

Journey of a Wounded Healer

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18. The Man Who Owned Everything

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When I think of all the effort, struggle, and bloodshed involved in the acquisition and retention of so-called wealth, it makes me wonder that riches are considered assets rather than liabilities. While I appreciate the cities and skyscrapers and technological marvels—including modern medicine—that this mind-set has brought to us, I find it is an utterly useless way of determining the value of those things most important to we human beings. It is beauty, family, love, friendship, and knowledge that bring most of us the greatest pleasure, and none of which can be purchased. Why do we ignore these great gifts to wish for and acquire more wealth and possessions than anyone could make use of even in multiple lifetimes? The possessions are often bequeathed to unknown heirs, thereby robbing them of their own struggles and achievements, means by which their own characters may be developed and strengthened.

Struggle, defeat, pain, and illness are integral elements of the human condition. No one is served, and no one is fooled, by trying to completely avoid them. Instead we would be better off teaching ourselves how best to deal with mishap when it visits and convey that knowledge and wisdom to future generations. Beyond their names and inexact, fading likenesses, who remembers the great kings and queens and leaders for whom so much human effort and misery were expended to immortalize them? Everything living will die and everything made will be destroyed. There is little point to fighting death when its victory is foreordained.

I lived a dozen years in Manhattan where the culture of mindless acquisitiveness and endless youth has reached perfection. Are most Manhattanites happier than other folk? My own experience and the anecdotal evidence of others suggests they are not. If anything, perhaps they are a little less satisfied than ordinary mortals. Why, then, all the hubbub?

Once the basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, and safety have been met, most people can attain a degree of happiness. Without these, most people are miserable. But it does not follow—and research has shown it to be so—that more things bring more happiness. In fact, the rat race, in which those who want more, more, more must engage, is positively detrimental to health and happiness.

In a short story, I posited the idea that one man, through mergers, acquisitions, and cut-throat elimination of all competition, manages to become the sole owner of everything and everyone on the planet. Yet he is thoroughly miserable and dissatisfied. There is nothing more to acquire; he even owns the future. The only thought that brings him any pleasure is that his astronomers believe a nearby massive star is about to go mega-nova and will destroy the entire

Solar System. Without nourishing the mind and spirit, owning everything is an empty prospect. Yet the desire to possess ever more is the logical conclusion to runaway acquisitiveness.