

# NAME YOUR GREED

Rev. Allen Wells

Why am I speaking about greed, you may ask? It would seem to be a truism that greed is bad, and we all know that. I am speaking about greed because both as persons and as a society we are suffering greatly from an unnamed malady. And having not recognized the real cause of our suffering, we have sought the cure for it in the conditions which caused it.

Why am I speaking about greed? Because it is helpful to diagnose the disease you are suffering from. A friend of mine has suffered for years with joint pains and tiredness. Finally he was accurately diagnosed as having Lymn disease. He was relieved to at least know what was wrong. And knowing what the disease was enabled him to secure treatment.

We tend to speak about our values being wrong, or this or that government program not working, but I can't say when I've heard commentators condemn personal and political practices on the grounds purely on the grounds that they are greedy. A few years ago it became acceptable to affirm that "greed is good." For a centuries though, greed has remained at the top of the Christian Church's list of cardinal sins, related to lust and gluttony. And it is chastised in Judaism and in Islam.

## I. Where Does Greed Come From?

### a. Animal "Angst"

Why is greed so irresistible and sharing so hard? It took only a decade for the communal hippies of the 60's to become the commercial "yuppies" of the 70's. The early followers of Jesus organized themselves communally, and as the Aposle Paul wrote, shared in all things, but it didn't last. The Pilgrims, too, briefly tried to live communally but were unsuccessful and gave this goal up at the urging of Governor Bradford.

Animals, though aggressive, are not greedy. Their stomachs can hold only limited amounts, so when they are sated they stop eating. Perhaps, greediness became a nameable trait in humans when we learned to domesticate animals and sustain agriculture, and were thus freed from the limitation of our immediate satisfaction. Then we could grow extra grain and corn we could store up against times of drought and we could also use this surplus for collateral in bartering and bargaining.

A good friend of mine believes our individual greediness and resistance to communal sharing developed with the invention of the back scratcher. Before this innovation, he reminds us, we like the apes, had to groom one another. But when suddenly we found we had the ability to do it all ourselves, he believes we all became (we thought) self sufficient, and focused only on our own needs.

However, we got here, it seems clear that the more we have accrued the more selfish and isolated we have become. Though there are wonderful exceptions like Warren Buffet, generally speaking the wealthy in our country give the least away. The same goes for countries. The facts are that our country gives the least in foreign aid of any developed country. The same is true in religion. Those with the least income tend to give the most to their churches and temples.

The more we have the more frightened we become of losing it, and when we are frightened, we become less generous. Giving to charities fell off remarkably after the attacks of 9/11. We fall back upon the primitive regions of our brain that remind us that we are either prey or predators.

### **b. Human Angst**

The more recently developed regions of our brain have created worry that animals don't have. Becoming self-conscious, we have become aware that our life is limited. Awareness of our own impermanence and that of everything, creates in us an existential angst – an unsatisfactory “hole” that we long to fill up, that the Buddha called dukkha or basic unsatisfactoriness. This existential hunger drives us to search for something permanent to hang on to – even if it is an afterlife.

The feeling that we are lacking something – enduring solidity – formulates our religious system and fuels our economic system. In religious terms, we believe we are sinners and need God's salvation. Our economic philosophy coopts this theological assumption and deludes us into believing that money will provide the security we need and we will be saved by what is not just sarcastically referred to as the “Almighty Dollar.”

Of course this belief never works out. If it did, our economic system would collapse. Our businesses must continually remind us that we are not yet satisfied, by making us imagine new needs. One way it does this is by stimulating comparisons. As a friend told me “I never wanted a Porsche until so many people told me that I had to have one.” Advertisers play upon our innate longing and persuade us to work for more and more in an endless game that has built in, the need to continue playing it. We come to believe that if we can have enough we will believe that we are enough. And so we indebted ourselves to the future.

## **II. Our Greediness for Money**

We have become more and more greedy, not just for things, but for money itself. We have created inventive ways of making money from money. Up until 1986, the finance sector’s share of domestic corporate profits never rose higher than 16%. But in the last decade it has risen to 41%.

Making money from money is a form of financial alchemy. In reality it is nothing more than a giant Ponzi scheme in which we expect to win enough before the last people get in the game, or the last resources are used up. I believe something is fundamentally amiss in a financial culture built upon “sales” that don’t produce any products or services, but only sell bigger and bigger bets, especially since the deck is always stacked in favor of the house. At least in an actual casino, the damage is contained to the gamblers. In this system the lives of people unconnected with the betting itself are destroyed – eight million jobs or so in this last go around.

