Paula Hofmann

Life Is

~~Pain~~

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De~~press~~ing

Hope~~less~~ness

A Journey

Paula Hofmann

Life is A Journey

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If there is no peace in the minds of individuals,
how can there be peace in the world?
Make peace in your own mind first.

~ S. N. Goenka,
Vipassana teacher 1969-2013

Content

1: Once upon a time...

If some extraterrestrial being were to look at this world, they would most likely shake their head in disbelief or some kind of cynical amusement. 'Their planet looks kinda nice', they would say, 'but this human species on it acts weird: having systems, institutions, and ideologies in place that destroy their ecological foundation of being… Can you hand over the popcorn, please…'

Yes, if I were watching this from such a safe distance, I would lean back as well and take a handful of sweet-savory popcorn – never could decide between the two in terrestrial cinemas – but unfortunately, I am part of this mess, just like you. So, let us leave popcorn, the black universe and its mysteriously sparkling stars behind and start our return down to Earth.

We, that's me as the narrator and you as the dear audience, just entered Earth's atmosphere and are about to pass cloud level. Earth's bent horizon is *expanding in front of us as we look down on Earth. Here, indeed, the situation is grave. Symptoms have become clearer and clearer: world society is stumbling into a threat that experts warningly refer to as a 'global organic crisis'.[1] This observation reflects a situation where growing conflict and authoritarianism threaten the very foundations of society, including human rights and the health of our biosphere. In 2023, from Central Europe to Central Asia, democracy declined in 11 out of 29 countries, and global freedom deteriorated for the 17th consecutive year.[2] Amidst a fracturing international community, the climate crisis intensifies and will cross the global warming level of 1.5°C within the next two decades.*

We continue to sink deeper. In the time zone where we entered, it is night. It seems as if the scene would have been turned upside down. Bright dots sparkling in the dark not in the sky, which is covered with a dark grey cloak of clouds and air pollution - but on the ground. We continue to sink... sink... sink... and finally: land. On many houses, a red and white flag is waving slowly in the cold breeze, with the red forming a leaf of a tree and two stripes on the flag's right and *left edges. We have landed in a suburb in Toronto, Canada. From there, our journey will start… Now.*

Cheeky Child – in the following called by her short form, Cheeky C – feels a sharp pain in her back and opens her eyes. She instinctively rolls her small, tiny body to the left side to escape the sharp pebble on the hard, cold ground where she lies. A thought cracks into her mind. 'How did I get here? Where am I?'

She feels dizzy and shaky. Slowly, she moves her hand, trying to sit up and gain orientation, her two honey-brown braids gently touching her small ears as she lifts her head, the weight of her vest, hoodie, and worn-out jeans feeling too heavy to bear. She senses a rugged wall and stairs close to her, in some parts illuminated by the dirty yellow glow of the streetlamp next to her but mostly covered in shadow.

Another thought leaps into the fog which veils every corner of her brain. She breathes in sharply. The fog is gone, her brain crystal-clear now, yet, as with the first thought, she couldn't find an answer, nothing, to this very simple but essential question…

'Who am I?'

2: I am waiting for a new era

Great Grandmother – in the following, I will call her by her short form, Great G – lifts her head, which feels too heavy to bear. For the past hour, she has stared out of the window, out in the dark cold street, her chin resting in her right hand, lost in the endless labyrinth of her thoughts. She hadn't even noticed that tears came out of her eyes and rolled down her wrinkled skin. It drops down to the happily flickering candle next to her, her only companion in this night and living room. The room is otherwise cloaked in heavy darkness and stillness.

Yes, she had reasons to feel depressed. Youth around the world have mobilized to protest against global leaders and a world economic system that has proven to fail to combat the most existential threat humanity faces: climate change. Yet, nothing has changed. In the headlines of newspapers, and the articles of scientific journals, she still reads about unbroken monopoly powers, contemporary forms of slave labour,[3] rising temperatures and environmental degradation, increasing military spending, a looming debt crisis in almost a dozen developing countries, and underfinanced health care systems around the globe. She sighs and shakes her head. I know I focus a lot, maybe too much, on the bad things out in this world, she thinks. But still… There is no departure into a new era… Business continues as usual, putting profit maximization first… Worst, coming closer and closer to the end of her life, she has the feeling of regret. Of failure. Of lost time.

She doesn't have the feeling that she achieved any satisfying contribution to sufficiently tackle any of the problems out in this world. She often wishes that she could turn back time. Yet, how could she have done more? In her younger ages, she closely escaped burnout several times… The birth of a new era, an era of global health, where the financial system and real economy prioritize the well-being of people and the planet, is what she has been waiting for. When will this new era arrive? This deep desire for global betterment, the era of a happy child in every part of the world, that she hopes will be born at some point in the future, was probably the reason for the tear that left its trace on the wrinkles of her cheek minutes ago.

