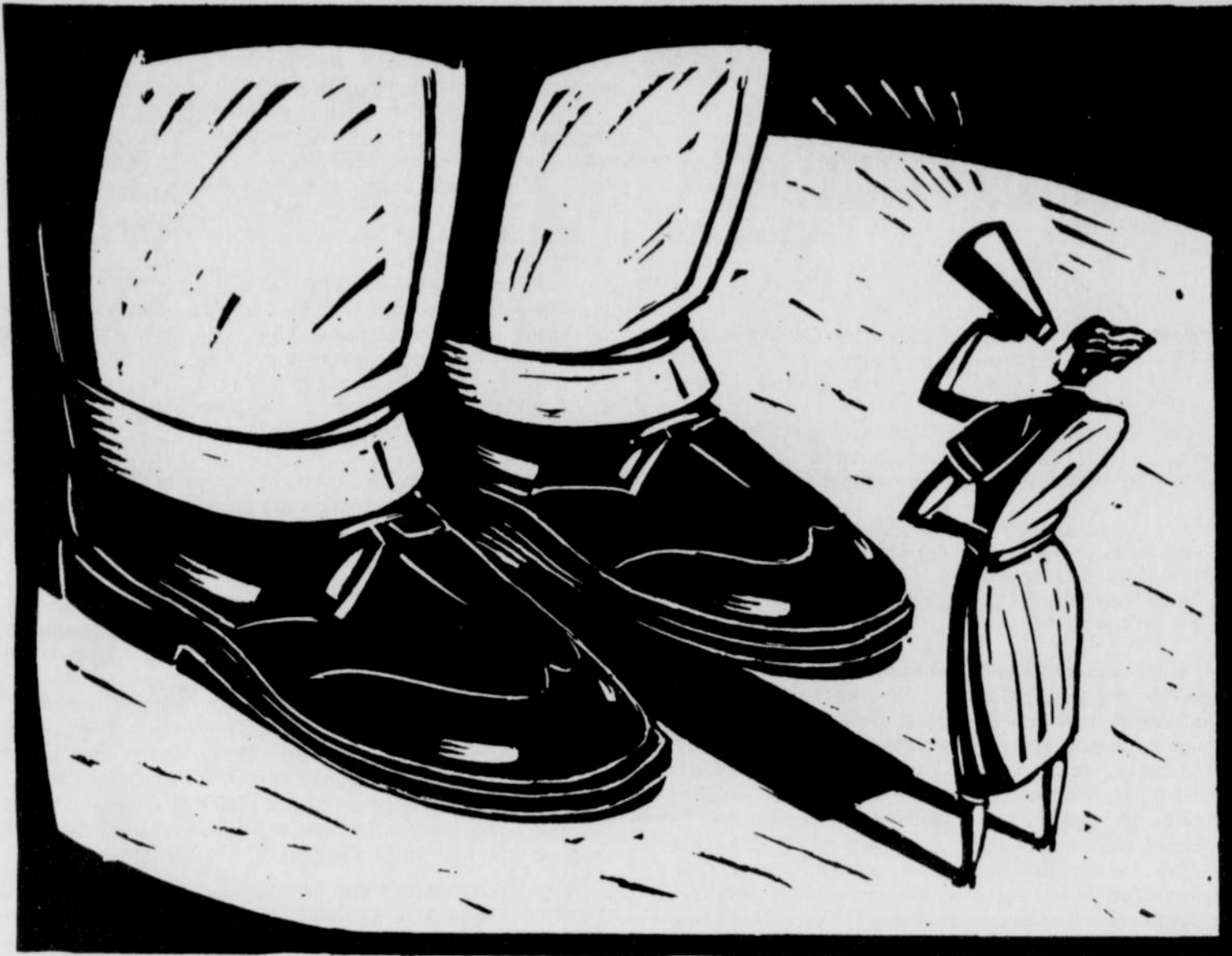


DEAR BOSS, WHAT I REALLY WANTED TO SAY WAS...



