

TOUCHSTONES

Wealth



I HAVE A VISION: 1938, small-town America, a knock on the back kitchen door. A woman, wiping her hands on her apron, sees through the screen a grizzled, hungry man in dusty overalls. She wraps a ham sandwich in waxed paper and hands it to him with a smile.

The only famished creatures at my back door are the deer that eat the roses. But I see them—the homeless and the hungry—on the way to the opera, the theater, the gym.

Some sit on the sidewalk, their backs pressed against shop walls, a paper cup in front of their crossed legs. Some have signs. Some have dogs, also hungry. Some walk along with me, pressing their faces close to mine, asking urgently for money. Some are selling the street newspaper.

Sometimes I give, sometimes I don't. I don't if I'm rushed, if my wallet is buried too deeply in my bag, if the person is smoking cigarettes, if the person looks like a con artist, if I gave at the last corner.

I feel guilty, whether I give or not. I tell myself I shouldn't have to apologize for my refrigerator full of food and my bed with an electric mattress pad. I note in my checkbook my donations to food kitchens. But when I walk past the lumpy blankets in the doorways and the strung-together grocery carts full of plastic bags, I feel responsible, and I feel helpless.

For about a year, before Da Mayor sanitized the San Francisco Civic Center, I tried to emulate the 1930s lady at her screen door. Each morning, as my husband crossed that park on his way to work, the men on the benches would ask him for money. I began to pack him two identical sack lunches, one for him to give away. But there are so many outstretched palms—and so many excruciating questions. What good can I do? What kind of relationship can I—who have enough—have with those who have so little?

Still, in my struggles to reconcile generosity and judgment, I remember a Thanksgiving at the house of friends who live in a neighborhood where more than the deer are hungry. The doorbell rang. Our hostess sent the scruffy man down the stairs with a plate piled high with food.

And it was a china plate.

KAREN ROSENBAUM
Kensington, California

ON MY FIFTH birthday, Nanny gave me a beautiful dress. Every stitch had been sewn by my grandmother on her old black pedal-driven Singer sewing machine. Included were a pair of matching panties, finished off with a tiny pocket. The outfit was probably pink; I don't remember.

There was another present that day—a

tablet of paper so small it fit into the pocket of the panties. The sheets of paper were different colors: pink, blue, green, yellow. The little tablet cost perhaps five cents. I was so enamored of it that all day long, whenever anyone wished me "Happy Birthday," I hiked up my beautiful dress and showed off the notepad. (Draw your own conclusions from the fact that the paper, rather than the dress, enchanted this writer-to-be.)

Wealth is whatever we have beyond what we actually need: the jam in addition to the bread, the velvet trim as well as the coat itself. (We're talking here about material wealth, of course, not spiritual; but the connection turns out to be closer than generally assumed.)

There is a catch or two to having wealth, even so modestly defined.

Ben Franklin, or maybe it was Erma Bombeck, said, "First the man owns the house; then the house owns the man." The five-year-old fell in love with paper of all sorts; sixty years later, the woman darts around the house, tripping over tons of paper, including boxes of dittoed handouts older than the garbage man; file drawers of operating instructions and warranties for appliances long since interred in the landfills of several states; trunks jammed with handwritten journals of every shape and design, some half-full of dated entries, others with only a page or two used in the whole notebook. Taking care of our STUFF, as George Carlin teaches us, can be an ironic bondage. But obviously the Hunting and Gathering genes of most humans are vastly more dominant than those that trigger Releasing and Recycling.

Gathering can be a demanding addiction. An enthusiast in Orem sports a T-shirt reading, "She Who Dies With The Most Fabric Wins." Fabric: go figure. But what constitutes wealth is definitely in the eye of the holder, in the first place, and finally in the heart.

Therein lies the other catch. Wealth is what we want, not what we merely need—and wanting is easy. I have rarely met anyone who does not want many things. (Peace Pilgrim never hiked my way, and folks who copied her in the Sixties are now studying the Dow Jones numbers, taking each dip personally.) It's human nature to want. But far less common is loving and delighting in what you want once you get it. Half the world's novels and most of the biographies attest to that paradox.

We have all looked into the impoverished eyes of men and women who wanted hugely and got pretty much all that they wanted,

TOUCHSTONES is a new SUNSTONE section that debuted in the December 2005 issue. It was inspired by "Readers Write" in The SUN magazine. We invite readers to submit their own short memoirs on a pre-selected theme.

TOUCHSTONES topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for personal expression. Writing style is not as important as the contributor's thoughtfulness, humor, and sincerity. We will edit pieces, but contributors will have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication.