Suddenly, some movement out in the dark catches her attention. She moves closer to the window, its cool surface touching the tip of her nose. ‘There is something on the ground… Moving… In the light of the streetlamp… Now it is sitting up… Looking around… My Good…’

She gasps as she recognizes to whom the contours and moving shadows belong. ‘It’s a little girl! Just ten or twelve years old… What the heck is she doing out there? Alone like this?’ She freezes in her observing position, hesitates, thoughts rushing through her mind. Then she makes a decision. She takes her cloak and runs outside.

Suddenly, Cheeky C hears hurried steps coming closer. Before she can finish thinking about her options for hiding somewhere, long legs appear in her field of view. Her heart jumps in horror.

3: I want to find out who I am

We witness the encounter of the two from afar, invisible to our protagonists.

The little girl on the ground turns around and makes hasty movements, trying to come to her feet before Grand G arrives.

Great G reaches out her hand and kneels down, trying to calm Cheeky C down. She says something to Cheeky C, which makes her stop moving. She listens, her tiny body on eye level with Great G's face, who now slowly puts her hand on the girl's shoulder.

Cheeky C shakes her head several times in reply to what Great G says to her. We can see the bewilderment in Great G's face.

A cold breeze blows down the street, and the girl shivers in her light red vest. This time she reluctantly nods in reply to Great G's words.

Finally, they both turn and walk towards Great G's house, bypassing us and speeding up their walk as *another cold breeze whispers through this memorable night.*

Great G hands a cup full of tea to Cheeky C and sits down next to the girl on her couch, wrapped in a fluffy blanket, just one meter away from the chair where Great G sat and stared out of the window minutes ago.

‘And you really can’t remember who you are? Not even your name?’

Cheeky C shakes her head. ‘What’s your name?’, she asks back.

‘Everyone just calls me Great G.’

‘And who are you?’

‘An old woman close to the end of her life’.

And captured in an everything-consuming black hole of frustration, despair, and fear, she thinks.

Because of the world as it is in the 21st century, because of all this war, starvation, poverty, and displacement that is still going on.

Because I feel I failed to contribute to betterment before I became old and energy of life began to leave my body slowly, day by day.

But she didn’t say that out loud.

4: What is happiness?

‘Hm’. Cheeky C tilts her head, looking at her with intelligent, vigilant eyes that suddenly seem to be much older. ‘Are you happy?’

‘What is happy, what is happiness?’ Great G asks back, regretting her sharp tone. What is happiness? How can happiness be possible in this world where so many things are about money? Earning, spending, saving, lending. And again earning. And fearing the moment you fail to function all the time. Some form of enslavement, she thought grimly, from the moment you leave your parental nest and enter work life. With only a little time for yourself to fully unfold all facets of your personality. And to become happy.

‘For me, happiness is knowing who I am in this world,’ says the small girl in front of her. ‘And I want to find out who I am in this world, Great G.’

‘Wow. This will be the journey of a lifetime.’

‘Journey?’

‘All inclusive. Transportation will be in a flying can with too many people and too few emergency exits because it’s profit over people. Destination: unknown. Attention, you might get into turbulences and storms. The food is disgusting. Inflation skyrocketing. Backpacks ready?’

‘You are joking.’

‘Of course I am. But you just won a special travel discount.’

‘Which one?’

‘I am coming with you.’ I might be too old, Great G thinks, but if I go with her and help her to find out who she is, I might also find happiness and an answer to the question that I have been pondering for decades now:

How to change the system that brings us money and prioritizes money and selfishness above anything else into a system that prioritizes global health, the wellbeing of both society and the planet?

And so, after a long night with an unexpected and life-changing twist for our travel companions, they go upstairs and to bed, Cheeky C in Great G’s bed and Great G on a mattress in another room, both tired but *lying awake, lost in their thoughts and questions about the very foundation of being and happiness. We now leave the two, come back into our own lives, and wait to see how the journey that just started on a cold, dark night in Toronto will continue.*

5: Why are banks so big?

‘Woahh,’ Cheeky C turns her face to Great G, her eyes wide open. ‘What is that?’

They walk through Toronto downtown without a destination, hoping that they see something that will trigger Cheeky C’s memory. Who she is. Where she is from. She couldn’t even recall her name. Her heart starts to beat faster again, her breath becomes short. The shock of her identity loss and the inevitable feeling of being lost keeps her in its fierce grip. Trying to hide that from her elderly companion, Cheeky C points towards a giant tower of bronze-colored glass and dark grey metal, rising into the sky before them. A big car rushes past them on the broad grey street next to them, honking angrily. How hostile, she thinks. The opposite of the cozy living room with the couch and warm chocolate and cinnamon tea in Great G’s small suburban house. In the night, lit up by candles on the sills and tables, during the day flooded with light through the big windows in each of the four walls. But here in Downtown, everything feels rushed.

She didn’t notice how tense her body became, as if there was a threat and she had to run away the next moment. It is hard for her to shake off this tension as an automatic reaction to the external stress she is exposed to. ‘Oh, that?’ Great G looks up, a lot less impressed. ‘That is a bank. Look, there is their name on the glass front, in big white letters on blue ground, below the contours of a yellow lion. It’s the Royal Bank.’