MARK MATCHO

BY V. M. KOHOUT

Please accept this as my letter of resignation. I am leaving because I believe that industrial corporate capitalism, which includes but is not limited to this retail company, damages the health and integrity of our natural world and our human relationships in order to achieve a profit. By working for and receiving a check from this company, I am guilty of furthering this irresponsibility.

While pursuing a profit is as natural in a money-based economy as gathering food is in a subsistence one, our country has achieved excess. This wealth has leveraged us into a globally unchecked capacity to control and destroy people, ecosystems, other cultures, and even ourselves without beginning to understand what it is our money has given us power over or that we do indeed hurt others and ourselves with this power. Industrial capitalism's current goal is to pursue unlimited economic growth as if the resources of the earth and its capacity to assimilate refuse were unlimited as well. This goal is incompatible with sustained life on the planet, let alone harmonious life.

The earth is a finite place. Increasingly, Americans seek international resources because our demands exceed domestic supplies. Historically, America's wealth was built on the wealth of the land, spurred by favorable ratios of resources to population. Anyone from fortune seekers to homesteaders could farm acres, graze thousands of cattle, mine anything any way, or cut unlimited trees without visibly upsetting any balance. Over the last 200 years, the population has increased. Today our habitat must support more people. But not only has the population risen, our rate of consumption, known as standard of living and boosted by mechanization, has risen dramatically in that time. On a graph, add the upward curve of per capita consumption to the curve of increasing population, and the demand on the land sky-rockets, as does the interpersonal competition for its wealth.

I am not advocating a different system. I don't believe any system can be infallibly executed. Neither am I insisting that our current cultural/economic system is completely without redemptive qualities. It has good points. The real beauty of a money-driven system is that some power, however unchanneled, rests in the hands of the frontline consumers — the everyday citizen: us. Whereas democracy gives us a voice to vote with, a voice which can be muffled and distorted, capitalism gives us a hand to push with. When we are conscious of this, we can make

informed purchases, or boycotts, and exert quite a shove. Also, capitalism is fueled by individual ambition, and this is a good energy to tap when it is restrained by conscience. Neither wealth nor growth itself is inherently evil, but being enamored of them enables us to be ignorantly destructive. That is the danger, and that is what I promote when I encourage customers to, no matter what, buy.

Let me explain the term "industrial corporate capitalism" as I am using it. "Capitalism" because, here, power follows money as opposed to following military strength, for example, or land (I am not advocating either of these). "Corporate" because holders of sums of money, hence power, are often companies, not individuals, and decisions are made by groups of people. While this situation can mitigate an individual's abuse of power, it can also disguise it, and muddy waters when questions of responsibility and morality arise. Thus, corporate capitalism, as I am using the term, denotes control in the hands of big business. I have added "industrial" because that is the mode of operation. That is how our goods are made and food produced; not manual or personal but momentous and aggressive. In terms of the land, "industrial" often means extractive, taking without replacing in a one way flow of energy. The powerholders ride this animal, industry, in which the workers are the organs and muscles. This beast is a voracious consumer of resources and often a dirty polluter. However, using this overstated metaphor tempts the accusation of the equestrian and the pardon of the ass, and that would be inaccurate, for the frontline consumers — us — wield power with every dollar we spend and every job we accept. I am responsible, too.

Usually, an individual's decision to buy comes after assessing only the dollars in his/her pocket or line of credit. Can s/he afford it? Yes, s/he can get the money. But this tally is incomplete. Behind many comforts, foods and manufactured products are costs and consequences which are often overlooked. They are social, personal, environmental, and arguably aesthetic and moral. They show up in our relationships, our tap water, our future and across the hemisphere.

