

Breaking Out Of The System Loop

Contributed by Ran Prieur
Friday, 28 May 2010

Ran Prieur: Breaking Out Of The System Loop: How To Drop Out. (2004.) This article is licensed under the Creative Commons. Source: Master New Media. Here is a mental exercise in reading, and in maintaining a flexible viewpoint about reality and your future. If you are happy with business in general, with your work and salary and with the way we should conduct our lives is portrayed by most media, independent or not, around you, then this essay may be positive overkill and a disturbing intrusion for which you have no real need for. But if your interest is in stretching your ability to see reality beyond your present viewpoint, or to stretch your ability to adapt and understand more aspects of human nature you had not considered until now, though demanding and probably unpleasant at times, this reading will open up questions and considerations that can only do good if asked with true sincerity, and with the flexibility that a sportsman faces a new training sequence.

Ran Prieur: Breaking Out Of The System Loop: How To Drop Out. (2004.) Here is a mental exercise in reading, and in maintaining a flexible viewpoint about reality and your future. If you are happy with business in general, with your work and salary and with the way we should conduct our lives is portrayed by most media, independent or not, around you, then this essay may be positive overkill and a disturbing intrusion for which you have no real need for. But if your interest is in stretching your ability to see reality beyond your present viewpoint, or to stretch your ability to adapt and understand more aspects of human nature you had not considered until now, though demanding and probably unpleasant at times, this reading will open up questions and considerations that can only do good if asked with true sincerity, and with the flexibility that a sportsman faces a new training sequence. To know and to become increasingly aware of who you are and where you are going is, in my humble opinion, the very best path, to become a smarter navigator of your life journey. Physical and not. Ran Prieur, an individual who has chosen to detach himself from the mandates of today's consumer society, recounts and explains in this essay what "dropping out" of the system means and what drove him after this ambitious goal. Again, this article is not reporting about some hot new media technology or a new vision for how media and your participation in it may deeply change the world we live in. This reading is more about shaking some of your long established values, your long unquestioned references and your tacitly selected goals while comparing them with those of someone who has bravely ventured some apparently less rewarding paths, without fear, hesitation or nostalgia for dropping out of the "comfortable world" the majority of us live in. This is an exercise in mental openness, tolerance and ability to understand that our reality is only shaped by the values and goals we set for ourselves. Point is, we all too often forget, suspend or never stop to really ponder what these values and objectives are. This is why I recommend, to those of you, who have a strong spirit of independence, who care about Gaia, the living planet we survive on, and who want to use their inquiring mind to expand their understanding of life at large, to face with eyes wide-open the singular vision brought forward in this essay. Intro by Ran Prieur. Dropping out of the present dominant system has both a mental and an economic component that go together like your two legs walking. It's a lot of steps! Maybe you notice that you hate your job, and that you have to do it because you need money. So you reduce expenses, reduce your hours, and get more free time, in which you learn more techniques of self-sufficiency and establish a sense of identity not dependent on where you get your money. Then you switch to a low-status low-stress job that gives you even more room to get outside the system mentally. And so on, until you've changed your friends, your values, your whole life. The point I have to make over and over about this process, and this movement, is that it's not about avoiding guilt, or reducing your ecological footprint, or being righteous. It's not a pissing contest to see who's doing more to save the Earth -- although some people will believe that's your motivation, to justify their own inertia. It's not even about reducing your participation in the system. It is about reducing your submission and dependence: getting free, being yourself, slipping out of a wrestling hold so you can throw an elbow at the Beast. This world is full of people with the intelligence, knowledge, skills, and energy to make heaven on Earth, but they can't even begin because they would lose their jobs. We're always arguing to change each other's minds, but nobody will change if they think their survival depends on not changing. Every time you hear about a whistleblower or reporter getting fired for honesty and integrity, you can be sure that they already had a support network, or just a sense of their own value, outside of the system they defied. Dropping out is about fighting better. How to Drop Out I didn't even start dropping out until my mid-20's. Unlike many outsiders and "radicals," I never had to go through a stage where I realized that our whole society is insane -- I've known that as long as I can remember. But even being already mentally outside the system, I found it extremely challenging to get out physically. In fourth grade I wanted to blow up the school, but I didn't know how, and even if I had done it, it would not have meant an endless summer vacation. In high school, inspired by Bill Kaysing's *The Robin Hood Handbook*, I wanted to go live off the land in the Idaho wilderness, but actually doing it seemed as remote and difficult as going to the moon. (Kaysing later wrote the book *We Never Went to the Moon*.) So I continued to bide my time and obey the letter of the law, like the guy in the Kafka parable. In college, when Artis the Spoonman performed on campus and told us all to drop out, I thought that was ridiculous -- how would I survive without a college degree? A few years later, with my two college degrees, and after havin tasted jobs in which I would be operating envelope-stuffing machinery or answering phones in a warehouse, I was finally nudged toward dropping out by the Bush recession and by my own nature -- that I'm extremely frugal, love unstructured time, and would sooner eat garbage than feign enthusiasm. More than ten years later I'm a specialist at eating garbage -- as I draft this I'm eating a meal I made with organic eggs from a dumpster, and later I'll make a pie of dumpstered apples. I live on under \$2000 a year, I have no permanent residence, and moving to the Idaho wilderness now seems like a reachable goal -- but no longer the best idea. Getting free of the system is more complex than we've been led to believe. Here as in so many places, our thinking has been warped by all-or-nothingism, by the Hollywood myth of the