To submit a reflection, please send it typed and double-spaced to SUNSTONE, 343 North Third West, Salt Lake City, Utah, 84103. If you cannot type, please print clearly. Electronic submissions can be sent via email to TOUCHSTONES editor Allen Hill at: allen@sunstoneonline.com. Again, due to space limitations, submissions should be kept somewhere around 400 words at most, but we are willing to make exceptions for exceptional pieces. We're thankful for all submissions we receive and look forward to reading your TOUCHSTONES.

Upcoming Topics and Deadlines

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only to find ashes where they had expected ambrosia. There is no joy in having something unconnected to loving that something. Pride, yes, arrogance, yes, even revenge. But joy? No.

So is that the real secret to wealth, not only to have what you want, but to want what you have?

If so, I've been very lucky. I've lusted after paper in all its textures and forms; and it delights me as much now as it did on my fifth birthday. I've hankered after books; and while my arthritic joints have suffered from shoving sagging boxes of them from one place to another, the heft and feel, not to mention the music and meaning, of books gives me more pleasure today than ever before. I've wanted dogs; and despite the relentless chores involved with being a pet owner (or, more accurately, a pet's *staff person*), my heart still leaps up when I behold a furry face waiting at the window. Sometimes gratitude sweeps over me like a sneaker wave for wealth like this—for wanting, for having, and most of all, for loving.

ELOUISE BELL
Edmond, Oklahoma

ONE NIGHT WHEN I was working as a hospital chaplain, I was called to do an end-of-life ceremony for a thirty-year-old man who had had an aneurysm and been declared brain dead. His fiancée, to whom he was to be married the next month, had decided to donate his organs. Here she was, looking beyond her own grief to think about those who might benefit from this tragedy. Many people struggle with the decision to donate their loved one's organs. I think this is because brain death doesn't look like death—the patient looks healthy, feels warm. They look like they'll wake up any minute.

As I went into the ICU room, filled with bothers, sisters, nieces, and nephews, I braced myself. End-of-life services are difficult, and I expected this one to be harder than usual. This man's mother was flying in from Ireland. She would arrive at 10:00 pm, and the organ harvesting needed to happen at 11:00 pm. This service would be her only chance to say goodbye while he was still breathing.

Yet, in this room I noticed sadness but also a feeling of peace. We read scriptures and said the Our Father. Then, each of the

twenty family members said what they loved best about this patient and told him goodbye. They kissed him and stroked his hand. This man would be missed by so many, but during this sad, sad time, they seemed to be blessed with the gift of the Comforter.

Early the next morning, three patients received the vital organs they had waited so long for, and others received the gifts of skin and corneas.

EMILY CLYDE CURTIS
Phoenix, Arizona

HAVING HEARD MANY times as a child, "We don't have enough money," I grew up hoping that a money-growing tree or a fairy godmother (I knew better than to ask God) would bless me with incredible wealth so I'd never have to say again, "We don't have enough money." Going to Ronzone's Department Store in Las Vegas with a friend whose family had a large amount of money always proved to be an embarrassing occasion. I was certain there was an indelible message written all over my face and that the saleslady would look down her nose and say, "It's clear that you, young

twerp, don't have enough money. What are you doing here?" My friend had a charge card and the right to sign; all I had was loose change from babysitting jobs and a strong sense of not having "enough." Stories of the Little Matchgirl definitely made my eyes enlarge and throat swell when I read or listened to them. I not only felt privy to, but was also certain that I, too, was a dweller in, the inner sanctum of scarcity.

The truer truth is, I think, that our parents learned to say those words somewhere—maybe from their parents or their parents before them when there was a drought, a depression, or hard times. Maybe they were all born into the "Not Enough" school. It was their habitual credo. But we always managed to get by. No one starved or went to school without shoes. There was always our family and the assurance that we belonged to each other, skinny and nervous that we were. We cared about each other and trusted in God's abundance over the long haul. We danced with each other to the polka music our father loved. I could play "The Beer Barrel Polka" on the piano and also "Indian Love Call" so my mother could sing, "When I'm calling you—oo—oo—oo, oo—oo—oo," like the birds of heaven when no one else was listening. There was the brain in my head, the love of writing letters/drawing/painting, the sunsets in Nevada,

my dancing feet, laughter when I wasn't taking myself too seriously, a bicycle that could carry me into new kingdoms in the desert, friends whom I adored and always the possibility of new ones. It's not a surprise that I ended up feeling wealthy even if the real-time money can still play mysterious tricks—being near-then-far, looking as if it won't be enough, disappearing-then-appearing as if it were the stuff of genies.