‘A bank?’ Somewhere deep in her mind, Cheeky C knows about banks. They give you money from your bank account if you need it, given you have enough money to put it there. She can also vaguely recall the concept of credits: money for those who have not enough in their bank account but need some to continue their daily life and business, so they get it from the bank but have to pay it back later. She realizes she never thought about banks before; banks have appeared to be such a natural part of her life. Wherever and however she has lived it – her memory stops here. ‘Why is the building of the bank sooo big?’

‘Because they have so much money in them, they need enough space to store it. So, the more money a bank can pile up, the bigger its building gets.' Great G's face is deadly serious.

'You are joking.'

'Of course I am. Okay, okay, you get a serious answer. The building size symbolically showcases the power banks have in our lives, politics, and the economy.[4] In basically everything. The moment you see it, you bow down in awe and admiration.'

'We didn't bow…'

'Internally.'

6: Why are banks so powerful?

Great G turns to Cheeky C and smiles warmly. ‘And maybe you didn’t bow because you have the rare gift of curiosity and questioning everything.’

Cheeky C smiles back – cheekily. ‘Then let me ask you another question. Why are banks sooo powerful?’

‘Good one… It’s because they can create money. So they create the very thing we all need. No, you might ask yourself, how do they create money? And do they have any constraints in doing that? And where do the problems and injustices start? Longer story… Let us walk to a nice spot where we can talk and sit.’

As always, we follow them as invisible observers. They walk down Bay Street, the feet of Great G almost automatically following the narrow pavement down to Harbourfront, a promenade made out of grey concrete at the shores of Lake Ontario.

She looks over to her young companion. Cheeky C just spotted two other dominant Canadian financial institutions. Not that hard – overlooking their buildings would be like overlooking the movie screen in a cinema. Too big to fail.

‘Look! CIBC… What’s that? And Scotiabank Arena… Must be a bank as well!’ She turns around, her two honey-brown braids flying. ‘Great G! It feels like they occupied the whole city! Is that normal?’

‘No, my dear’, Great G replied, ‘that’s as normal as pineapple pizza.’ Cheeky C looks as confused as someone could look who doesn’t know about that ever-lasting debate. ‘Or as normal as people who crave Poutine. I will make you try,’ Great G adds with a smile, ‘…after we tried Beaver Tails.’

A small wooden house appears in front of them, just a few steps away from the dark water of Lake Ontario, with small boats sleeping on the lake’s calm surface. ‘Beaver Tails’ is written in curved white letters on red walls and rooftop, luring visitors with the national colors of Canada. It is around noon and just a few other people walk across the promenade, mainly tourists.

‘So, why are banks so powerful?’, restarts Great G the conversation, after they both sat down on the concrete steps that lead down to the water, holding flat, deep-fried, crispy buns rolled in sugar in their hands. ‘When you understand that, you understand global capitalism and the major problems we face. Banks are so powerful because they create money. But let's dive even deeper to unterstand where the power of banks comes from.’

7: Beaver Tails and global bonds

'I remember coming into touch with that topic on a deeper level for the first time when I wrote my Bachelor thesis over 50 years ago,' Great G continues. 'If you want to have access to goods and services to produce something – to Beaver Tails to eat something – you need money. Banks can give it to you, mostly in the form of credits, which is money that you have to pay back later, at a higher price, as banks charge interest. The other thing is equity investment, coming from other financial institutions or private individuals. And now I want you to guess something.' She turns to Cheeky C who stops eating and looks at her.

'What?'

'How much money in the form of credits is currently in the global market compared to investments?'

'Umm…'

Great G pulls out her phone. 'Sometimes even the wisest person needs to look up the current numbers, but don't tell anyone… Ah, got it. If you want to know the exact dry numbers, listen carefully: the volume of the global bond market is $133 trillion while the global equity market only has a volume of $109 trillion.'[5] She quickly types into her phone, then looks at her sugary bun with new respect. 'With $133 trillion, you can buy 19 trillion Beaver Tails. That's three Beaver Tails per day for two years – for every person on this earth.'

Great G takes a crispy bite. 'Anyways, what I wanted to show you is that credits, in the form of bonds, make up the largest share of the money that is used for making things run in this world. And investments and credits are interrelated, as investors can borrow money from banks to make investments. Banks are also key players in the bond market: they both buy and sell large amounts of bonds.[6] So, it often comes back to banks in the end, if not always. And, following certain financial guidelines, they decide who gets money and who does not. That's why they are so powerful.'

Cheeky C tilts her head to the right side, frowning thoughtfully. 'Okay, got that. They even have a say in whether a Beaver Tail can be produced or not, that’s incredible! Has it always been like this, that banks have so much power?’

‘No, no,’ Great G shakes her head heavily. ‘Glad you ask that. Often, we think about the things around us as given, as natural. But nothing is natural. Everything is a social construct that evolved in the course of history. Money as the widespread and only means of barter and change was artificially imposed by the modern state during industrialization almost 200 years ago.[6] The majority of the population exchanged goods by “give and take”principles, with money playing a subordinate role.’

