

# KILROY CAFÉ

Philosophy for the Modern Age

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**Introducing  
“invented need”**

## WHAT YOU NEED. WHAT YOU DON'T.

By GLENN CAMPBELL

The requirements of life are pretty simple.

You need basic nutrition. 

You need physical safety.

You need freedom from serious disease.

You need trusting relationships.

You need “mobility”—that is, the freedom to explore and change.

You need a meaningful mission.

The mission is the really difficult part. When you have a well-defined one, all the other needs usually fall into place. Your whole life can be thought of as a tool for achieving the mission. What is your purpose in life? Once you've figured that out, everything else is a piece of cake.

Problems arise only when you don't have a clear mission. That's when all the other needs tend to expand and become almost insurmountable.

Take nutrition. Your body has certain fueling requirements. It needs calories to keep its muscles moving as well as various nutritional building blocks it can't manufacture on its own. As far as the body is concerned, it doesn't matter where these elements come from—be it an expensive meal from a gourmet restaurant or an unappealing bowl of gruel. By the time it hits the digestive system, it's all an unappealing gruel anyway.

In the wild, humans were omnivores who ate whatever came their way: meat, fish, plants, fungus. Given the wide variety of traditional foods, it is clear the human diet is pretty flexible. As long as the essential elements turn up in the gruel, it doesn't seem to matter what

goes in the mouth.

When your resources are limited, your diet is going to be simple. You'll eat the available food that gets the job done. When you have excess resources and you don't have a mission to devote them to, that's when your dietary requirements expand. You start investing in ever finer distinctions of taste, presentation and presumed nutrition until all of your excess resources are absorbed.

For example, a glass of wine with your meal is harmless enough. The nutritional value is limited, but at least it contains calories and, if it matters to you, alcohol. Wine was invented as a way to preserve fruit juice in the days before refrigeration, so it's one of those traditional foods that gets the job done.

But what happens today when someone wants something to drink and has money to burn? He insists on ever-finer gradations of wine at ever-higher cost. His wine has to have the right provenance and bouquet. He has to prove his good taste and social standing via his wine selection even though his digestive system can't tell the difference.

This is an example of an “**invented need**”—where the imagined requirements of life depart from the actual operational ones. Our lives today are filled with invented needs: special food, homes, cars, clothing, etc., which far exceed their operational purpose. When resources are available, we tend to seek finer and finer gradations of perceived quality until our money is gone and we have completely lost touch with the original need.

Someone who invests in invented needs always thinks he's getting more for his money, but usually it is less. An

expensive sports car is usually far less reliable and useful than a standard model. Likewise, when you buy more expensive food, you aren't necessarily getting better nutrition. Often, you're buying richer, fattier gruel or some trace element that is statistically insignificant to your true health.

Life is inherently risky, and every need has to be balanced against every other. There are no perfect solutions to a basic need, and if we seek them, we are going to be stealing resources from other needs, like our core mission.

To devote the most resources to our primary goals, we have to settle for “good enough” resolution of lower needs. We should expect “adequate” nutrition, housing, transportation and clothing, because perfection is both unattainable and no longer cost-effective after a certain point.

You need physical safety, but you can't live in a fortress or guard against every danger.

You need freedom from serious disease, but disease is probably going to happen no matter what you do, so you have to soldier on in spite of it.

You need trusting relationships, but you don't need perfect friends or lovers. To some extent, you have to work with who you have.

You need mobility. It is good to have the freedom to explore and change, but you're always living in some kind of prison, so while you are there you have to work within its confines.

You need a mission. So what will it be? You could climb every peak in the Himalayas, but a more meaningful purpose is probably closer to home. It's a combination of what you want to do and what you can actually do based on your resources and your limited time on Earth.

It might be right under your nose.

—G.C.

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