

# The Hunger for Money

*Toward a philosophy of abundance*

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by Marjorie Kelly

Our culture has a guilt about money like the Victorians had about sex; we don't admit in polite company that we love it, but secretly everyone loves it. If we don't have enough we crave it, and feel guilty for craving it. But as with sex, or with food or safety or any basic human need, having enough is healthy. And I don't mean the bare minimum. I'm not talking about survival but about abundance, joyous abundance, the vibrant health of ample, ample money. Financial health is a kind of clean and spirited health, like good lovemaking, or a gourmet meal—it has nothing in it of filth or gluttony, as the common myth would have us believe.

Money is a healing force in the world. Money feeds. Money warms and clothes and comforts us. It is a vehicle of freedom. Like love, it is a common language we speak, and like love, it has an endless bounty. There is no logical or necessary limit to the amount of money in the world, just as there is no limit to the amount of love.

What makes us uncomfortable about money is something we call "greed," and the filthiness of that word betrays our secret guilt about money, our secret fear—which we can trace to biblical times—that things of the world are base and unclean, and things of the spirit are higher and more noble. Our heritage teaches us to secretly hate our hunger for money, and to squash it—but when we cannot squash it, as we cannot squash any legitimate need, we project it outward: *I am not greedy, but Lord they are, look how base they are.*

"Greed" is a harsh word, and one that I do not like; it always makes us feel we're talking about somebody else, not ourselves. It is a word that evokes no compassion, when it seems to me that compassion is always in order when we

speak of human need. Perhaps we can understand what we're talking about better if we use the phrase *the hunger for money*—for indeed, this is a hunger that all of us have, and it is a healthy and necessary hunger. We are physical beings, not angels, and we have physical needs. Money is the way to meet them.

When the hunger for money goes unfed, or when it exists in such an exaggerated state that it cannot be fed enough, it becomes a kind of sickness, a kind of hysteria, like a high fever. We feel a hollow terror in our belly, and become unable to receive or give without anxiety.

There are two extremes of financial anxiety where, ironically, the feelings of starvation are much the same: in the paralysis of poverty, or in the gluttony of excess wealth. It's difficult to understand how someone grossly overfed can feel hungry, but it's literally true. Research shows that the obese physically feel hungry all the time; they show biochemical signs of starvation even when well-fed. The same can be said, I believe, of the financially obese, those we commonly call greedy.

It makes one wonder, what is the real hunger here? An insatiable hunger is by definition a misplaced hunger. The body would not be given a need for oxygen if we lived on an oxygen-poor planet. Plants would not be given a need for light if this were a sunless world. Our legitimate hungers can be satisfied; it is only the hungers masquerading as something else that seem bottomless. What, then, is excessive financial hunger about?

The first thing it may be about is self-esteem. If we feel frustrated in our legitimate needs to make something of our lives, to achieve status in the world, achieving wealth can be a pretty good substitute. Money may also be a substitute for love (the father who expresses affection by giving his children things).

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Drawing by Rockwell Kent for an emblem for Junior Art Patrons, 1921. Courtesy Rockwell Kent Legacies.

or a way to buy belongingness (joining an exclusive country club). There's nothing wrong with being wealthy, or giving your children things, or joining country clubs—and there's nothing wrong with needing status, or love, or belongingness; the problem comes when we try to nourish all our needs with one thing. It simply doesn't work. We wind up still hungry for status, and love, and belongingness, and we look greedy to boot. It's like trying to nourish a need for love by eating; we wind up still hungry for love, and full to boot.

**I**n our culture, we're particularly prone to trying to solve problems with money, because money is something we value highly—perhaps more highly than anything else. In other cultures, at other times, this hasn't been the case. In his classic book *Of Time, Work, and Leisure* (excerpted on page 18), Sebastian de Grazia speaks of a time in ancient Greece when to be a man of leisure was the highest goal—and to pursue leisure was to practice music and contemplation. He writes, "It is difficult for us to realize the shame that Themistocles, the Athenian general and statesman, felt at a banquet when the lyre was passed around and he didn't know how to play it."

If our culture has a kind of one-dimensional fixation on money, we would do well to examine the forces that encourage it, rather than pointing the finger at individuals. Given our work environment, where success is the goal and money a way of keeping score, to blame people for playing hard and playing to win would be like blaming school children for making good grades.

At any rate, it isn't wise to attempt to change a bad habit by slapping it down, squelching it, making it feel guilty. We can change it, instead, by wrapping it 'round with a new and healthier habit. We can focus not on squelching our hunger for money, but on nourishing a feeling of abundance.

We live in an age of unprecedented abundance. For the first time in the history of the world, it is within our power literally to wipe hunger from the face of the earth. It is time to replace the old economics of scarcity with a new economics of abundance—and work has in fact begun on this, with people gathering regularly at The Other Economic Summit to explore the concept of a New Economy (for information on TOES, see page 6).

These are new times, and we need a new philosophy, a philosophy of abundance. We need role models and guideposts: how does one live rightly with abundance? Andrew Carnegie is a model—he transformed his guilt over having excessive wealth into an enduring system of philanthropy. One wonders how many artists, how many scholars and schools and cultural projects, have been nourished by the legacy of that one man. Frank Lloyd Wright is another exemplar—a man who created spaces where people can lead lives of great elegance and comfort, in structures that are in harmony with their environment. I think, for example, of Wingspread, the Wisconsin home Wright built for Herbert Johnson of Johnson Wax, which Wright called "a pattern for a happy free life in the country." (For more on Wright, see the feature beginning on page 10.)

If part of the problem is that our cultural values are too narrow, the solution is to broaden them. The point is not to value money less, but to value other things more. In the month of August, as summer draws to a close, it is a good time to broaden our appreciation of this astonishing earth where we live—a time to quit the city and venture into the wilderness, a time to appreciate the abundance of sun and lazy afternoons. This is a different kind of wealth, as Henry David Thoreau reminds us. There is no better statement of the philosophy of abundance than what Thoreau wrote in *Walden*: "I was rich, in sunny hours and summer days, and I spent them lavishly." ❧

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