8: Money and bullshit jobs

Great G swallows the last bite of her Beaver Tail and folds the oily, red-white paper slowly into a small paper ship. She continues. 'And now, Cheeky C, bear with me, the crucial point comes. The economic system radically changed in the 19th century. The 'old' system was transformed into a 'new' system. The leading classes' visionary end – or 'utopia', as Polanyi names it – was the self-regulating market, a system that must work without any interference.'

The elderly woman's hands complete the transformation of a Beaver Tail wrapping into a paper ship. 'Ironically, large-scale interference was needed to establish and maintain the system within society. This new system was thoroughly artificial and mechanic. Transactions were no longer a reciprocal 'give and take'; instead, they required money. Everything, even human life and land, was treated as a commodity. As a soulless thing to buy, own and sell – to make money.'

Compassionate sadness overshadows Great G's wrinkled face. 'Similarly, soulless, the economy and countless jobs have become, leaving people’s souls longing in desire for something they don’t even know what it is. This has dramatically intensified over the last decades. Nowadays, many people lack spirituality and meaning in new job positions that are created constantly but are actually useless. Anthropologist David Graeber calls these “bullshit jobs”.

These are jobs that provide no value for society, pointless employment that is just created to keep people busy and minds occupied. Graeber mentions examples of employees creating useless documents and sheets for their managers or having to complete time-passing tasks such as bringing paper clips into order according to their colours. People who make more money but no meaning – unlike care workers, nurses, cleaners, etc. who are essential for society but receive low payment disproportional to their actual value.[7] Or unlike people who earn a lot of money but also bear a great responsibility, as it happens in leadership positions. So, in many kinds of jobs, your mental health is threatened to deteriorate nowadays. Either you lack true happiness, connection, and meaning – or financial and social security. At the same time, the system promotes the perfect delusion of happiness through spending money, possessing, and consuming things in the outside world. I wasn't aware of this myself for a long, long time in my past…'

Great G stands up and walks down the stairs to the lake's surface. Cheeky C follows her, listening attentively with her small ears. 'Why do you know all this? Why are you telling me all this?', she asks.

Great G grins. 'Well, every great grandmother has some good night horror stories to tell. Watch out when you choose your job later…'

9: More power: banks or politicians?

The paper boat is almost sunken now, starting its lonely journey through many dark and cold layers of water down to the very bottom of the lake. Cheeky C turns her face to Great G. ‘Wow. But if an economy running only with money is not natural but imposed, does that mean that this system can change again?’

‘Of course. Anytime. To be clear, I don’t think that we will ever develop into an economy that uses no money at all. Money will stay with us, and with money, the incredible power of people and institutions that create and regulate money flows.

But the distribution of that power can change, of course! There is always a power struggle between the different social forces we have.

Banks, investors, businesses, governments, parties, civil organizations, cultural clubs, churches, families, or social movements – they all fight in that struggle, create alliances, try to outcompete each other, whatever. It can get very dirty and sometimes even bloody.'

'Politicians? What's that?'

'People who can create binding rules for everyone in society, also for the most powerful in there.'

'That's incredible. But that raises another question. Who is more powerful? Banks or politicians?'

'Difficult… And don't forget to include companies in the equation. I live you an evergreen answer but which is very true. It depends.

When we look at the political and economic history of the West, specifically the United States of America as the Western leader, research shows that the financial system was a lot more regulated after WWII, when we had the so-called Bretton Woods system.

This system prioritized macroeconomic stability and social security within nations. However, due to various economic troubles and ideological changes within the US, the Bretton Woods system broke apart in 1972, a well-intended consequence of US President Reagan's administration.

Let me tell you more about that, as understanding this is crucial to understand the massive power shift in world society that took place afterwards…’

10: The myth of economic deregulation

During her talk, Great G suddenly remembers the days when she learned about the global political economy as a student during her exchange semester in Toronto, at York University. The university's colours were red and white, just like the colors of the sunken paper ship minutes ago. Those days were mind-blowing for me, she thinks. If you can understand the international monetary system and its changes in history, you can understand a lot more in this world.

She pulls herself back to reality, Cheeky C's expectant eyes on her, thirsty for knowledge. 'The collapse of the Bretton Woods system in the 1970s – the US-led institutional setup for a stable monetary order after WWII – marked a drastic change in the global economy and international monetary system. Under the ideological umbrella of what scientists call Neoliberalism and the Washington Consensus, deep changes in international law were undertaken that should ensure that the financial and economic order is protected from any outside disturbances - for example, political instabilities caused by civic protests against increasing social inequalities and neoliberal authoritarianism.'

Great G shakes her head in amusement. 'And that's so ironic – the post-Bretton Woods global economy became apparently deregulated while actually becoming *more* regulated, namely, by international law! This contradiction can be resolved when we understand that this "deregulation" is a myth. In fact, modern capitalism has been heavily regulated ever since – in times of globalization more by international not national law – to make sure it functions for a specific ideological goal. Currently, this goal is individual profit maximization, justified as increasing society's wealth.

