

Wealth and Wellth

by Muriel Strand

Coping with our pandemic is giving almost everyone a vivid lesson about true “wellth.” I like this spelling because it really conveys the true meaning, and my Oxford English Dictionary informs me this spelling is OK, if archaic. If something labeled “wealth” is not improving anyone’s welfare, it’s not actually “wellth.” And if it could be used in a way that could offer anyone better welfare, it’s not as much wellth as it may seem.

Often we think of “wealth” as money, but although related, they are very different. For one thing, money is a numerical measure, while wellth is qualitative. Because the real-world economy of goods and services has been almost completely monetized, many people unconsciously see money as wellth. But money is just a symbol, the poker chips we have all “agreed” to use to play the life game. Money only stands for wellth. It’s one way to measure welfare and wellth, but a complete measure of welfare must be as complex as we are. And in a balanced life, the whole is more than the sum of the parts.

When I was getting to know my ex, I realized he saw money as a flow (like GDP), while I saw it as a fund (like a savings account). In the shadow of this pandemic, we see it’s both. Arresting its flow reveals how much of our welfare depends on the flow of that economic lubricant. At the same time, having a fund set aside can allow one to remain safe and well during this catastrophic contagion, assuming a safe space. (In my case, this fund includes jars of beans, rice, nuts, dried fruit, and home-canned preserves, as well as a lot of dandelions in my garden.)

Shortly before the turn of the century, I spent a few years studying economics, so as to decipher the voodoo of just how I could put my money in a bank, and it would grow interest like magic. This seemed to contradict the Second Theory of Thermodynamics, the “decay” principle that entropy always increases universally. The key to this conundrum is that money is a symbol, a social invention, while entropy is just the way the universe works. Yet just because we invented money doesn’t mean it’s a simple phenomenon. While on an individual level it’s a zero-sum game, on a societal level we see it disappear in recessions and bankruptcy and appear by government fiat.

1 Timothy 6:10 says “the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil.” I believe the moral hazard of loving money arises precisely because it’s only a symbol. What we should love are the many Earthly gifts that we value, need, and want, which money merely represents. Money can’t be just an individual possession like a spoon or a pen. It belongs to everyone because it’s only valuable if others accept it in payment.

If wellth is whatever contributes to our welfare, then it has both physical and metaphysical dimensions. These two dimensions operate according to very different principles, yet they are intimately entwined in reality, as are our needs and wants. I suspect that many perplexities about wellth and money arise from confusion about these principles and their interaction. The Midas myth pertains here.

Physical wellth depends on our most basic survival needs: clean air and water, healthy food, cooking, comfy shelter, and plenty of sleep and exercise. Yet as humans we also require companions, flora and fauna, plus families and friends, for reasons both mundane and sacred. We need communities. We are eusocial; just as we have evolved to need cooking, we need a tribe for survival as a species.

Given the state of the world, the nation, and the market, it's clear that our tribes are not living in the best of all possible worlds. Opposition, polarization, blame, and blindness in our world and in our tribes are sapping our wellth. Even among Friends – silent, churched, radical, conservative – common ground crumbles at times.

Yet to arrive at a cultural consensus, a social contract that works for our communities, we will have to engage with other citizens who express uncomfortable and unwelcome feelings, opinions, and ideas. Matthew 7:3-5 reminds us of the wisdom of humility. Making other people wrong does not make one right.

Bravery, courage, and fortitude are needed when negotiating with people we don't agree with. Friends process (as discussed in the Jan/Feb 2020 pages of *Western Friend*) offers recipes for finding common ground, unity, and reconciling/integrating ideas and emotions that seem opposed, but are actually existing together in the same real world, and which all have their own measures of truth and Light. Success in such threshing will benefit all.

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