

Where is Safety?

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The 20th century began with great optimism. To many people who were alive in 1900, the new century seemed to offer profound hope for a better world. Especially in Europe, the last quarter of the 19th century and early years of the 20th were considered a golden era — “La Belle Epoque” — where peace and prosperity reigned, science and industry forged ahead in leaps and bounds, the arts and literature flourished, and a future of general enlightenment seemed possible.

Yes, there were rumblings and revolutionary undercurrents. Socialism and Communism were growing movements, what was called Anarchism disturbed the status quo, and the poor or oppressed were gradually becoming noisier in their discontent. Some sectors of the arts and music showcased a shocking vision of change (Stravinsky’s radical composition “The Rite of Spring” for the Nijinsky-choreographed Ballets Russes production provoked a near-riot at its Paris premiere in 1913).

Overall, however, optimism reigned, especially among those who benefitted from industry and the institutions of government. That ended suddenly in 1914, with the unexpected (but oddly predictable) chain of events that began World War I.

For much of the world, the rest of the 20th century became a long nightmare of great conflict and suffering. To a large extent, however, America was insulated from those difficulties, both by its increasing economic bounty and by the mythology that underpinned the American Dream of freedom and wealth.

As the 20th century ground to a close, America found itself seemingly alone atop the heap of modern civilization. The Cold War had ended with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and American power was hegemonic and apparently unchallenged. Beneath that shiny surface, however darker currents stirred. America was already well underway with the project of creating the global economy, and much of our previous industrial base had been dismantled and transferred to what was called “The Third World.” By the time the 21st century started, we were well down the road toward the FIRE economy — F-I-R-E being an acronym for **F**inance, **I**nsurance, and **R**eal **E**state. We didn’t actually make things any more, we simply moved money around.

Americans were beginning to think of ourselves as the Masters of the Universe, the bosses who oversaw and distributed the goods made by less-well-paid workers around the world. Not everyone saw himself as God-like, but many of the elites who ran the country and made policy did, and the rest of us generally went along for the ride.

Since its inception, America has been pushed and pulled by a pair of paradoxical and contradictory mythologies. On the one hand, America has been the promised land of milk and honey, where anyone willing to work hard in business can make a fortune. So, the dream of monetary and financial wealth has always been near and dear to the American heart. On the other hand, America has also been the great hope for social justice through equality. Fairness, a level playing field, the idea that every person has value — these are principles sacred to the American Experiment. Both of these very different mythologies (or memes) claim the word “freedom” as part of what they represent, although the applied meanings don’t resonate similarly. Freedom to pursue headlong the dream of amassed wealth is not the same as freedom from unlawful search and seizure.

Over the two and a half centuries of America’s history as a nation, “freedom” is still the primary ideal, but two other conflicting mythologies — wealth and justice — have co-existed in the American psyche in an uneasy balance. Both are always on the playground, but they don’t play nicely together. People who fervently espouse one of the two mythologies are often willing to throw the other one under the bus. The balance waxes and wanes over time, with one mythology dominating the other for awhile. During the Great Depression, social justice took precedence over the pursuit of wealth. Over the past 40 years, however, wealth has clobbered justice and social equality. We live now in an oligarchy — government by the few — that amounts to a Plutocracy, a country run by and largely for the rich and privileged.

The reason I bring up this situation is because one answer to the question “*Where is Safety?*” is: **through Money**. Wealth can buy a considerable amount of safety. Not entirely or perfectly, of course. No matter how rich a person may be, Death awaits us all. That’s how Mother Nature has set up Life on this planet, and no amount of money can buy off Death. Money can, however, postpone Death and make Life in the interim much more pleasant.

For instance, if you’re a regular person (i.e., not rich or socially privileged), try making an appointment with your doctor (assuming you have one) that will be scheduled for a date sooner than two weeks out. You’re very lucky if you can, because the vast majority of regular people cannot. Despite obscene profits in the pharmaceutical industry, the institutions of medical care and treatment in this country are burdened heavily and stretched thin, just about to the breaking point. Even some of the well-off may have to wait for medical care, but it is clearly the wealthy who get the best treatment in a timely manner.

So yes, Virginia, money may not always allow one to buy happiness, but it can and frequently does enable the purchase of extra safety, whether a mere modicum or considerably more.

The problem with money as a means to safety is that so many of us don't have much. The overwhelming bulk of the world's economic wealth is controlled (i.e., "owned") by a relatively small percentage of the human population. Americans enjoy a larger slice of the global financial pie than most other nations, but — as I alluded above — America has become a society marked by an increasing chasm between the "haves" and the "have nots."

Even with sufficient money, there's the problem of real safety versus illusory safety. In modern consumer society, shopping has replaced hunting. Can people enhance comforting feelings of safety by buying things? Well, perhaps temporarily, but not permanently. Like hunger, desire can be satiated only for a little while before more yearnings arise, along with their gnawing emptiness. In addition, buying things doesn't always provide even momentary satisfaction. To a disturbingly large extent, the engines of commerce in modern life are fueled by false promises. Buy this product or acquire that device and you, too, can be as happy as the smiling, laughing actors in the ads. That's what advertising sells: fantasies and dreams of happiness. The implied promise is the hook, but the reality is elusive, and almost always fleeting.

All the major spiritual traditions warn against attachment to the physical and material realms, given that they are transient, unreliable, capricious, and subject to entropy. You can't take it with you, and you may not be able to keep it while you're here. In America, however, even spirituality has been co-opted. Over the past 40 years, religious movements focused on "prosperity evangelism" have arisen in both Christianity and New Age Metaphysics. I suppose that was inevitable, given who we are, but it strikes me as extremely dubious. The distinction between having enough and wanting everything is a very slippery slope.

So, let's move money aside in the discussion of how to achieve safety, since so many of us are and will be unable to buy security. What other means exist for the majority of Americans to find at least the sense of some safety?

One obvious direction is to re-focus and re-orient our drives and desires away from the acquisition of things and toward appreciation of people we love and life's simpler pleasures. For many people, that translates as biological family, which is the primary level of belonging in society and, indeed, life. Family, however, is a double-edged sword, sometimes offering a safe haven of love and care, but frequently imposing imprisonment in cruel torment. For all the media and commercial emphasis on the sentimental celebration of family, many people have fled their families of origin, and families created in adulthood through marriage and children have proven less than durable.

For those whose experience with relatives is mostly positive, family provides a refuge of safety from the slings and arrows of the world. For many others, friendship is a preferred choice. Neither solution works infallibly, and sometimes not at all, since human relationships are notoriously unpredictable. People come and go. Betrayals happen. Love and affection are wonderful when they work, and even better when they prove lasting, but painful when they don't work or don't last.

The upshot is that some people feel safer than others. In a world with more than seven billion human beings, both categories involve huge numbers of people. I'd hazard a guess that more people don't feel safe than do. While I'm happy for those who feel safe, my concern is for those who don't. (That includes me, by the way. I didn't worry much about safety when I was younger, but I do now.)

In a very real sense, the spiritual challenge of our times is learning to accept uncertainty and the absence of safety, yet still live well and fully by keeping our hearts open and our minds alert. Otherwise, we risk falling into despair, with all its accompanying travails — cynicism, hatred, and even violence. I have no prescription for successfully achieving acceptance of uncertainty and living with a lack of safety, except to remind everyone (me too) that we share this challenge with billions of other humans. That knowledge may not make our troubles vanish, but it's true. The fact is that we are both alone and together.