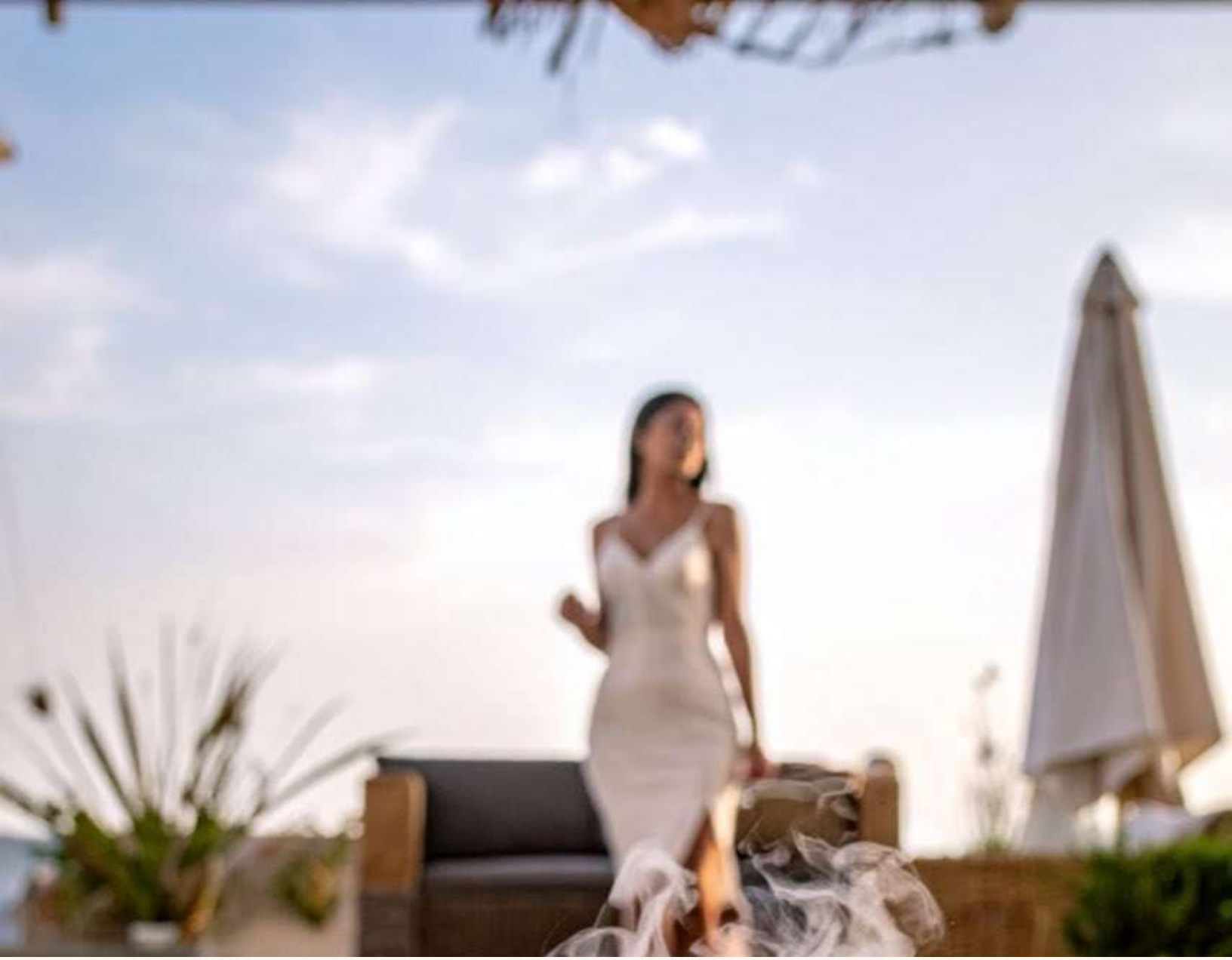


THE STANDING FOREST · CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Household Ring

Chapter Eleven of The Standing Forest

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The Household Ring
Chapter Eleven of The Standing Forest

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A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

This work is offered for education and leadership development. It is not legal, financial, accounting, investment, medical or psychological advice; take the advice of a qualified professional who knows your circumstances. Companies and events are described from the public record as the author understands it; characterisations are the author's analysis. Examples are illustrative, and no particular outcome is promised to any reader.