One example of "deregulation" is the market of speculative financial products such as derivatives, the trading of goods based on their estimated future value. The US government deregulated profit-making through speculation on commodity prices, enabled by so-called derivatives, in 2000, when Congress passed the 'Commodity Futures Modernization Act'. As a result, the derivative market grew massively.

Between 1995 and 2012, the total amount of financial derivatives increased by 1700%!’ [8]

And one example of investors’ privilege by law is the extended legal protection of private property. Through the use of patents, companies can now even declare basic goods for human survival, such as seeds or medicines, as their property, strictly controlling who can access and produce them and who cannot. That power was created through the US-led establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Trade-related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement as part of it. This has been criticized for locking in special rights to private capital for goods that are so essential for humanity that they should rather be legally protected as "common property"!’

11: Money and inner peace

Great G pauses and looks at Cheeky C, understanding. ‘Your confused look is okay. Lots of intelligent fancy words, I know.’

‘Well, you said a lot of cool stuff, but you didn’t answer the question.’

‘Yes, because I pretty much enjoy sharing all my fascinating political science knowledge that could make Earth a better place if more people would know and understand it. But we are getting closer, no worries. Pause for a dramatic rise in tension.’

She pauses again and brings the palms of her hands together – now it was her turn to smile cheekily.

‘The point is that neither is more powerful per se. It depends.

And I encourage you on our journey to look closely at how it really is.

Whenever we encounter money and the financial system in our traveling through everyday life, ask yourself where power, most of all the power of change, truly lies.

I am sure you will find an answer someday, and I hope world societies will – all our wealth and health are dependent on it!’

‘Wow. I should name you Drama G.’

Cheeky C suddenly looks gloomy, fighting back tears.

'Right now, I just want to find out who I am in this world… But all we found so far is banks.’

‘And Beaver Tails… Isn’t that something?’

Great G, feeling the sadness of Cheeky C as if it was her own, tries to cheer her small companion up.

Cheeky C shakes her head. ‘All the money in this world, all banks together, can’t replace what it means to know yourself.

Because they are things from the outside world. But what I need is inside.

To know who I am, to understand what’s going on inside myself, to believe in myself.

To find peace in myself.

I wish we could reach that point on our journey.’

12: Facing the dark storm inside Cheeky C

Cheeky C turns her face away so that Great G can't see her tears. She feels so incomplete, so worthless. *I don't know who I am.* And the walk through Downtown Toronto didn't help at all. Frustration boils in her, together with endless desperation. She feels a gap, a longing in herself for something she doesn't even know what it is… The gap widens and opens until it seems like an eternal black hole, sneeringly laughing at her, consuming everything else in and around her, sucking in every light and hope for betterment.

She feels a hand touching her shoulder. 'Cheeky C?' Great G's voice, compassionate. 'I understand what you are going through… There is no escape, my dear… The only way out is through.'

'What do you mean?'

'There is no escape, my Cheeky Child. That means that you must face the dark storm inside you, pull it right in front of you, go right into its center, and fully feel the toxication it brings into you. In the center of the storm, you either break – or learn to break out.'

'How can I break out?'

'It is through learning to love yourself.'

'Loving myself? I don't even know who I am, so how am I supposed to love myself? And I thought love is only for romantic love relationship stuff.' Cheeky C feels defensive and rejective against the thought, not knowing why.

Great G smiles at her. 'It's okay that you are hesitant and afraid.' Damn. How did Great G know?

'You will figure it out, be patient', Great G continues. 'It will take you time. I can give you guidance, but you have to walk the path yourself. I will tell you one thing today.'

Great G takes a deep breath and pauses for a second. 'It's a mental game. The first thing that helps is to acknowledge that everything is temporary. Things will become better one day. Keep telling that to yourself as a mantra. Everything is temporary. Acknowledging that everything is temporary frees you from the feeling of being stuck and trapped in the current situation without ever being able to change it.

This, in turn, helps to calm down and clear your mind.’

‘Thanks! I will try… Do you know any kind of walk to another bank that can help?’

‘Of course, I know. You are with a person that has “Great” in her name…' Great G pulls out her phone. ‘Let’s start booking our plane tickets. We must go to Europe to make you understand.’

13: Social banks in Europe

Our two travel companions head back to Great G's cozy home and get their backpacks ready ('Cheeky C, can you take those four packs of cinnamon-chocolate tea, thanks'), then drive to Toronto Pearson International Airport. Great G was able to book an affordable last-minute ticket for two people ('Call me Great Booking G in the future'). As an invisible audience, we have the privilege of not being as jetlagged as Great Booking G and Cheeky C a few hours later.Together, we arrive at their main destination: Amsterdam, Netherlands. They continue to travel by train to Utrecht, as Great G knows a good friend there who offered to host them in her apartment during their stay ('She is Indian, Cheeky C, time to increase your spice tolerance…'). Finally, the next day, they reach what Great G is so eager to show Cheeky C: the headquarters of a social bank.

