

feel as if I had come home. Burning Man is an annual week-long event of self-expression and self-reliance held in Black Rock Desert, Nevada, regularly attended by more than 40,000 people. Burning Man started in 1986 on Baker Beach in San Francisco, when a small crowd designed, built, and eventually set fire to an eight-foot wooden statue of a man and a smaller wooden dog. Since then the size of the man being burned and the number of people who attend the festivities has grown considerably, and the event is now one of the largest art festivals, and an ongoing experiment in temporary community.

Burning Man has many extraordinary aspects, but for me one of the most remarkable is its rejection of market norms. Money is not accepted at Burning Man. Rather, the whole place works as a gift exchange economy—you give things to other people, with the understanding that they will give something back to you (or to someone else) at some point in the future. Thus, people who can cook might fix a meal. Psychologists offer free counseling sessions. Masseuses massage those lying on tables before them. Those who have water offer showers. People give away drinks, homemade jewelry, and hugs. (I made some puzzles at the hobby shop at MIT, and gave them to people. Mostly, people enjoyed trying to solve them.)

At first this was all very strange, but before long I found myself adopting the norms of Burning Man. I was surprised, in fact, to find that Burning Man was the most accepting, social, and caring place I had ever been. I'm not sure I could easily survive in Burning Man for all 52 weeks of the year. But this experience has convinced me that life with fewer market norms and more social norms would be more satisfying, creative, fulfilling, and fun.