



November 2020

## The Case for Universal Service

Contribution to GTI Forum [Universal Basic Income: Has the Time Come?](#)

Vicki Robin

In *Your Money or Your Life*, Joe Dominguez and I present an approach to earning, spending, and saving aimed at liberating the mind (spirituality), enabling creativity in need fulfillment (DIY, resourcefulness), and freeing time from paid employment (early retirement). Granted, it is a very Western, individualistic idea.

My observation is that people who have enough passive income to cover expenses (a self-created basic income) still have not solved the existential problem of what to do with their time. The work of being human is outside the money economy. Atomized individuals do not instantly gain communitarian values, a sense of service, a purpose. Is a universal basic income merely an income distribution strategy, or is it linked to the challenging, necessary conversation about “the good life”? It is the very amorality of money that lets us get through life still immature. UBI is a mechanism for the right to subsistence. The bigger task today is fostering social cohesion, a desire to participate in building a fair, equitable, sustainable, and liberating society and global community. The hill towards such shared prosperity without limiting entrepreneurship is getting steeper by the minute. Is our future merely coping? Unless a UBI is embedded in a more inspiring project, there will be a lot of quibbling about where the money comes from as well as class resentment toward people on welfare, the dole, and so on.

When I proposed that people on the path to financial liberation take on a shared political agenda that included UBI (which would selfishly shorten the years to liberation from the necessity of paid employment), few liked it because they would have worked hard for their financial freedom, and thought that others should have to pull themselves up as well—a libertarian mindset. However, when I coupled that with universal service, it was very palatable.

Although “universal service” is often talked about in terms of the military, that view is too limited. It could be ecological restoration, it could be social services, it could be apprenticeships, it could be growing food, or it could be environmental cleanup, a version of Habitat for Humanity, aging-in-place support, or even a self-created pathway of service. In the military, people learn a trade and then get lifelong benefits once they have put in their time. We can see examples of this, whether in the Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps or in programs like AmeriCorps, Peace Corps, Vista, and free medical or legal education in exchange for serving underserved populations for a few years.

The side benefit would be mixing people from all classes and backgrounds into a shared experience which could have a similar benefit as military service: bonding, tolerance, and shoulder-to-shoulder camaraderie with people you would never know otherwise. Another side benefit would be basic training—not doing ropes courses, but filling in the holes in education and discipline—to provide greater readiness for life.

The universal service feature of a basic income would not need to be the only form of giving to society as well as receiving from society. People already in the workplace could fulfill service through something like the National Guard. The basic idea is joining the mechanism of UBI with the struggle by societies to form common cause and common values and restir in our hearts that brotherhood and sisterhood that gets people to hang together and work together.

---

## About the Author



Vicki Robin is a social innovator, writer, and speaker. She is the co-author of the international bestseller *Your Money or Your Life: Transforming Your Relationship With Money and Achieving Financial Independence*, and author of *Blessing the Hands that Feed Us: Lessons from a 10-Mile Diet*. She has helped launch the New Road Map Foundation, the Simplicity Forum, the Turning Tide Coalition, Sustainable Seattle, the Center for a New American Dream, Transition Whidbey, Your Money or Your Life Community, and Local Food Challenge.

---

## About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



Cite as Vicki Robin, "The Case for Universal Service," contribution to GTI Forum "Universal Basic Income: Has the Time Come?," *Great Transition Initiative* (November 2020), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/basic-income-robin>.

---

## About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As an initiative for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.