ABSTRACT

The word economy comes from the Greek oikonomia , the management of a household. Before it described nations and markets it described a house: its stores, its fields, its people, the work of keeping them. It is fitting that the most useful scale for the ideas in this book turns out, in the end, to be the oldest one. A household can see the whole of its own ledger. It knows where its water comes from, who in it is tired, what it throws away on a Thursday. No national accountant has that view of anything. This chapter brings the ring home. It is written for one person, or two, or a family, deciding how to live inside the coastline with the money and the work they have. It does not ask anyone to give anything up. It asks them to see the floor and the ceiling of their own household, to find what is already working, and to ask the question that Santa Anna's Ecstatic Economics places at the centre of its practice: what would be enough.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Household Ring



The Household Ring

HAUTE LUMIÈRE · THE STANDING FOREST · CHAPTER ELEVEN

The oldest economy

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A boundary, first

Before anything else, the boundary the book itself draws, because a chapter about households that ignored it would do harm:

> *This chapter is not saying that material poverty is a mindset problem. People living in genuine material deprivation need material resources, not consciousness shifts.*[76]

A household that cannot pay its rent, heat its rooms or feed its children does not need a ledger of its throughput. It needs income, housing and support, and the floor of Raworth's ring is drawn precisely to say so. The fourth objection in Chapter 3, and the sixth, turn on this point: the poorest need the floor raised, and growth that raises it is the purpose. Everything below is written for a household that has enough security to look at its own relationship with enough. If that is not yet your household, the first line of your ledger is a need that is short, and the first move is to meet it.

The household's two rings

The Two-Ring Ledger from Chapter 2 works for a household with very little change.

The floor. The needs the household exists to meet, for each person in it: food, shelter, warmth, health, rest, learning, connection, a say in decisions, time. Write each person's name beside each need and mark it met, partly met or short. A household's floor is breached by individuals, as an organisation's is. The average can look fine while one person is not sleeping.

The ceiling. The four or five flows that cross the household's coastline in the largest volumes. For most households in rich countries these are home energy, travel, food, goods bought, and water. Each has a

meter, a bill, an odometer or a receipt, and each can be written down in its own unit: kilowatt-hours, litres, kilometres, kilograms of food waste, the number of things bought and not used.

The stock. The things the household holds whose condition its decisions make better or worse: the house itself, a garden or allotment, the bodies of the people in it, its savings, its friendships, the skills of its members. Boulding's crew, in Chapter 2, measured the condition of the ship rather than the speed of its consumption. A household that spends its health to earn its income is doing what a firm does when it consumes its own body and reports a record year.

Separating getting bigger from getting better

Daly's distinction between growth and development, from Chapter 2, is at its clearest in a household. Getting bigger is a larger house, a second car, a longer commute for a higher salary, more things. Getting better is a warmer house with the same floor area, a meal cooked together, a skill learned, an evening with nothing in it. Both can be good. A household that has a choice between them, and many have more choice than they think, can ask which it is choosing.

The most useful single question is the one Chapter 3 asked of a firm or a household: which of our commitments only work if we keep growing? For a household, that is usually a mortgage or loan whose repayments assume next year's pay rise, a pattern of spending that only balances at a higher income, or a working arrangement that only pays if someone works longer hours each year. Each is a place where the household's own structure, not its wants, is demanding growth. Each can be redesigned slowly, so that a good year is welcome and a flat year is not a crisis. This is not financial advice, and a household making a large financial decision should take advice from someone qualified to give it. It is a way of seeing which of the household's pressures are built into its structure.



