

Lara Hoffmans... INCONVENIENT TRUTHS

An Army of Willing Dupes

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Recently, while waiting to pay an exorbitant premium for organic tomatoes at Whole Foods, I had a revelation. No, it wasn't that the marketing term "organic" is simply the most impressive scam ever widely perpetrated on humanity—though it is. (Remember the day in 7th grade science class we learned anything including carbon and hydrogen atoms is organic? Including pesticide? And gasoline? Here's a two-step plan to becoming a billionaire: 1. Open a gas station. 2. Sell "organic" gasoline. Leonardo DiCaprio will be your best friend.)

Besides that profitable tidbit, while queued I was overwhelmed by the full brunt of our accelerating economy. Folks fret the US economy is slowing and recession looms, seemingly supported by Q1-07's less than stellar performance. Nonsense! Fathom this: The US economy is healthy and resilient and one quarter's sluggish growth doesn't portend anything insidious—that so many are dour is a bullish factor particularly since Q2 seems set to surprise to the upside. And the way to know our economy is healthier than most fathom can be as easy as visiting your local grocery store.

For example, at Whole Foods, hanging by the homeopathic cold remedies and other impulse items, were \$15 gift cards featuring an idyllic scene of little children, holding hands and gazing at a windmill. How darling! What did this gift card entitle me to? Why, \$15 worth of renewable energy credits! Safe, clean, **bird-mutilating wind power**, delivered straight to my door! But hang on a tick. What's this? I don't actually get 15 bucks of wind energy shipped to my home. (I wondered how they'd do that. In a balloon? Would Al Gore bring it personally?) Turns out, the money goes to Renewable Energy Choice. Their web site says they are "a national leader in corporate and residential wind energy credit marketing." Credit *marketing*? What the heck does that mean? Apparently, this:

When you purchase wind power from Renewable Choice Energy, your electric bill won't change. You still pay your utility company to supply electricity to your home. What you get is the comfort in knowing a specific amount of electricity you consume is replaced on the national grid with clean, carbon-free electricity.

(<http://www.renewablechoice.com/about>)

So, I pay 15 bucks, which goes to Renewable Energy Choice, an energy broker (like Enron! Remember Enron?), who uses that money to cover operating expenses and improve profit margins. And that's supposed to give me comfort? That doesn't give me comfort—that makes me feel like I'm an accessory to white collar crime. How do they account for this on their balance sheet? "Contributions from dupes?"

Why do they deserve my 15 bucks? If I'm feeling charitable, I can give the money to a company I like better or whose products I use. Like GE. Or Jimmy Choo. Or Halliburton. Who in their right mind gifts money to a corporation in exchange for nothing? This is the way it works: I give money, I get something. Like actual energy. Or tax advice. Or tortilla chips. I don't give money and get comfort that a firm with a specious business plan looks more attractive to potential buyers. Who is falling for this scam? Apparently, the woman buying an \$8 PB&J in line in front of me. She bought four.

That's how you know all this nonsense about our "broken" economy, income gaps, wrong jobs, and slowing growth is so much hooey as long as Whole Foods can sell hypothetical wind for 15 bucks. Here's the unfathomable truth: Our economy is resilient and healthy. Folks are working and earning more—which means they have money to spend on vacations, over-priced organic tomatoes, sneakers, investment advice, business expansions, and energy credit marketing. Those carping consumers are dead, over-indebted, and tanking the economy can't fathom that. A more beautiful thing? Those likeliest to buy pretend wind cards don't get it. They see themselves as benevolently contributing to a noble cause. And they are! But not the one they think. They are being duped into combat for the most holy cause of all—Capitalism.

Whoever dreamt up wind gift cards is a genius. I genuflect before him. (If I find out the cards are manufactured in China, I'm tearing down my home to erect a shrine.) Incidentally, the cards double as refrigerator magnets—mine's holding up a picture of Milton Friedman.