



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on November 25, 2011

The Mystery of Thanksgiving Day: of Turkeys and Pencils

He wrote, “Isn’t there something wondrous — something almost inexplicable — in the way your Thanksgiving weekend is made possible by the skill and labor of vast numbers of total strangers?” The magnificent choreography of the free market, including the poultry farmers, the food distributors, the truckers, the architects who built the hatchery, the technicians who keep it running, the people prepping the turkey — from slaughter to defeathering to inspecting to wrapping to transporting to pricing to displaying — all of this coming together voluntarily by the mystery of the free market. All of this, he said,



had to be precisely timed so that when you showed up to buy a fresh Thanksgiving turkey there would be one - or more likely a few dozen - waiting. The level of coordination that was required to pull it off is mind-boggling.

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But what is even more mind-boggling is this: no one coordinated it.

There was no turkey “czar” overseeing, designing, coercing, directing, demanding, ordering. The mystery of the free market did it all. As Jacoby put it: “If that isn’t a miracle, what should we call it?”

Or take the lowly pencil. Leonard Reed, the founder of the [Foundation for Economic Education](#), penned his most famous essay, “[I, Pencil](#)” in 1958 and it has reached millions with the message of the “mystery” of the market. He wrote:

I am a mystery — more so than a tree or a sunset or even a flash of lightning. But, sadly, I am taken for granted by those who use me, as if I were a mere incident and without background.

[And yet] if you can become aware of the miraculousness which I symbolize, you can help save the freedom mankind is so unhappily losing.

[The mystery is] *not a single person on the face of the earth knows how to make me.* (emphasis in the original)

Look carefully, perhaps for the first time, at a pencil: note the wood, the lacquer, the labeling, the lead, the eraser. Wrote Reed:

My family tree begins with what in fact is a tree, a cedar of straight grain that grows in Northern California and Oregon. Now contemplate all the saws and trucks and rope and the countless other gear used in harvesting and carting the cedar logs to the railroad siding. Think of all the persons and the numberless skills that went into their fabrication: the mining of ore, the making of steel and its refinement into saws, axes, motors; the growing of hemp and bringing it through all the



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stages to heavy and strong rope; the logging camps with their beds and mess halls, the cookery and the raising of all the foods. Why, untold thousands of persons had a hand in every cup of coffee the loggers drink!

When the finished product arrives in stores, Reed concludes, “There is a fact still more astounding: the absence of a master mind, or anyone dictating or forcibly directing these countless actions which bring me into being. No trace of such a person can be found. Instead, we find the Invisible Hand at work. This is the mystery...”

In reflecting on all the free market has provided for which to be thankful, Jacoby concludes:

It is commonplace to speak of seeing God’s signature in the intricacy of a spider’s web or the animation of a beehive. But they pale in comparison to the kaleidoscopic energy and productivity of the free market. If it is a blessing from Heaven when seeds are transformed into grain, how much more of a blessing is it when our private, voluntary exchanges are transformed — without our ever intending it — into prosperity, innovation, and growth!

By becoming aware of the “miraculousness” of the free market operating without the necessity of government, citizens can help save diminishing freedom by putting government back into its proper place and letting the “mystery” of the market reign once again.



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