As supernatural as we sometimes feel, humans are part of the earth's cycles. We depend on the photosynthesis of plants for all food and on plant respiration for oxygen. Like all animals, our eliminations and ultimately our bodies return to the earth to be recycled into nutrients for future life. Being human, though, and members of an industrial society, we consider ourselves more highly sanctioned or evolved than our earthmates. We

reward ourselves by extracting proportionally astronomical amounts of energy from the cycle. We consume about 100 times more energy than our bodies would need were we in a non-industrial society, hand making our existence. We use it to pave roads, build and drive cars, be entertained, heat big houses, manufacture and transport goods, advertise these goods, and so on. Many of our wastes and byproducts cannot beneficially return to the cycle. Thus we break the continually recycling and globally limited energy cycle, passing the bill for our excess to neighbors both human and nonhuman, and to their descendants.

Costs, and the consequences of ignoring them, are disguised by the cosmopolitan nature of the system. Distance and intermediaries between resources, consumers, and refuse sites help to cloak costs of consuming and discarding these resources. For example, our trash disappears into the garbage truck and we think no more of it. We don't watch it fill the countryside. We don't see the streams of agricultural run off or the eroded land behind our cheap, cosmetically perfect food. We don't see the poverty and dependence that result from forcing cultural upheavals in foreign lands in the name of investment. These damages cannot be repaired by stuffing money in the wounds and do not disappear when ignored. Admittedly, ignorance is simpler, guilt-free and requires no sacrifice, but ignorance is not a solution.

Industrial corporate capitalism damages the health and integrity of our human environment and relationships by overhauling personal wealth. In our capital culture, money is a basic survival tool. It buys shelter, food and clothing. We have been led by advertising and culture to believe that money also buys abstracts like security, happiness, love, reputation and health. As a result of this belief individuals compete for purchasing power, taking attention from the family and human community. Ironically, these neglected human relationships provide the happiness, love, security and personal significance we're trying to buy. When we value money as a leverage to success we also sacrifice our natural communities. Unfortunately, these are the very relationships on which we depend for health, food, resources, recreation and solace. In this way our culture undermines its own existence.

The pursuit of unlimited growth on a finite planet leads to an obvious dead end. It encourages greed. It estranges neighbors. It enables us to rationalize the shaving back of social, environmental, aesthetic and moral values. Its waste contaminates our air, water and food. It sacrifices the wholeness of our own habitat for a profit. We fool ourselves if we believe that growth is progress or that value can be counted in dollars, yens and marks.

This consumption-based pursuit of profit is unsustainable at its current rate, yet my job is to increase profit. After all, I am working for some of that money.

We don't often think of these perspectives. Our luxuries and excesses are routine. Electricity, extensive water-based sewage systems, cable TV, telephones, microwaves, refrigerators and automobiles are considered rights in America, not the luxuries they are. My job is to convince people that noodle makers, bubble pens, matching dinnerware, whirligigs and slug poison are also essentials. Thus, my lower-end retail job furthers industrial corporate capitalism's manipulation of humans and destruction of human habitat by enabling, even encouraging people to buy goods they do not need at prices which don't cover the whole cost — which are essentially loans against our future and thefts against our neighbors. Simply by doing my retail job well, I feed an industrial machine that is eating the ground out from under our feet.

I have thought about the ironies of what we call progress and the blindness of measuring value in money. I have considered the cost of the lifestyle I sell every day. Instead of pushing another plastic token to modern technology, I would like to challenge its assumptions. I would like to question our definitions and priorities. Most of all, I would like to live in a manner consistent with what I perceive as true, and I understand my employment with this company to be in direct conflict with my personal goals. Thank you for an enlightening opportunity.

V.L. Kohout lives in Warrenton. She writes of her article: "A couple of years ago I worked for a large local retailer. The job grew increasingly frustrating the more I thought about what I was doing. I eventually quit but lacked the guts to tell my boss and co-workers the whole reason why. They would have thought me bonkers. *Dear Boss* is a belated letter of resignation."

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