



A Preoccupation with Wealth

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The Occupy Wall Street movement has caught my attention and there are some valuable lessons to learn from this phenomenon.

The first of these centers on how critical a healthy and vibrant economy is to the well-being of our citizens. Such an economy provides most people with the opportunity for employment and the ability to meet life's basic needs.

The second lesson is how we take the first lesson for granted when the economy is functioning well. Just a few years ago the United States had very low levels of unemployment. Many of the conditions the protestors are now highlighting existed then but they weren't in the forefront. It's remarkable how chronic unemployment and a stagnant economy can turn citizen against citizen,

American against American, individuals against corporations, and the 99 percent against the 1 percent. This schism breaks my heart.

The third, and saddest, lesson is how raw feelings float to the surface during periods of economic stress. Consider these passages from an Op-Ed in the Washington Post (My name is Wall Street, and I'm addicted to greed, November 1, 2011):

"First, the mega-rich have overreached yet again. They do that. If your spirit centers in accumulation, enough is never enough. Avarice and hubris don't know how to stop. Like an alcoholic in full toot, they can't restrain themselves."

"The wealthy will sacrifice everything - morality, friends, family, health - in order to keep the wealth flowing. They will manipulate others, ignore those who counsel probity, declare their critics simply envious, and seek the company of 'drinking buddies.'"

The worst part: These words were written by an Episcopal priest.

I've worked in the financial field for 18 years and have met people from all walks of life with various degrees of security. In all that time, I've observed only two absolute truths regarding the wealthy and poor: Wealthy people have a lot of money; poor people have little or no money. That's it. Period.

Beyond that they become individuals, each unique and with a personal story. Some have made good decisions in their life, others bad decisions. Usually it is a combination of both. Some have been lucky, others not. Again, there's usually a combination.

An executive at my first financial firm, IDS, was fond of saying "IDS financial planners have the hearts of social workers and the minds of capitalists." I liked that sentiment and have since striven to listen to the personal story of the person with whom I'm sitting. The stories have been as varied as the people, the details and the outcomes part of their life experience.

Oh, there is one other thing I've heard from some wealthy people, and that is "I've been blessed." And there's something I've heard from some not-so-wealthy people, and that, too is "I've been blessed."

On those days I drive home and think, "I'm the one who was blessed with their presence today." Their level of wealth did not matter.

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