I have much better idea than most people nowadays who use money.

Instead, we could focus on the actual things—the resources, assets, and so on that we need. That would obey the laws of physics. Also, the control of resources becomes more distributed. What I've been working on for the past few years is how to use technology to have a more decentralized way of allocating assets, so the people who produce something can stay in control over its allocation, and people can decide to use their time on what they find meaningful, not just what produces money. We've ended up allowing our decisions to be based on very speculative, very virtual criteria.

There is a concept people refer to as "[holopticism](#)." It stands in contrast to panopticism, like the panopticon, in which a small number of people can see the whole situation. This is how hierarchical institutions function; some people have a privileged position of having more information, and other people have very narrow views and can't see what is happening. They need to depend on what other people tell them, and often those in power take advantage of that.

Now, with current information technologies, we can have much more access to information. People can have an overview of how things relate to each other, how things work together. When we make our decisions, we can base them on an understanding of how it might propagate throughout society, so we don't need to decide what we work on just based on what we'll be paid. We can make educated decisions about what impact our actions will have on the future. We can talk about the possible futures we might manifest ahead of us. But if we make our decisions based on money, we will probably manifest some crippled, weird science-fiction scenario. That's what many people are already doing.

Take the example of recycling. When the person from city recycling was here, I asked if they have the process fully automated, or if people are working it. That way I can think ahead and know, if I don't wash something, by the time it gets to the recycling facility it will smell really badly, and if people work there, I will take a little extra effort to wash it so someone doesn't need to work with my stinky recycling. Again, that decision is not directly based on money. I try to see how what I do affects other things and do my best to harm the

least and play fair with everyone. With proper technologies, everyone can be part of the decision-making process, taking into account how things relate to and influence each other, rather than this weird monetary speculation where we forget where the money comes from or how people got control of it, and those who have it can do whatever they want. I find this a very poor kind of relationship.

Would you like someone to manipulate you into doing something you don't want to do? I have really strong internal motivation to do things in a certain way, and clarity about why I want to do it. I want to help enable people to have the communication and collaboration capacity to make decisions more based on sharing visions and finding those who want to manifest their visions together. This isn't manipulating someone to do something, or hiring someone or paying someone to do something—it's saying, "Hey, do we really want to do this together?" And, "If we do, let's enable everyone to do their best."

I try to live by rules less and less. More and more I try to see the results of my decision, and how much happiness or suffering they cause, and to maximize happiness and minimize suffering. But I can still think about some kind of guidelines. For example: radical honesty. I do my best to stay as honest as I can. If I am in any way dishonest with someone, I see that as a failure. I wouldn't call it a rule so much as that I find it more healthy than having some fake image that I have created.

Sometimes I feel a bit of frustration with the overhead of not using money. It just took me three days, almost, to get from Paris to Bologna. Meanwhile, people complain that two hours in the airport is boring, and the whole time they're drinking coffee and eating croissants. I'm not criticizing anyone, but having this bit of a struggle helps me appreciate things that other people take for granted. At this point I feel quite deep clarity about how money holds us back from creating a harmonious society, so I don't have any hesitation anymore about whether I want to use it again or not.

Still, I've taken a kind of compromise. I don't use money myself, but my decisions can cause transactions to happen on my behalf.

Sometimes I experience really great support from random people, random strangers, and that's very uplifting. At the same time, sometimes I will wait for a ride in a place for half a day, and I know that probably many of the people who said they aren't going in my direction just lied to me because they don't want to take me. I get a bit irritated and start thinking badly about those people. I don't want to have this kind of negative perspective about people. At the same time, I'm trying to explore and find out how to develop systems that

will help us to migrate to more healthy relationships between different people.

