

There Is No Free lunch
Ken Olson

Labor Day set me thinking. The source of the headline is an old Latin proverb, “Nullum gratuitum prandium,” which has made a comeback, even on T-shirts. For centuries, Latin was the language of the humanities, and heads of state also employed it for official proclamations. At the beginning of the Renaissance in the early 1600s, the sciences adopted Latin to share knowledge across national boundaries. Scientific names classify plants and animals in that universal tongue. Montana’s State Flower, the Bitterroot, is *Lewisia rediviva*. The Golden Eagle is *Aquila chrysaetos*.

“There is no free lunch” has wide application. An individual from Canada tells of a winter when he was a college student and was trying to make ends meet. Among his cost-saving measures was that of not signing up for garbage collection. He had to dispose of a large batch, so he simply buried it in the back yard of the place he was renting. How did that work out? At a latitude with deep frosts, not so well. The Spring thaw came and a mass of garbage began to poke itself out of the ground. But what this fellow had overlooked was that the garbage collection in that town --was free! (Well, not actually: it was already built into his rental fees, so it did cost something. It always does.)

In nature, the rule is in ceaseless operation. Angeworms are sacrificed so that Robins can fly. Little fish are necessary food to grow big ones. There is cost attached to almost any accomplishment you can name. You cannot have a baby without the pain of birth.

Labor Day should not be just a holiday from work (that not everyone, by any means, gets). The date should also remind us that we live off the labor of previous generations. A price has been paid at some time by someone or something, somewhere. We turn on the lights with almost no effort, but Edison and Tesla worked for years to make the possibility an actuality. Someone may buy us lunch. In that moment, it’s free for us, but it also took plowing, seeding, harvesting, diesel fuel and a baker, too. It’s simply common decency to recognize this and to be grateful.

To exist means to make mistakes, some worse than others, but who would trade free will for robotic perfection? It’s part of the inescapable “cost of living.” Some blunders and wrongs result in penalties; others are paid for with a guilty conscience, regardless of having escaped the police or the IRS. Those are wrongful acts committed; we can add the “coulda shoulda wouldas,” too. Voltaire put it this way: “Every person is guilty of all the good he should have done.” A functioning conscience is part of the price of being human.

There’s also the high cost of love. CS Lewis: “There is no safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even an animal.”

And what we call grace is not free, either. The German poet Heinrich Heine had no clue when he flippantly declared, “God will forgive me: that is His business. I like sinning and God likes forgiving. Really, the world is admirably arranged.” On the part of the recipient, grace is free,

but, on the other side, absorbing and absolving grievous wrongs is a costly thing, indeed, often symbolized by a cross.

“Freedom is not free” is a truism associated with memorials. Freedom of speech is enshrined in The First Amendment of the Constitution, but many Americans, including some leaders, use free speech as a right to lie without the slightest embarrassment (Insert names here.....), and the rest of us pay the very steep price in many and various ways.

Politics costs more than money. Another part of the price is a good candidate’s uncomfortable knowledge that that he/she might lose an election. Then, all that time and effort will have been for nothing, something that can take a heavy emotional toll. (Although “someone” thinks that elections are only fair if he wins and rages about it nearly every day, everyone else accepts the possibility of failure as part of the deal.) A candidate named Richard Tuck lost a race, and his first reaction was, “The people have spoken –the bastards!” But he regained his poise shortly thereafter. Trump never has, never will.

“There’s no free lunch.” You can think of many more ways in which this truism applies, but let’s close with another Latin maxim: “Illigetimi non carborendum,” translated as, “Don’t let the bastards wear you down.” It’s crucial advice for all who genuinely care about decency and democracy. It truly does require work, participation, and constant vigilance.

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