'And it's not just any headquarters', Great G excitedly says to Cheeky C when they leave the train station 'Driebergen-Zeist' and walk on the pathway alongside a small, dark green forest. The trees' branches and leaves are sprinkled with water drops from the recent early spring rain, and the morning air is fresh and clean. ‘It’s art. You will see.’

A building rises in front of them, surrounded by trees and morning fog. Contrary to the banks in Toronto, it is not its size that is the most remarkable characteristic. It is the shape. A curved glass front, not higher than two stories, flows into the nature coexisting around the building. The front connects three round-cornered sections of the building that were built higher than the outer wall, about three or four stories high, covered by greened roofs.

‘My friend must still work in one of these towers right now,’ murmurs Great G. ‘Let me text him to see whether he is available to give us a little tour.’ While she types, Cheeky C looks around, trying to get a glimpse inside the building. Its inner parts are illuminated by warm light. She can see contours of people sitting on desks, walking around, or having a conversation. Making deals that manage capital flows – and move the world. Cheeky C feels a rush of sensations, of fascination.

‘Why did you bring us here?’, Cheeky C asks.

‘To show you that there is something else besides conventional banks and their intimidating, cold, streamlined towers as we saw it in Toronto. Something you might never heard of. Something powerful, authentically aiming at the wellbeing of the planet, society, and the individual. You asked me if there are any kind of banks that can help against a lack of happiness. Here they are: they are called “social banks” or “ethical banks.”’

14: Conventional banking and fossil fuels

Great G looks around, her wrinkled face smiling. She seemingly enjoys where she sits with her young companion. ‘It’s so good to be back, after so many decades. After ending my semester abroad in Canada, I came here to visit friends and just started my own discovery journey through the world of finance… But anyways. To understand what social banking is, we must understand its differences from conventional banking. I give you a striking example.’

Great G types into her phone and turns the screen around for Cheeky C.

‘JP… JP Morgan Chase,’ the girl reads. ‘What is that?’ ‘That, my Cheeky Child, is one of the largest and most successful banks in the world.’

‘Oh, so a lot of Beaver Tails can be financed by it?’

‘Yes. I guess we just introduced new metrics for measuring a bank’s success. Amazing… For now, let’s look at one of the usual indicators of a conventional bank's success, and that's total assets under management (AUM). In simple words, AUM is the value sum of all things financed – 'owned' – by the bank. In 2023, JP Morgan's AUM had a volume of $3.74 trillion, ranking it the fifth largest bank in the world according to total assets, and the largest bank in the US. The bank is like a magnet attracting hyper-capitalistic mega corporations that effectively rule the world to a large extent or those that dream of doing so in the future. It forms a dense knot of Western monopolistic power in the financial system.'[9]

'Wow. Sounds like a lot of Beaver Tails. And power.'

'Yes. And here is the thing… JP Morgan Chase's money moves a lot of things in this world and keeps them running, but it doesn't use all of their money power for planetary health and societal wellbeing. In fact, the bank's harshest critiques say that the bank actively destroys planetary and societal "assets".'

'You destroy the thing that you want to own? How is that possible?'

'Good question. How can one explain a bank's ongoing fossil fuel investments when the effects have been noticeable for decades? By denial, delusion, and a specific set of prioritizations, I would say. Conventional banks are primarily driven by competition and profitability, which means making as much money as possible. At the cost of society and planet, if necessary. Many of them claim to become more sustainable now: JP Morgan, Citi, Wells Fargo, Barclays, BNP Paribas, HSBC, Goldman Sachs, Bank of China, Deutsche Bank, just to name a few examples. Yet they don't do enough. Their persisting billions of investment into fossil fuels tell the truth.[10] But there is one powerful thing we can do against it.'

15: Your banking power for planetary health?

Great G looks into the astonished eyes of Cheeky C. ‘Yes, this world is not a pony farm, to use a German saying, any German may forgive me for this hair-raising translation… Do you know how big JP Morgan’s investment into fossil fuel assets is?’

‘What? Fossil fuels? What is that?’

‘These are materials that can cause a rise in global temperature and a climate crisis if you burn them in an excessive amount. Which is what humanity is doing right now. So, what is your guess of JP Morgan’s fossil fuel investments?’

'Ehh… I have no clue. And I am hungry…’, Cheeky C replies.

‘I give you the number as a starter. No worries, we will eat in about five minutes, with my friend. The number is big and hard to digest, so it’s good that your stomach is empty…’

She pauses dramatically, the effect slightly curbed by the hungry growling of Cheeky C's stomach in the silence. 'It is…nothing less than $434.154 billion! That's as big as the whole 2023 government revenue of a country – for example, Albania in Southern Europe.'[11]

