The Wealth of Generosity

By Rod Dreher — Director of Publications

In his apocryphal rejoinder to Fitzgerald’s cocktail-party attempt at sociology, Hemingway may have been onto something profound. The wealthiest Americans struggle with many of the same concerns everyone else does. Money has not liberated them from the human condition, and in some cases has only exacerbated their problems.

But Fitzgerald was onto something too. Because of their enormous financial resources, the rich have unusual opportunities to do good in the world—and those who take them find deep and lasting pleasure in philanthropy.

These are the findings of Boston College sociologist Paul G. Schervish and colleagues who have teamed with his Center on Wealth and Philanthropy to survey the very wealthy (that is, Americans worth $50 million or more). The mission? To learn how their extraordinary prosperity affects the way they see their lives, their spirituality, and their attitudes toward purpose and philanthropy. An article in the April issue of *The Atlantic* reveals some results of the studies, which were partially funded by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation.

We think we know about the joys the wealthy get from their money—big houses, fancy cars, expensive vacations—but Schervish says his research has turned up surprising information.

“I have found that the most striking thing is the joy people have that results from their giving of time and money to the care of other people,” he tells the *TR*. “People would say things such as, ‘What I have just done I’m convinced is more fulfilling to me, and has done more for me than it has perhaps done for the beneficiaries.”

Schervish, a former Catholic priest whose politics were once conventionally liberal, was skeptical when he first started hearing this line from multi-millionaires. But he heard it so often he began to suspect there was something more there.

“I found out in every instance that there was something truly deeper going on: care for others in which wealth was used as a tool,” he explains. “I started looking more deeply at the meaning of philanthropy. What I found is not just joy, but hope, and fulfillment. I found people were experiencing fulfillment through a connection to something more profound than their usual daily life.”
What these wealthy philanthropists are experiencing, says Schervish, is the virtue inherent in caring for others—which, no matter what our income, opens the path to our greatest happiness. It is the realization that one of the purest and most attractive experiences we can have is caring for others just because they are in need. It is not the absence of self, but a quality of self that generates generosity. And that quality of self is one of connection, one of identification, such that our experience of love of neighbor and love of self occurs simultaneously."

One implication is that the conventional warnings from Christian traditions against the corrupting power of wealth might be outdated. Was Jesus right to warn that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter heaven?

“Yes,” says Schervish. “In Jesus’s time, the character of the rich person was directly exploitative—but that is not the whole story, even in the Gospels. Notice how Jesus also represents God as the wealthy but merciful father of the Prodigal Son, and as the landholder who pays generous wages to workers who were late to the fields. So the question is not wealth itself, but how wealth is used. Discerning fresh understandings of how to use wealth as a tool for deeper purposes is a key question for spiritual life in the 21st century.”

“Sir John Templeton was one of the world’s wealthiest men, but also a generous philanthropist who knew firsthand the joy of helping others,” says Barnaby Marsh, the Foundation’s executive vice president for strategic initiatives. “Although Paul Schervish’s research focuses on the wealthiest, his findings are relevant to everyone living in this age of prosperity. The challenge is for each and every person is to reflect on how we have been blessed by fortune our own ways—and many of us have been, even if we’re not millionaires—and to understand that the greatest happiness comes not in buying things, but in gratitude and in using our bounty purposefully.”

NOTEBOOK

On Economics, is Freedom Faltering?

Is democratic capitalism on the ropes? The global financial crash and authoritarian China’s meteoric rise, fueled by a state-guided economy, have increased doubts that free-market democracy represents the ideal political and economic model to guide development. Is the “Washington Consensus” over, replaced by an apparently more stable and dynamic “Beijing Consensus”?

Not so fast, say sociologists Peter Berger and Ann Bernstein, who say in the March/April issue of The American Interest that the argument for the Beijing Consensus is “ultimately false”:

First of all, of course, is the fact that Democracy has inherent value beyond its economic implications as the best way to defend human rights and freedom. But more than that, the evidence shows not only that the benefits of inclusive growth can be achieved without sacrificing the benefits of democracy, but also that in most cases inclusive growth and democracy are mutually supportive. Grim tradeoffs between democracy and development are not inevitable.
Berger, a leading American sociologist, and Bernstein, executive director of the Centre for Development and Enterprise, a South African think tank, give the Chinese achievement its due. “Never before in human history has a society as large grown as quickly for as long; none has ever raised as many people out of poverty,” they write. But it’s wrong to identify the supposed virtue of autocracy as the secret of China’s success. In truth, China has won the confidence of investors because its government can be relied on to stick with pro-market policies.

Isn’t this a testimony to the stabilizing benefits of autocracy over democracy? Not really, say the authors. The evidence shows that “mature democracies”—that is, nations where the rule of law obtains, and people have the liberty to criticize the government, thereby incentivizing constant reform—provide the best overall model for generation growth.

Berger and Bernstein’s work was funded by a $520,000 grant from the John Templeton Foundation, which supports research and advocacy geared toward promoting political liberty, free markets, and entrepreneurship in developing nations.

Fighting Slavery on the Front Lines

Cable news giant CNN has been exposing its global audience to the realities of human trafficking through its CNN Freedom Project, designed to make contemporary citizens aware that slavery is by no means a thing of the past. The network has recently featured the abolitionist efforts of Free The Slaves (FTS), a Washington-based non-profit organization working around the world for the liberation of captives. (See CNN’s reports on the organization’s work on the Free The Slaves website.) As we reported in a previous Templeton Report (February 3, 2010), the John Templeton Foundation put $2.9 million behind FTS, to support its vital work in winning freedom for shackled men, women, and children worldwide.

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