

Understanding our dependencies

Our cost of living is about far more than the price of essential goods.

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [January 2023](#) issue



Century illustration

This fall Liz Truss became the shortest-lived UK prime minister on record. Why? Because she insisted on an ideological answer to a very pragmatic problem. She kept saying “I can fix this,” whereas the real answer was, “It depends.”

In management-speak this is the notion of dependencies. A dependency describes the relationship among activities, specifying the particular order in which they need to be performed. Like a lot of management-speak, it’s glorified common sense. A key skill of management is to keep control of your dependencies so you’re not

paying a workforce to sit idle in a factory waiting three weeks for the raw materials to arrive.

That's tough enough when managing a company. Imagine trying to manage all the dependencies when you're running a country. The UK is in a crisis right now because the dependencies have gotten way out of control: our degree of dependency is exposed, and our vulnerability is laid bare. It's a horrible feeling to discover how vulnerable you are and to feel so exposed. But once we've gotten used to it, we perhaps need to attend to what this sense of vulnerability is telling us. It's revealing the host of dependencies that, when they go well, we take for granted and even feel entitled to.

There are things that we utterly depend on, that someone else or something else is constantly sustaining, and that if deprived of we feel completely bereft. The term "cost of living" makes references to these things. We've been hearing constantly in the UK about a cost-of-living crisis: the price of essential goods has been increasing far more rapidly than household incomes, resulting in people having to go without. But the cost of living has an additional dimension. For everyone's living there's a colossal, unimaginable, indescribable cost, one we seldom consider and almost never talk about.

Consider three dimensions of dependency. There's everyday dependency. I rely on a laptop and a phone, but I'm powerless without the people who make and repair them. I go outside, and there's a whole network that makes my life possible. When things go wrong there are doctors, opticians, dentists, and a host of systems that exist to put things right. Our whole society relies on client economies to service it.

Then there's cosmic dependency. There's a planet, whose ecosystem we've woken up and realized is more fragile than we thought. There's my parents, without whose existence there would have been no me in the first place. There's weather and crops and livestock and transport and food processing, and on a grander scale there are a bunch of meteors that haven't yet struck the earth but could blow us all apart one day.

But there's also divine dependency. We have no idea what it cost God to make all things. But we can see what it cost God to be with us in Christ. The cost of our living with God forever is a cost we could never afford, astronomically beyond our capacity or ability to pay.

In Marius Gabriel's gripping 2022 novel *Goodnight Vienna*, Gretchen is a neurodivergent 12-year-old girl in Vienna in 1937. (Plot spoilers follow.) She can neither read nor write, but she can listen once to a piece of music and then play it perfectly on the piano. Her caregiver is a frustrated trainee doctor named Katya, who has just come to Austria from Glasgow because her parents ran out of money. When the Nazis take over Austria, Gretchen is at risk of being sent to a medical research laboratory. Katya stops feeling sorry for herself and realizes that she has to get Gretchen out of the country. After a series of dangerous adventures, they find themselves with forged passports on a train—alongside Shulamit, a Jewish woman who uses a wheelchair.

When they reach the Hungarian border, the Gestapo guards scrutinize the passports closely. They're looking for a woman travelling with a 12-year-old child. It looks like the game's up. But when Katya and Gretchen's true identity is about to be revealed, Shulamit ridicules the guards for not realizing she's Jewish, and she claims she's plotting to kill Hitler. The guards march Shulamit off the train in her wheelchair and forget all about Katya and Gretchen.

Gretchen can't believe what's happened, but Katya says, "I think she'd planned to do that all along, if she saw you were in danger."

Gretchen sobs, "I can't even thank her."

Katya replies, "I think she knows you will thank her with everything you do in your life."

Goodnight Vienna is a novel about dependency. Katya rages at her dependency on her feckless parents. She initially sees neurodivergent Gretchen as pitifully dependent, before realizing the girl's true gifts and character. The two of them depend on the grace of several courageous people to escape Austria, and in the end Gretchen's life is saved when Shulamit lays down her own life in Gretchen's place. Shulamit's death is the cost of Gretchen's living.

The UK's cost-of-living crisis has exposed our dependencies, for some people in humiliating and impoverishing ways. It's also demonstrated the absurdity of our attempts to manage our dependencies, as if the whole of existence could be charted on a project manager's spreadsheet. Not only does this make us ignorant of how much our conventional lives cost people hidden from us; it also brackets out our maker, sustainer, and companion, who bears the true cost of our living at all.