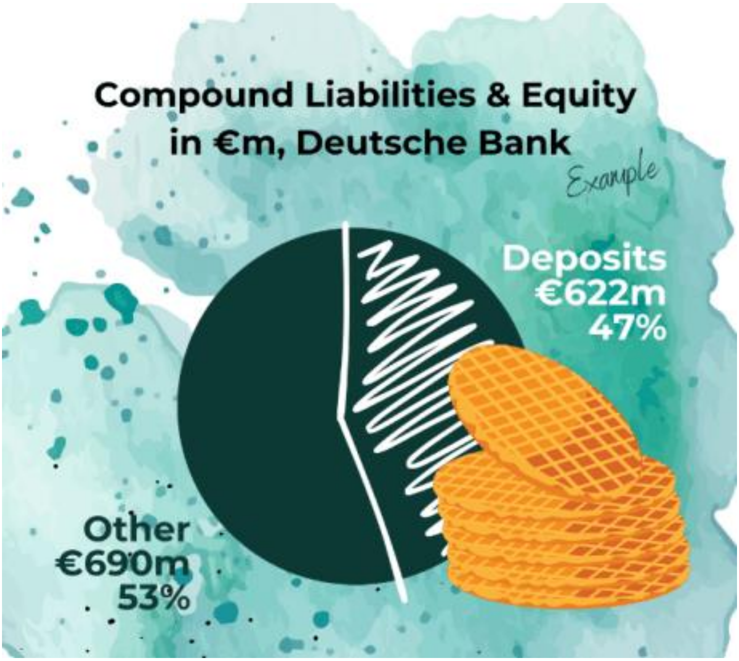
Cheeky C stares at her. 'I am sorry, Great G, all that I can think about is Beaver Tails and being hungry…'

'Okay, one last sentence before I turn into the great hero – Great G hero – who saves you from starving to death. You asked what a social bank is… You know what, to make it fast, let's go to the website of the Institute for Social Banking. Just a second… Here!'

Her fingers perform a routined dance on the screen and finally stop. 'Here it reads, bear with me: "“Social Banking” describes banking and related financial services whose main objective is to contribute to the development of people and planet, today and in the future. First and foremost, this means simultaneously taking into account the social, environmental, governance, and economic impacts of activities on all levels, with the aim of reducing their negative and increasing their positive effects on the common good.”’[12]

Great G takes a breath. ‘My God, what a long sentence… Is the author German? Now the most important part.' She takes the small hands of Cheeky C. ‘That is the last thing before we dive into the breakfast buffet: This all might feel overwhelming. But there is this one impactful thing we can do as individuals against the harmful power of conventional banks. We can take our own finances out of their hands and start to use the power of our money mindfully. One of the easiest starting points is to open our bank accounts at a social bank.’

‘Well said, Great G. Wanna restart in our marketing department?’ An amused, elderly man’s voice behind Cheeky C lights up a broad smile on Great G’s wrinkles and lets her jump up, reaching out her hands. 'Ah, my friend is here! He can tell us even better. There is so much more to explore - after breakfast! Are you ready for this journey?'



Your (collective) power for change. Own graphic. Source: [13].

16: Your impact with banking

After breakfast, Cheeky C feels much better. She really likes Great G's friend. His name is Jake J and he treats everyone around him with sincere respect and honesty, and knows a lot about social banking. Even more than Great G. As they tell Cheeky C, they both got to know each other decades ago in Sweden during a Summer School for Social Banking. A friendship that has never been broken.

'You know, Cheeky C, that banks are among the most powerful institutions in society', Jake J says to her. 'But do you know why?'

Cheeky C feels excited. Of course, she knows the answer – she learned that in Toronto! 'As I learned from Great G, banks are so powerful because they can finance the production of a lot of Beaver Tails.'

Jake J tilts his head and chuckles. 'Hm, interesting… I clearly see the influence of a hungry stomach and some Canadian snacks here…'

Great G tries to look as innocent as possible.

Cheeky C continues. ‘But Great G also taught me that banks are so powerful because even politicians, investors, companies, and people like you and me have to go to a bank to get money. Everyone. Money plays a central role in today’s society, and with that, banking institutions that give us money have incredible power.’

Thumbs up from Jake J. ‘Well done, well done… So banks are so powerful because they control all money flows in our society. But do you know where banks get all their money from?’

He chuckles again, seeing the puzzled look on Cheeky C’s face. ‘Time to go beyond Beaver Tails. Time for… Dutch Stroopwafels!’

Cheeky C’s puzzled look doesn’t get better as he pulls out a package of round, thin, golden-brown waffles from his bag. ‘To understand where banks’ money comes from, and thus their monetary power, you need to understand a bank’s balance sheet – and the power *you* have.’

‘A balance sheet? What’s that?’ Cheeky C feels a rush of curiosity.

‘An overview of the inflows and outflows of a bank’s money. How much money comes in, and how much is put into assets. Ideally, both should be balanced. In the case of conventional banks, a lot of their assets are in sick finances: the finances of fossil fuels. They have super weak guidelines. Just as Great G told you before I jumped into your conversation.’

Jake J pauses and points at the waffles in his hand. ‘So, when we find out where the incoming money comes from, we know where the power for change comes from. Are you ready to unpack some truth?’

Cheeky C smiles – cheekily. ‘If it means eating waffles - then I am!’

‘Awesome. Deal.’ Jake J takes one waffle out. ‘This waffle represents the total amount of a bank’s income. Great G, you are German and know about the involvement of your country’s banking institutions in dirty business. How much money went into the Deutsche Bank in 2023?’