The question of enough

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The question of enough

Santa Anna's book offers a practice that is simple to describe and harder to do. Sit quietly, take three slow breaths, and bring to mind a phrase:

> *Now bring to mind the phrase: I have enough.*[77]

Notice what happens in the body: whether something opens or tightens, whether part of you agrees and another part objects. Then a second phrase:

> *Now try: There is enough for everyone.*[78]

The book does not claim that noticing the difference changes the world. It suggests that a person who has noticed it makes slightly different decisions, and it gives a reason drawn from the Buddhist economics it discusses:

> *The monk who owns a robe, a bowl, and nothing else can experience profound sufficiency. The billionaire who owns everything can experience profound deprivation.*[79]

That sentence is easy to misread as a claim that material circumstances do not matter, and the book is explicit that it means nothing of the kind. Its point is narrower. Past the floor, the feeling of having enough is not set by the amount held. A household that can name what enough feels like has a ceiling of its own, chosen rather than imposed, and usually more room inside it than it thought.

The book asks a second question, at the end of one of its chapters, that is worth asking aloud at a household table:

> *What did you learn about money, wealth, and "enough" from your family of origin?*[80]

Most adults carry an answer to that question they have never said aloud, and most households contain two or more different answers, which explains a good many of their arguments about money. Saying them aloud, once, without trying to settle anything, is often the most useful conversation a household has about its economy.

Work, and the third ring

For most households the largest flow is not energy or goods. It is the hours of work its members sell, and the condition in which they come home. Chapter 4's third ring, vitality, is easiest to see here. A household can meet every material need and respect every limit while one of its members is exhausted by a job that consumes more than it pays.

The signs of aliveness from Chapter 8 work at home without any scoring. Is everyone taking their leave? Is anyone working in the evenings as a habit rather than an exception? Does anyone dread Sunday night? Has anyone learned anything this year? None of these is a target. Each is an observation a household can make about itself, gently, and each can lead to a conversation about whether the hours being sold are buying what the household needs, or buying more than it needs at a cost it has not counted.

Santa Anna's book frames regenerative work in a sentence that applies to a job as well as an enterprise:

> *A regenerative workplace produces employees who leave each day with more energy, skill, and sense of purpose than they arrived with.*[81]

Few jobs meet that standard every day, and the book does not pretend they do. But it is a useful measure for a household deciding between two jobs, or deciding what to ask of the one it has. A job that consistently sends someone home with less than they brought is drawing down a stock, and the household is paying for it whether or not the payslip shows it.

The household's reciprocities

Chapter 4 asked an organisation, for each of its inputs, what it gives back to the source. A household can ask the same. Its food comes from farms; does it buy, where it has the choice, from growers who keep their land in heart, and does it pay them promptly? Its water comes from a catchment; does it know which one? Its care comes, often, from people outside it: grandparents, neighbours, a childminder, a friend who takes the children on a Tuesday. What does it give back to them?

Chapter 7's Stewardship Contract has a household form: a standing arrangement with a local grower, a weekly box of vegetables paid for in advance, a neighbour whose garden is watered in exchange for eggs. These are small. They are also exactly the kind of reciprocity the Honorable Harvest describes, and that Chapter 2 found in Daly's rules with numbers attached.



The household's commons

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The household's commons

Many of the things a household depends on are not its own: the park, the library, the bus route, the river at the end of the road, the school. These are commons, in Elinor Ostrom's sense, and the neighbouring book in this lineage, *The Pasture Was Never Empty*, takes them up at length. A household's part in them is small and real. It can use the library, so that the library stays open. It can join the friends of the park. It can turn up to the meeting about the bus route. Santa Anna's book suggests, in its chapter on governance, identifying "one concrete, feasible act of governance participation" and taking it. For a household, that is often the most effective single move it can make on the ceiling, because a commons kept in good order lowers everyone's flows at once.

A household year

The organisation's year in Chapter 9 has a household version, much shorter, set out in full in the workbook. Its shape is this.

One month of seeing. One flow, written down weekly in its own unit on a sheet by the kettle. Each person names one need of theirs that is met and one that is short. Nothing is changed.

One conversation. At the end of the month, at a meal: what surprised us, what do we already do well, what would enough look like.

One quarter of trying. One small change to the flow, and one to a need that was short. Keep writing the flow down.