The way you make money in this system is by loaning out more than you have. Banks can loan out 90% more than they have in their deposits. You are motivated to get people into debt in order to make income on their interest. To make this system work, every one has to have faith that the economy will forever grow so that there will be more money in circulation to pay off this interest. And for the economy to grow, more people must take out loans to be able to purchase more products that are produced on the loans the producers have taken out. The whole system is one big bubble, because the source of labor is limited and natural resources are limited. If we were to continue at our present rate and other countries were to catch up, we will soon need 3 or 4 planets to support us.

### III. Karl Marx on Institutional Greed

Karl Marx apprehended the deficiency of this system, which is that it requires constant growth and expansion. We'll use up people, natural resources, and the benefits of technical innovation, until there is nothing left. He realized that in an unregulated system built on personal profit we can never live in balance with the land or in fairness with people or without colonialism in regard to other countries.

Our government now colonizes more subtly than ever. First we try loan sharking, and only if that fails, do we attempt control through coups, or as a last resort send in our military. John Perkins describes how we operate in his book, "Confessions of an Economic Hit Man."

"Like our counterparts in the Mafia . . . we provide favors. These take the form of loans to develop infrastructure— electric generating plants, highways, ports, airports or industrial parks. A condition of such loans is that engineering and construction companies from our own country must build all these projects. In essence , most of the money never leaves the nited states; it is imply transferred from banking offices in Washington to engineering offices in New York, Houston, or San Francisco.

". . . the loans are so large that the debtor is forced to default on its payments after a few years. When this happens, the like the Mafia, we demand our pond of flesh."

This often includes one or more of the followinbg: control over United Nations's votes, the installation of military bases, or access to precious resources such as oil or the Panama Canal. Of course the debtor still owes us the money--and another country is added to our global empire." (p. xx, Confessions of an Economic Hit Man, John Perkins)

The world becomes our "natural resource. As we face running out of resources of earth, we are talking about colonizing the moon and Mars. And people become "human resources". Until only a few decades ago, we still considered working people to be "personel". Similarly we considered our people to be "citizens", but now we refer to ourselves as consumers".

### IV. The Buddha on the Origins of Greed a. It's in All of Us

The Buddha saw how greed arises as a deluded attempt to satisfy our fear of impermanency. The Buddha saw that believing that we don't have enough is the root of the problem because it is based on a sense that we are not existentially secure.

This sense of deficiency is in all of us. So if we are to transform our economic system, we must at the same time, moderate the personal impulses within us that support it. I suspect we rarely really feel our own greediness – unless we have achieved a certain level of introspection. We rationalize an extra vacation because it is to take care of ourselves. Or we feel we deserve a lucrative financial benefit as a reward for our hard work or for being smart. If we take the lion's share now, we promise ourselves that we will become benefactors later. I wonder, does any I am thief actually feel she is greedy? It is hard to take personal responsibility, I am reminded of the comedy routine of Bert and I about two down east Mainers.

“Eben Robey went down to the Tremont Temple in Boston one Saturday night to hear Norman Thomas speak. Next Monday he was preaching socialism to Enoch Turner over the back fence.

“You know, Enoch,” he was saying, “under socialism a person shares everything.”

“You mean to say, Eben, if you had two farms, you'd give me one of them?”

“Yep, if I had two farms, Enoch, I'd give you one of them.”

“Do you mean to say, Even, if you had two hayricks, you'd give me one of them?”

“Yep, if I had two hayracks I'd give you one of them.”

“Or, if you had two hogs, Eben, would you give me one of them?”

“Darn you, Enoch, you know I got two hogs.”

Our greed can manifest very subtly, but it is nevertheless the same greed that drives cold companies to remove mountain tops. Driving up to Massachusetts for a retreat last week, I noticed the beautiful colors on my route. I immediately thought, “If only I could share this with my friend who loves the fall, I would double my pleasure.” While this might be considered a generous thought, I realized it wasn't in my case. With a deeper introspection I became aware that my present satisfaction didn't feel enough by itself. You might say, I wanted to “invest” it for more return.

## **b. It Dissatisfies us**

But our yearning for more increases our dissatisfaction. It reinforces our awareness of the hole within us, and it further frustrates us with each supposed leap forward. The second bite is never as quite satisfying as the first, nor does drilling for oil the second mile down in the gulf bring us as much benefit as did the first.

In the Pali language of the Buddha, the word for “craving” is “tanha”. It refers to a thirst that is unquenchable. Eventually our craving becomes so strong that we can’t satisfy ourselves with ordinary reality, but we have to create virtual ones which we aptly call derivatives.

Our unquenchable thirst disserves us. It isolates us. The wealthier we are the wider become our lawns, the higher our walls, and the more insurance we built up against loss. Craving overruns our psychological space, by narrowing our focus to one desired object, and we lose perspective on life. It removes us from being fully present to what we have, and our capacity to appreciate it.

But if we can become aware of our cravings, we can gain control of our lives, just as an alcoholic can when he ceases denial and stops drinking.