Great G’s fingers dance on the screen of her phone. ‘Deutsche Bank’s total liabilities and equity is, according to their 2023 annual report on page 213… around €1.3 billion.’[1]

‘And how much is coming from deposits?’

‘That is… Around €622 million, almost half.’[2]

Jake J breaks the waffle in half. He hands one half over to Cheeky C. ‘Here. Your power.’

Figure 1: Your employer’s and your power for change.

The little girl is dangerously close to breaking the record of the most puzzled look on a child’s face ever. ‘My power? How?’

‘Because if you grow older, you will own a bank account. A deposit. And by that, you will finance a bank. So, a part of a bank’s power will ultimately come from your hands. And from your friends, your family members, your employer – everyone who has a bank account. Almost half, if you become a client of Deutsche Bank. Do you understand now the power that you have as an individual, that everyone with a bank account has? The power for change.'

'For change?' The little girl starts to think. 'Hm… Do you mean changing by opening my bank account at a social bank? They have the strictest criteria for using my money. I learned that from Great G before you joined. No fossil fuels, no arms industry, no child labour. Only healthy finance.'

Jake J smiles all over his face. 'Correct! Now, let's enjoy this insight with some Stroopwafels…'

Cheeky C's question interrupts the three's content sound of chewing. 'Wait… Just opening an account at a bank is easy. But what about all the adults who have a bank account at a harmful bank and want to move – how can they do that? I can imagine it involves a lot of time and bureaucracy…'

Jake J and Great G shake their heads. 'Not at all. But many people think that and become deterred…'

Great G sighs. ‘I had so many debates in my life. But it is actually quite easy.’

‘Oh yes,’ Jake J adds. ‘All you need is courage… And a few clicks. Let me show you.’ He turns Great G’s phone, where the old lady has already researched the needed website, to Cheeky C.

‘You start with a background check of our current bank.

Does it have weak guidelines for the use of your money, ultimately supporting businesses that don’t care much about society’s and our planet’s health?

You can check your bank with the Fair Finance Guide.

Or you can check whether your bank is B Corp [3] certified, which is one of the highest sustainable standards in business certification.

Or you check whether your bank is a member of the Global Alliance for Social Banking on Values [4], short form GABV. In this network, only social banks with super-strict criteria can be members.

Here, you may face what you fear most: namely, that your bank is a bad one and you need to move your account.

In this case, step two: you check the social banking alternatives in your country with the members' map on the GABV website and choose the social bank that fits best for you.

The last steps are kinda simple and self-explanatory.

You open your new social bank account online, inform all your payment partners about your new bank data, and close your old bank account.'

Cheeky C is impressed. 'Wow! That's actually quite easy!'

'Yes, it takes you less time than watching an episode of Bridgerton…' Jake J rolls his eyes. 'If we had a story about social banking that is as thrilling for people as those Netflix series, the world would have long since been changed for the better.'

Suddenly, Great G looks thoughtful. A mischievous smile lights up her wrinkled face. 'Hm… You just gave me an idea…'

Epilogue: And Now You

What thoughts are buzzing around in your mind after reading?

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What ideas do you have for yourself and your contacts, your organization, your company?

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What can you do to help yourself put your ideas and ideals into action, and what are the next steps you can take in the coming weeks?

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Who can help me, and with whom should I connect?

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[10] See Banking on Climate Chaos Fossil Fuel Report 2023. 2023. pp. 10ff.

[11] See CIA. The World Factbook. 2023. Available online from: https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/field/budget/, last accessed 09 April 2024.

[12] See The Institute for Social Banking. 2021. “Definition of ‘Social Banking.’

[13] See Deutsche Bank. 2024. Annual report 2023, p. 213. Available online from: https://investor-

relations.db.com/files/documents/annual-reports/2024/Annual-Report-2023.pdf, last accessed 01 June 2024.

[14] Ibid.

[15] The “B Corp Movement” is a global network of companies that actively promote a sustainable, social and fair future. There are over 5,000 certified B Corporations worldwide, including Patagonia, The Guardian and Sympatex. B Corporations are companies that want to achieve greater sustainability and are committed to regularly measuring and improving their social and environmental. More on: https://www.bcorporation.net/en-us/.

[16] More on GABV.org/About us: „The Global Alliance for Banking on Values (GABV) is an international network of frontrunner organisations and leaders in the banking industry that use finance to serve people and the planet. Our collective goal is to make the banking system more transparent and support positive economic, social and environmental change.”

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Fact: Curious and engaged global citizen, passionate about creative solutions in politics and the global financial system, and professionally as well as voluntarily committed to a more sustainable and peaceful world order.

Hard fact: Born in Munich. 24 years old. Studied political science at LMU, with a focus on the international financial system.

Sad fact: Questioning the status quo since the start of the Fridays-for-Future movement in Germany. Sometimes frustrated by all the missed opportunities for sustainable and secure future policies.

Fun fact: Hard to pin down, always traveling, always searching, always experimenting.

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