

The Fear of Want!

By Mike Curtis

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The Fear of Want Breeds the Worship of Wealth said Henry George in 1879. Today, approximately 11 percent of our population are impoverished, and nearly two million Americans are incarcerated. We have an elaborate welfare system that redistributes nearly a trillion dollars per year (3.5% of GDP) to those who are unable to work, find employment, or earn enough to provide for their families.

However, poverty is psychologically painful. It is shameful, degrading, and humiliating. Even if you are getting food, clothing, shelter, and Medicaid, the shame of dependency, and the frustration that comes from an inability to improve your material condition, generates anger, contempt, and envy if not admiration for those who have risen above it.

So, while welfare greatly reduces the physical toll of being poor, the psychological degradation, and especially the fear of it, is quite sufficient that people strive to accumulate wealth. Many workers live with the knowledge that they could lose their jobs, and therefore, their incomes with little notice. That the accumulation of wealth is their only protection against the painful degradation of poverty.

Humans are gregarious. We are motivated by the acceptance and admiration of our peers. There are many, from warriors who expend their lives in battle to sports icons to inventors, researchers, and entrepreneurs — who have given their all in part or in whole for approbation rather than wealth alone.

Because of the fear of want, we admire the irrational accumulation of wealth. And the more wealth is accumulated, the more admiration is generated — even when it is more than could be consumed in a hundred lifetimes. No one aspires to be the second richest person in the world.

I believe the same psychology explains the gangster, the illegal drug dealer, and even the petty thief. The richer he gets, the more respect and status he enjoys. How he got rich is second to how rich he is. Many of Mr. Trump's admirers revel in the fact that he gets away with flouting the law and adding to his riches

I suppose in the case of the petty thief, the more he has stolen, the less degradation and humiliation he suffers. People are by nature cooperative. But, under a circumstance where all will not succeed, where some will be impoverished, many people become predatory, oppressing and exploiting their peers.

There were extreme examples of people who had suffered the extreme humiliation of poverty during the depression of the 1930s, and went on to become completely devoid of compassion as they murdered tens of millions of people with a complete lack of compassion, inhibition, or restraint in WWII.

There are many examples within ethnic groups. There are African Americans who get rich by rack-renting housing to other African Americans; and Mexican Americans who get rich as labor contractors by hiring illegal Mexicans at subsistence wages.

Without the fear of want, the richest person in the world would be looked on as a fool, like a hoarder who wasted their life accumulating things for which they got no benefit or apparent enjoyment. Crime and poverty go hand in hand. Create meaningful jobs with a pathway to advancement, and the rate of crime will go down proportionately. Create a pathway to home ownership, and the temptation to criminality is counterbalanced with security, dignity and a prosperous expectation.

Poverty and crime are the direct result of unemployment, stagnant wages, and the shortage of housing, which are caused by idle land — the only thing that workers cannot produce. The more land that is unused and significantly underused the fewer jobs, and the fewer units of housing.

The solution to poverty and the resulting crime is to simply acknowledge that all land is part of the Earth — a gift of nature. That the value of land results from the synergistic cooperation of the community as a whole, and, therefore, belongs to the community. The right of individual ownership is production. It is that part of what people produce that they could have produced by utilizing the natural opportunities that are equally available to everyone. And the reason there is not an abundance of land freely available for everyone is because it is hoarded unused and under-used as an appreciating asset.