## **V. Radical Reformation**

### **a. Radical Questioning**

If we are to transform the system built upon greed and our own lives which both contribute to it and molded by it, we must become personally and institutionally radical. We must personally investigate the origin of our cravings and politically question the motivation of an economic system built upon greed. To be radical is to question our foundations. Someone came up with this illustration:

“A man was standing beside a stream when he saw a baby struggling in the water. Without a thought he jumped in and saved it. No sooner had he placed it gently on the shore than he saw another and jumped in to save it, then another and another. Totally focused on saving babies, he never thought to look upstream to answer the obvious question: Where were the babies coming from, and how did they get in the water?”

Imagine a ship crossing treacherous seas. “Who is most responsible for the safety of the passengers?” The captain, the helmsman, etc. are all important. But the most important is the one who designed the ship. For if the structure of the ship is weak, no one can safely sail it. Greed is not just an individual matter, it is also structurally built in.

We can take shorter showers, install solar panels and make our individual lives as green as possible. Doing so is very important. It will help us to recognize our cravings, and it will make us more aware of our interconnectedness. But it is not enough. For example, what we consume amounts to about only about a quarter of total consumption; the biggest part of non-green activities is commercial, industrial, corporate, by agribusiness and government, and military. Even if you reduce the waste you take out for garbage pick up to zero, and convince the government offices and businesses in your area to cut down on their waste enough to eliminate our share of it, you won’t accomplish a whole lot. Because municipal waste accounts for only 3% of total waste production in the US. Only acting individually perpetuates the myth that we have far more power than we do, and yields power to those who are truly powerful and to the power of the systems design itself.

### **b. Seeing the System As Us**

We are a part of a large human family and we are a part of nature. When we take more from each other and from nature than our share, we deficit ourselves, and perpetuate the belief that we are not enough. The term for “enlightenment” in Pali, the language that records The Buddha’s teachings, literally means “to throw back” or “to give back”. Buddha taught that, at the end, we must take only what is offered and give everything else back. We must become creditors to the world and not borrowers from it, and from its children, and as native Americans put it, from the seventh generation. The Buddha, in fact, suggested that we need only four “contentments”, which are clothing, food, shelter, and medicine.

Most parents would scold their children for taking a disproportionate share of dessert. But they may not apply this ethic to our larger communities and culture. For example, these very same parents may not criticize the rich for paying a lesser proportion of their income in taxes than the poor. But the members of some communities take a different tack.

For example, members of native communities in British Columbia, redistribute disproportionate wealth every so often, with the wealthiest trying to see who can be the one to give the most away. If we were to half our military budget which primarily goes to protect the benefits of our greed, we could eliminate world hunger.

### **c. Name the Problem Within and Without**

We are left with two challenges: For one, we must radically challenge our own motivations. The other is that we must challenge the structure of our economic system which encapsulates selfishness. For some, the first may be harder than the second for it is easy to blame what is outside ourselves and avoid looking within. But this look inside is vitally important because only it will enable us to understand how others become trapped into greedy living. Then we can become sympathetic to them, instead of treating them as our enemy. For others the second look may be harder than the first, because it involves political risks that don't accompany charity. As Helder Camara, Brazil's Roman Catholic priest and champion of the poor, put it succinctly, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist."

May we grow to realize we are enough and that as Mahatmas Gandhi, famously put it, "Earth provides enough for every man's need, but not enough for every man's greed."

We can begin by naming the plight from which we suffer, and thus find our way out.

## RESOURCES FOR POSITIVE PERSONAL CHANGE

David Korten, in his book, The Great Turning, documents many grass roots movements, across the planet, that are making changes.

William McDonough, architect and designer, has made some astounding ecological breakthroughs that have proved highly economically profitable for the business that have utilized them. He decries the theory of “sustainability” on the grounds that we can do much better. He proves we can “upcycle”. Whereas recycling usually means downcycling our toxins, upcycling means producing buildings and products that do not produce any waste at all. He asks us to consider the cheery tree. Perhaps only a few blossoms pollinate. But the rest are not wasted. They fall to the ground and provide nutrition for new trees. McDonough has designed waste management plants where the effluent is cleaner than the water that entered the system in the first place. His philosophy is Cradle to Cradle, (also the title of his book) which is compared with “cradle to the grave”.

Daniel Goleman, in his new book, Ecological Intelligence, describes the movement for Consumer transparency. Using computers we can now make a Life Cycle Assessment of almost every product which includes its cost to the environment in dollars over its entire cycle – including the source of each ingredients which went into its making and everything that happens to it after we are finished with it.

GoodGuide is a web based service that evaluates thousands of products that we use may consider buying. Its members do LCA research on all of these. I looked up my shampoo, and found it is was only about 50% favorable to the environment. If you have an Iphone, you can even download GoodGuide onto it, and it will read the bar codes of whatever product you are looking at and give you an assessment.