sudden overwhelming victory: Quit your corporate job this minute, sell all your possessions, and hop a freight train to a straw bale house in the mountains where you'll grow all your own food and run with the wolves! In reality, between the extremes there's a whole dropout universe, and no need to hurry. In my case, as I understood what I had to go through to make money, I stopped spending it. I learned to make my meals from scratch, and then from cheaper scratch, making my own sourdough bread and tortillas. I stopped buying music and books (exceptions in exceptional cases) and got in the habit of using the library. When I crashed my car, I kept the insurance money and walked, and then got an old road bike. I took a road trip by hitchhiking, but it was too physically taxing and I got sick. Like many novice radicals, I got puritanical and pushed myself too hard, and finally eased off. I temporarily owned another car and lived in it for a couple months of a long road trip. In the Clinton economic bubble, I got a job that was much easier and better paying than my previous jobs, and built up savings that I'm still living on. The main thing I was doing during those years was de-institutionalizing myself, learning to navigate the hours of the day and the thoughts in my head with no teacher or boss telling me what to do. I had to learn to relax without getting lethargic, to never put off washing the dishes, to balance the needs of the present and the future, to have spontaneous fun but avoid addiction, to be intuitive, to notice other people, to make big and small decisions. I went through mild depression and severe fatigue and embarrassing obsessions and strange diets and simplistic new age thinking. It's a long and ugly road, and most of us have to walk it, or something like it, to begin to be free. A friend says, "This world makes it easy to toe the line, and easy to totally fuck up, and really hard to not do either one." But this hard skill, not quitting your job or moving to the woods or reducing consumption or doing art all day, is the essence of dropping out. When people rush it, and try to take shortcuts, they slide into addiction or debt or depression or shattered utopian communities, and then go back to toeing the line. The path is different for everyone. Maybe you're already intuitive and decisive and know how to have fun, but you don't know how to manage money or stay grounded. Maybe you're using wealth or position or charm to keep from having to relate to people as equals, or you're keeping constantly busy to avoid facing something lurking in the stillness. Whatever weaknesses keep you dependent on the system, you have to take care of them before you break away from the system, just as you have to learn to swim before you escape a ship. How? By going out and back, a little farther each time, with persistence and patience, until you reach the skill and distance that feels right. At the moment there's no reason to drop out "all the way" except puritanism. I hate civilization as much as anyone, but in these last few years before it crashes, we should appreciate and use what it offers. Sylvan Hart (his given name!), the 20th century mountain man who even smelted his own metal, still traded with civilization, and once carried a sheet of glass 50 miles through the woods so he could have a good window. (See Harold Peterson, *The Last of the Mountain Men*) Some of the happiest people I know have dropped out only a short distance. They still live in the city and have jobs and pay rent, but they've done something more mentally difficult -- and mentally liberating -- than moving to some isolated farm. They have become permanently content with no-responsibility slack jobs, low-status, modest-paying, easy jobs that they don't have to think about at home or even half the time when they're at work. Yes, these jobs are getting scarce, but they're still a thousand times more plentiful than the kind of job that miserable people cannot give up longing for -- where you make a living doing something so personally meaningful that you would do it for free. "Do what you love and the money will follow" is an irresponsible lie, a denial of the deep opposition between money and love. The real rule is: "If you're doing what you love, you won't care if you never make a cent from it, because that's what love means -- but you still need money!" So what I recommend, as the second element of dropping out, is coldly severing your love from your income. One part of your life is to make only as much money as you need with as little stress as possible, and a separate part, the important part, is to do just exactly what you love with zero pressure to make money. And if you're lucky, you'll eventually make money anyway. But how much money do you "need"? And what if the only jobs available are low-paying and so exhausting that you barely have the energy to go home and collapse into bed? These questions lead to my own level of dropping out, which is to reduce expenses to the point that you shift your whole identity from the high-budget to the low-budget universe. In a temperate climate, you have only five physical needs: food, water, clothing, shelter, and fuel. (If you're a raw-foodist and don't mind the cold, you don't even need fuel!) Everything else that costs money is a luxury or a manufactured need. Manufactured needs have fancy names: entertainment, transportation, education, employment, housing, "health care." In every case these are creations of, and enablers of, an alienating and dominating system, a world of lost wholeness. If you love your normal activities, you don't need to tack on "entertainment." If you aren't forced to travel many miles a day, you don't need "transportation." If you are permitted to learn on your own, you don't need "education." If you can meet all your physical needs through the direct action of yourself and your friends, you don't need to go do someone else's work all day. If you're permitted to merely occupy physical space and build something to keep the wind and rain out, you don't need to pay someone to "provide" it. Expensive health care is especially insidious: not only is our toxic and stressful society the primary cause of sickness, but the enormous expenses that have been added in the last hundred years are mostly profit-making scams that cause and prolong sickness far more than they heal it. This is the low-budget universe: I ride around the city on an old cheap road bike, in street clothes, often hauling food I've just pulled out of a dumpster. Sometimes I'll be on a trail where I'll invariably be passed by people on thousand dollar bikes in racing outfits. Why are they riding around if they're not carrying anything? And why are they in such a hurry? I used to be envious of those suckers: I have to ride my bike to survive and they're so rich they do it for fun. But what is this "fun"? I get everything -- exercise, getting from place to place, meaningfulness, the feeling of autonomy, and doing what's necessary to survive -- all with the same activity: riding my bike. They should be envious of me: my life is elegant and theirs is disjointed and self-defeating, making money which they have to turn around and spend on unhealthy restaurant food because they don't have time to cook, on cars because they have too many obligations to get around by bicycle, and then on bicycles or health club memberships to make up for sitting in their jobs and cars all day, and even then on medical "insurance" (a protection racket which for most people costs more than uninsured care -- or there would be no profit in it) for when their