PHYLLIS BARBER
Salt Lake City, Utah

ONCE I CAUGHT my father hunched over his chest of drawers, crying. He had found there the money my brother had recently earned shoveling snow. Dad knew he and Mom hadn't left it. Money was scarce enough they always knew how much they had and where. And he knew what a pittance that cash was compared to family needs. But he'd also learned that at least one of his kids had cared enough to give all he had. So he cried.

I scurried down into the basement and cried, too. Why?

By paying a little money for some jobs we eight kids did around the house, our parents taught us to work in order to earn. Most chores we did because we wanted to keep living there. On our own, we learned we

could earn more by cleaning, mowing, shoveling, babysitting, or tutoring for others, so we older kids snagged those jobs as fast as we could and left the lower-pay work to the younger crowd.

All of us felt proud to ease our parents' burden by earning enough to buy some things we needed ourselves in addition to what we deemed "nicer" presents for family birthdays and Christmas. So by the time Dad cried, I was a self-important teen smugly working in an office but only belatedly learning what one of those "younger kids" already knew.

CAROL B. QUIST
Salt Lake City, Utah

RICHES ARE BAD; wealth is good. Riches deal with vanity and pride, with lust, selfishness, covetousness, and greed—to "get gain and grind upon the face of the poor" (2 Nephi 26:20). They not only corrupt, but outwardly show your haughty corruption ("costly apparel"). The love of riches is the root of all evil (1 Timothy 6:10).

Wealth, on the other hand, is the good things of the world that the Lord liberally pours down on his righteous people and wants them to abundantly enjoy: flocks and fields, bountiful harvests and comfortable dwellings, music, art, education, good food, travel, recreation, computers, books, enter-

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tainment systems, DVDs, mountain bikes, iPods, cut flowers, beach houses—all to gladden the eye, please the ear, improve the mind, expand the soul, and celebrate Creation. It is possible to enjoy things not because they're expensive, though they may be, but because they are good. What's wrong with edifying conversation with mighty fine friends on a luxury barge on the Canal du Midi in the south of France? Or owning an exquisite classical music collection? Nothing. Still, St. Paul hauntingly asserts: "having food and clothing let us be therewith content" (1 Timothy 6:8). While there is an epicurean aspect to spirituality, 'tis the gift to be simple.

The no-man's-land between riches and wealth is wide and fuzzy: Do I like my Armani suit because of my vanity or because it hangs so well that I'm easy and unself-conscious in it, which helps me better serve people? The damning challenge of good things is having them when others don't: "that which cometh of the earth, is ordained for the use of man for food and for raiment, and that he might have in abundance. But it is not given that one man should possess that which is above another, wherefore the world lieth in sin" (D&C 49:19–20). Ay, there's the rub!—unequal distribution.

And so, finally, we get to God's perpetual

abundant-living fund: consecration—the self-reliant management of your life (stewardship) to provide for the needs *and* wants of you and your family *and* to deliberately create a generous surplus to set up others in self-supporting stewardships. God blesses his righteous people through various individuals with diverse gifts that must be liberally shared for all to be blessed equally. Hence, the material blessings of tithe-paying are primarily given and received communally, not individually.

The timeless, illusive challenge for individuals is, of course, to create *any* surplus. For even base needs and legitimate wants are darn elastic: even the most liberal Democrat lives in the largest house he can afford. But isn't a house a good retirement investment? Sure, but with that question you enter the never-ending internal war of guilt and justification until you throw up your hands in frustration and just go shopping. To ethically and morally enjoy wealth one must also deny many mighty worthy personal pursuits of happiness to enable those of others. How much self-denial is enough? Where do you draw the line between your legitimate wants and others' basic needs? Albert Schweitzer proposed that whenever you purchase a luxury you should also donate an equal amount to supply the ne-

cessities of someone else. If you dine out, donate the cost of the meal to a food bank. If you register for an art appreciation class, contribute to someone's college tuition. If you buy a CD, or go to a movie . . . well, you get the idea. That formula allows you to still enjoy the luxury of hundred-dollar-a-seat Broadway productions of *Les Misérables* (albeit less often) and help the poor.

One simply cannot live a consecrated life without lowering one's standard of living, and if a smaller house and thriving on just half of one's luxuries is too burdensome for middle-class American Saints, well, who then can be saved? What realistic hope, then, do we have for the Millennium? It hurts to prune oneself, especially of darn worthy endeavors, but on unpruned plants leaves flourish; on pruned ones, flowers. This widow's mite principle of self-denial applies equally to rich and poor: when you voluntarily reduce your standard of living so others will have more, when you "give 'til it hurts" (or at least until you have less)—especially when done anonymously—an incomprehensible and unexpected spiritual quantum leap occurs. Your life is richer. Less is indeed more. O so much more!

ELBERT EUGENE PECK
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