One look back. Lay the weeks side by side. Say what changed and what did not.

That is all. A household that does it once will have a clearer picture of its own economy than most households ever have. A household that does it every year will have built, without much effort, a practice of seeing its own coastline.

One household, worked

What follows is a composite, built for teaching. The household is not real; its names and every figure in this section were set by the writer to show the method.

Ruth and Daniel live with their two children, eleven and fourteen, and Ruth's mother, who moved in two years ago, in a semi-detached house on the edge of a market town. Ruth teaches; Daniel manages a builders' merchant twenty-six kilometres away. Their combined income covers the mortgage, the bills and a modest holiday. They are not short of anything the floor of Raworth's ring would name, and they are tired.

They begin, as the chapter suggests, with one sheet by the kettle. They choose electricity, because the smart meter makes it easy and because nobody feels guilty about it. On the first day each person writes one need met and one need short. The fourteen-year-old writes *met: food* and *short: a room to myself*. Ruth's mother writes *met: company* and *short: getting out of the house*. Ruth writes *short: sleep*. Daniel writes *short: time with the kids that isn't driving them somewhere*. Nobody discusses the lines for a month.

The electricity figures hold one surprise. The household uses about a fifth more on weekdays than at weekends, though everyone is out on weekdays. The fourteen-year-old finds the reason in an afternoon: a tumble dryer that runs every evening, and a games console left on standby that draws more than the fridge. Neither is a moral failing. Both are small, and the household changes them in a week.

The conversation at the end of the month is the part that matters. Read aloud, the needs that are short turn out to share a cause. Daniel's fifty-two kilometres a day, and the children's activities spread across

three villages, mean the car is the household's largest flow and its largest drain on time. Ruth's mother cannot drive and depends on lifts. Ruth's lost sleep is partly the hour after the children are in bed, when she marks books because the evening before was spent driving.

The household does not sell the car. It makes two smaller changes. The children's activities are consolidated, by their choice, into two villages instead of three, which removes one evening of driving a week. And Daniel asks his employer whether he can work from the branch nearer home one day a week, which he had assumed would be refused and is not. Ruth's mother joins a lunch club that has its own minibus, which she had heard of and never asked about.

In the language of this book, nothing here was a sacrifice. Throughput fell, a little, and the floor rose, a little, for three of the five people in the house. The flow they measured, electricity, was not the one that mattered most; it was the one that started the conversation. The question *what would enough look like?*, asked over a meal in the fourth week, produced the answer that changed the most, from Daniel: *enough would be being home by six twice a week.* None of their accounts had a line for that.



What this chapter cannot do

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What this chapter cannot do

It cannot raise a household's income, lower its rent or cure its tiredness. It offers no financial advice, and a household with debts, investments or a large decision to make should take advice from someone qualified to give it. It cannot make one household's choices settle a planetary question; a household's flows are small, and most of the ceiling will be kept or breached by firms and governments. What it can do is help a household see its own ground, find what already works, notice the difference between getting bigger and getting

better, and make its next decision with that in view. That is a modest claim, and the household is where it is easiest to test.

The Tool: The Kitchen-Table Ring

One sheet of paper, kept by the kettle, for one month at a time.

Across the top. The household's names.

Section 1 · Our floor. Under each name, two lines: *one need of mine that is met*, *one need of mine that is short*. Written on the first day of the month, not discussed until the last.

Section 2 · Our flow. One flow, chosen together: electricity, gas, food waste, car kilometres, or things bought and not used. Its unit. A row for each week, with the figure and the date.

Section 3 · What already works. Three things the household does well without trying, written on the first day by whoever is first to the kettle.

Section 4 · Enough. One sentence from each person, written during the month whenever it comes to them: *I felt I had enough when…*

Section 5 · The last day. At a meal, read the sheet aloud and answer three questions:

1 · What surprised us?

2 · What would enough look like, for this flow and for the needs that were short?

3 · What one small change would we like to try next month?

Write the change at the bottom. Start a fresh sheet. Keep the old ones in a drawer. After twelve, lay them side by side.

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The Household Ring

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