
Pity the Super-rich



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The road to success is paved with more than just money. Finding enduring things that matter is one way of avoiding wealth fatigue syndrome.

The rich, as noted by F. Scott Fitzgerald, are different from you and me. By rich, Fitzgerald was referring to those who have so much money that they don't know what to do with it. However, excess success and affluence can come at a high price, and lead to unremitting greed, corruption and a sense of entitlement.

In one of the most famous films of all time, *Citizen Kane*, we follow the story of one of these super-rich. Charles Foster Kane, played by Orson Welles, is a character based in part on the American newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst. The film follows a fascinating man's rise to fame to his inevitable fall from the "top of the world," dying alone muttering only the enigmatic "Rosebud." The film's central device is the search, by a newsreel report, for the meaning of this word. In the end, we find out that, despite all his wealth, Kane's most enduring and precious thought – the piece most central to his character and identity – was the name of the sled that he had been riding as a child the day his mother sent him away.

Kane suffers from “affluenza”, or wealth fatigue syndrome. While obsessively pursuing material gain (having a voracious appetite for the acquisition of money, possessions, appearances - both physical and social - and fame), the paradox is that all these acquisitions and conspicuous consumption do not make these people happy. Instead, their relentless quest for material gain only brings psychological disorders, alienation and distress.

Six cars, three yachts and a jet plane isn't enough

In my work as a psychoanalyst, management professor, and executive coach, I have met many extremely wealthy individuals who suffer from affluenza. In spite of all their accomplishments and material possessions, they remain bored and deeply unfulfilled. There are very few things that make them really feel alive. Given this sense of void, they may even engage in self-destructive activities.

To illustrate an interesting case of affluenza, take one of my clients, who, like Kane, is an extremely successful entrepreneur. For Peter, life did not have a very auspicious start. His father left the family when he was only five years old, leaving only his mother to make ends meet. Fortunately, his grandfather—a jack-of all trades—took an interest in the little boy encouraging his entrepreneurial drive. And that's what he became. Already in his early thirties, Peter was a self-made man and succeeded in amassing a fortune. He had become obscenely rich.

Peter possessed so much wealth that he could spend freely. Without restraint, he indulged in truly expensive hobbies, acquiring mansions, cars, a yacht, and even an airplane - new toys with which he soon lost interest. This excessive spending may be a sign not only of conspicuous consumption but also of an addiction and a mad attempt to cover up boredom and depression.

Conspicuous consumption for many rich men also involves women. After Peter's third marriage (and divorce), he decided that marriage wasn't for him, having left him with quite a mess, including bitter ex-wives and a train of unhappy children.

When money costs too much

In our individualistic, competitive world, it is unrealistic to say that money does not matter. It is hard to survive without having money, and all of us need a minimal amount of it simply to get on with everyday life. But, if

unchecked, money can also turn out to cost too much. Listening to the stories of Peter, and others like him, I discovered that whatever they acquire, it never seems to be enough and in spite of having it all they are never satisfied. Although these people may define their lives through earnings, possessions, appearances, and celebrity, excessive wealth can create a bubble of isolation and loneliness, leaving them more miserable than ever.

There is another extent to money's darker side. One of the many money-driven executives I have coached once said to me, in all seriousness, "What good is money if it can't inspire envy and terror in your fellow man?" Making lots of money isn't only a symbol of success; it can also be a deliberate attempt to make others envious, to show them who is *more* successful. As to be expected, such behaviour often serves as a matador's red flag, bringing out the worst in those who are being taunted.

For some, money is an ideal instrument for keeping score. Gaining a spot on the annual Forbes list of the world's richest people - the destination of many a narcissistic journey - is a highly effective, but not very sophisticated, way of gaining the admiration, and/or envy, of others. For many of the super-rich, to be left off the Forbes list can be a personal catastrophe. The battle to gain a place (or higher place) on it can also be the ultimate challenge.

But unfortunately, it's likely even those who make the list, are still not satisfied. They torture themselves by wondering whether their ranking is high enough or whether they will maintain their position.

The misfortune of growing up rich

While growing up with no money at all can be a problem, having lots of money can also be detrimental to a child's healthy development. In a typical scenario, super-rich parents, busy as they are with the acquisition and management of their wealth, compensate for their unavailability by giving their children presents and money as a substitute for love. Children raised on this model are generally left with ambivalent feelings toward their caretakers, depressive feelings and a great sense of insecurity, which can last into adulthood.

Despite all the riches money can bring, true wealth lies in family and friends who care about us, and about whom we care. Having intimate, deep relations is what life is all about. Far too often, the senseless pursuit of money hardens the human heart.

In the case of Peter, he would do well to concentrate on the things that last and to realise that focusing on finite material achievements only brings a temporary sense of fulfillment. Although Peter may have viewed the pursuit of money as the road to freedom, obtaining it turned out to be a bind to slavery. It led him to forfeit the essential things of life.

Readjusting your bottom line

The only cure for affluenza is to start giving back. As many studies have shown, altruistic acts are good for your emotional well-being, and can measurably enhance your peace of mind. People who engage in altruistic activities experience increased personal growth and are more content and fulfilled. There is a great correlation between doing good and feeling good. When we give to others, they feel closer to us, and we also feel closer to them.

Peter needs to keep in mind that thoughts and imagination are a great source of wealth, as are meaningful friendships and familial ties, and the ability to take pleasure in the small things of life. It's important to recognise that the people who are spiritually wealthy are the wealthiest of all.

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