

Happiness – money vs. the inner journey

"Money is not required to buy one necessity of the soul." - Henry David Thoreau

These are tough times. Millions of folks are experiencing pain and suffering – lost jobs, reduced wages, foreclosures, bankruptcies, lack of health care and on and on. According to Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the most basic need is that of survival. These folks are experiencing that desperate state – simply looking to survive.

Curiously, there's another group among us which is surviving, has covered their basic needs but who experience a similar state of desperation – namely, unhappiness – those who feel that more money is the one element that will bring them happiness.

Recently, researchers from the University of Warwick have found that, for many of this latter group, some form of inner work – therapy or counseling, rather than an increase in income is 32 times more effective in reducing or eliminating emotional and psychological unhappiness and distress, that once our "basic needs" (a la Maslow) have been met, income increases don't do a whole lot to increase our experience of happiness and well-being.

In their study, the researchers found a four-month experience of therapy or counseling produced a greater impact on folks' sense of well-being than an increase in income e.g., pay increase, even winning the lottery. Even the monies won for "pain and suffering" in lawsuits do not repair emotional or psychological harm.

What I find interesting when I read about the state of our country's health, is that many base their assessment of "health" on the basis of the GDP and similar economic and financial statistics. Me? I choose to look at the country's mental health statistics – e.g., rates of obesity, cancer, heart disease, depression, suicides, abuse, addiction, etc. Why? The results of the research also point to the phenomenon of a steady decline in mental health and happiness in developed countries over the past fifty years. Individual and collective economic growth has not increased national happiness.

On a personal level, Daniel Gilbert, author of the recent book "Stumbling on Happiness," suggests that "by and large, money buys happiness only for those who lack the basic needs (Maslow). Once you pass an income of \$50,000, more money doesn't buy much more happiness. Our culture implores us to buy bigger, newer, better things, but research shows "stuff" does not buy happiness."

In the end, there's a vast segment of our population that spends their lives doing things that they hate to make money they don't want to buy things they don't need to impress folks they don't like all in the attempt to experience happiness. Is that you? And if so, I pose the ultimate trite but important question, "How's that working for you vis-a-vis experiencing true and real happiness?"

"If all the gold in the world were melted down into a solid cube, it would be about the size of an eight room house. If a man got possession of all that gold -- billions of dollars worth -- he could not buy a friend, character, peace of mind, clear conscience or a sense of eternity."
- Charles F. Bunning

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

- What do I want money to do for me?
- What is happiness to you?

- What things, qualities, service, purpose do you value in life?
- What is the role of money in your search for meaning? Does it even have a role?
- How do you relate to money?
- Does money scare you?
- How does money rule your life?
- Is money your servant or your master?
- What was your and your family's experience around money like when you were growing up?

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