fragmented poisonous life makes them sick. How do you get out of this? One step at a time! Move or change jobs so you don't need a car, and then sell the damn thing. Get a bicycle and learn to fix it yourself -- it's not even 1% as difficult and expensive as fixing a car. Reduce your possessions and you'll find that the fewer you have, the more you appreciate each one. Get your clothing at thrift stores on sale days -- I spend less than \$20 a year on clothes. Give up sweetened drinks -- filtered water is less than 50 cents a gallon and much better for you. If you have an expensive addiction, pull yourself out of it or at least trade it for a cheap one. Probably the most valuable skill you can learn is cooking. For a fraction of the cost of white-sugar-white-starch-hydrogenated-oil restaurant meals, you can make your own meals out of high quality healthful ingredients, and if you're a good cook, they'll taste good. I eat better than anyone I know on \$100 a month: butter, nuts, dates, whole wheat flour, brown rice, olive oil, all organic, and bee pollen for extra vitamins. From natural food store dumpsters I get better bread, produce, meat, and eggs than Safeway even sells, but if this is impossible in your city, or you'd just prefer not to, you can still eat beautifully on \$200. The foundation of all this is to cultivate intense awareness of money. It doesn't grow on trees but you have millions of years of biological memory of a world where what you want does grow on trees, so you need to constantly remind yourself that whatever you're thinking of buying will cost you an hour, ten hours, 100 hours of dreary humiliating labor. Your expenses are your chains. Reducing them is not about punishing yourself or avoiding guilt -- it's about getting free. If you continue to reduce expenses, eventually you'll come to the proverbial elephant in the parlor, the single giant expense that consumes 50-80% of a frugal person's money, enough to buy a small extravagant luxury every day. Of course, it's rent, or for you advanced slaves, mortgage. The only reason you can't just go find a vacant space and live there, the only reason another entity can be said to "own" it and require a huge monthly payment from whoever lives there, is to maintain a society of domination, to continually and massively redistribute influence (symbolized by money) from the powerless to the powerful, so the powerless are reduced to groveling for the alleged privilege of wage labor, doing what the powerful tell them in exchange for tokens which they turn around and pass back toward the powerful every month and think it's natural. Rent is theft and slavery, and mortgage is just as bad, based not only on the myth of "owning" space but also on the contrived custom of "interest," simply a command to give money (influence) to whoever has it and take it from whoever lacks it. Fortunately there are still a lot of ways to dodge rent/mortgage other than refusing to pay or leave and being killed by the police. For surprisingly little money you can buy remote or depleted land and build a house on it. (see Mortgage Free! by Rob Roy, and also Finding and Buying Your Place in the Country by Les Scher) If you don't mind starting over with strangers, you can join an existing dropout community. (See the Communities Directory.) You can live in a van, camp in the woods, or look for a caretaker or apartment manager job. If you're charming, you can find a partner or spouse who will "support" you by permitting you to sleep and cook someplace without asking for money. And if you're bold or desperate, most cities have abandoned houses or buildings where you can squat. Mainly all you need are neighbors oblivious to your coming and going, a two-burner propane camp stove, some water jugs and candles, and a system for disposing of your bodily waste. If the "owners" come, they'll probably just ask you to leave, and in some places there are still archaic laws from compassionate times, making it legally difficult for them to evict you.