I've been doing research into what it takes to transport someone from place *a* to place *b*. Probably you need to make sure you have access to a highway, or another road, and that you have access to a car and some amount of fuel. At the World Wide Web Consortium I started a [community group for web currencies](#), to build on top of [web payments](#), so that perhaps at some point we can start transferring liters of fuel directly—a network so that, say, you don't need to give me money to buy fuel. Right now the collaborative effort to produce a certain amount of fuel, which takes probably hundreds of people, depends on virtual currency, like euros or dollars. Some minority decides how, when, for how much, and to whom that is paid, and also who can afford to access the fuel. If people were to say that we don't want to get these fictional tokens, and instead just work together to produce the fuel, and allocate it to our liking, that would be more democratic, more distributed.

Nowadays weapons factories can afford electricity while hospitals sometimes struggle to afford it. If more people were to control the electricity, that would be different. If the majority of producers stayed in control of the resources they produce together, I think the hospital would be more likely to get the electricity than the weapons factory. People could work on fuel if they see fuel as useful, and then directly allocate it to the projects they care about and want to support without any need for a third party, like banks or monetary currencies.

My parents called me Paweł. The few times someone would call me Pavlik, I kind of liked the sound of it more. And, also, I think many people find Paweł hard to pronounce if they don't speak Polish, and Pavlik seems much easier to many people. Pavlik is actually a diminutive name, so most of the time you will not find people my age using it.

At some point I found that it wasn't attractive to associate myself with some small group of people and give so much emphasis to genetic or blood relations. Of course, with some people I have certain emotional relationships shared over time, but I don't like the idea that some people are family and others are strangers, or something like that. I find it really not natural for me. I try to see all of us as one family, including non-human beings. That's also one of the reasons I prefer a vegetarian or vegan diet. For me, eating other mammal meats is a bit like eating a close relative.

I don't stay in touch with my blood relations lately. I stay occupied with other things. When we meet, we don't do anything that I would say is useful. We have different interests, different kinds of aspirations, so I don't see at this moment so much of an attraction to do something together. Where I grew up there's also this crazy obsession with eating lots of meat and having a fifteen-course meal with every type different animal on the plate. For me it's disgusting.

I started introducing myself as an elf back while I was living in the park in San Francisco, in the middle of the forest. I never stayed at the shelters for homeless people. I sometimes went to places like that to take showers, but I was almost always in the park. Once, I think I was in Santa Rosa, I decided to see what it's like to stay in a shelter. They asked me to fill out a form. Already, then, I was not a big fan of nationalities, and all these countries and citizenships. The form asked me to fill out my ethnic group. I looked at it and looked at it, and I thought, "What do I put here?" I thought more. "Of course, I'm an elf!" They took this, and in their documents somewhere is an elf asking for shelter.

The place was actually terrible. People were very unfriendly, and after one night there I felt that I'd rather stay in the forest. The people don't really care. They are just dealing with you and don't give a damn about you. You're just a number there. But now, if someone asks my nationality or whatever, trying to put me in some kind of drawer, then I say, "Okay, if you really really want to, you can consider me an elf." It's not like I sat down and made this strategy, but this elfen theme started kind of appearing somehow, I don't know how.

I like "elf Pavlik"—those two together sound nice. They fit in a certain way, at least to my kind of aesthetic taste.

The name "elf" is a combination of two symbolisms. One is the traditional elf, forest beings that are close to nature. My computer work tends to keep me in cities, but I like to see myself as part of nature nonetheless. I think that many issues we face nowadays, especially environmental ones, come from our lack of understanding that we are part of a natural environment. The wellness of nature is associated with my own wellness.

The other symbolism is probably harder to explain. It's a bit related to Christmas elves, but it's not about Christmas so much as a kind of attitude. One thinks about the pictures drawn of elves making presents, and having fun doing that, working in a playful environment and doing something because they feel happy doing it.

We often talk about work as a way to get paid, but how often do we say, “Let’s do something to make someone else happy, to bring smiles to someone’s face”? I’m not saying I fully understand it, but I like this elfen theme to my existence.

*As told to [Nathan Schneider](#), who was conducting interviews in Matera, Italy, for an article on the [unMonastery](#) project, [which appeared](#) in [The Nation](#). *Transcription by [Garrett Baer](#).**

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