I squatted a shed for two weeks in December 2002 and if necessary I'll do it again. Also I have enough money saved to buy cheap land -- the project is just too big for me to do alone. Also I'm slowly learning wilderness survival -- which is iffy since wilderness itself is not surviving. But I spend most of my time surfing housesits and staying with friends and family. To drop out is to become who you are. Do not feel guilty about using strengths and advantages that others do not have. That guilt is a holdover from the world of selfish competition, where your "success" means the failure or deprivation of someone else. In the dropout universe, your freedom feeds the freedom of others -- it's as if we've all been tied up, and the most agile and loosely tied people get out first, and then help the rest. But what if they don't? What about people who are outside the system but still hyper-selfish? These people are not what I call "dropouts" but what I call "idiots." The view of this world as a war of all against all, where your purpose in life is to accumulate "wealth," zero-sum advantages and scarce resources for an exclusive "self," is the view of the elite. The only reason to think that way is if you are one of the handful of people in a position to win. For everyone else, the value system that makes sense is that you are here to help, to serve the greatest good that you can perceive. Yet in America, rich and poor alike are raised with robber baron consciousness, to turn us against each other, to keep us exploiting those below us instead of resisting our own exploiters, to keep all the arrows going the right way in the life-depleting machine. The frugality that I'm talking about is the opposite of ungenerosity, because it frees us from a scarcity-based system in which we cannot afford to be generous. For all our lives we've been trained as prostitutes, demanding money in exchange for services that we should be giving free to those we love, because others demand the same of us. In this context, the dropout is a hero and a virus: if you no longer need money, you can give others what they need without asking for money, and then they no longer need money, and so on. In practice it's still sketchy because there are so few of us, but the more of us there are, and the more skills and goods and openings we offer, the better our gift economy will work. And if we do it right, they won't be able to just massacre us or put us in camps, as they've always done before, because we will have too many friends and relations in the dominant system. For strategy I look not to political movements like revolts or strikes or radical parties, but to cultural movements like gay liberation or feminism or pagan spirituality. First define a clearly understood identity, then proudly claim that identity, then build public acceptance through entertainment and by each of us earning the support of friends and family outside the movement. I'm envious of gay people -- I've spent years mastering written language just to halfway explain myself, and all they have to say is "I'm gay." If we had a word, what would it be? In a recent family bulk Christmas mailing, I was "living the bohemian lifestyle," but I don't go to poetry readings or hang out in coffee shops. "Anarchist" smacks of ideology, of people who bicker endlessly about abstract theory, although maybe we could adopt an insulting term used by theory anarchists, and call ourselves "lifestyle anarchists." "Voluntary simplicity" is too tame and politically correct, suggesting aging yuppies trying to save the world by reducing households to one car -- plus the life I advocate is not at all simple, just unstressful. I'm too

politically ambitious and forward-looking to be a hobo or a tramp. In Eastern tradition I could be respected as some kind of monk or holy man, but I don't want to get "enlightened" -- I want to make the whole world wild and free. The word I've been using, "dropout," is a good start but it has the same deep flaw as "primitive": it places our dominating, parasitic, and temporary civilization in the fixed center. We've got it inside out. On the physical plane, nature is the center that holds, and "mainstream" society is the falling apart, the irresponsible life-wasting deviance. What I'm trying to do -- and what we're all going to have to do in the next few decades if we survive at all -- is drop back in.