

Another Rant About Greed

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Yes, dear friends, this is another rant about greed. Why? Because it continues to be a major burr under my saddle — actually, more like a large porcupine than a small burr.

Why is it that corporations — major, minor, and middling — always choose greed? Sure, I assume that much of their public relations budget is spent on lip service to family, community, sharing, and the greater good. Just look at the ads on TV. Examples: Amazon is currently running a diversity-sensitive TV ad that showcases an Hispanic ex-warehouse worker who is now training to be a nurse. The ad highlights how Amazon helped this former employee (presumably with financial aid) to make his dream a reality. The point, of course, is to paint Amazon as a responsible social citizen, deeply concerned with individuals and the greater good. It's a lovely story, and it might even be true.

But it shows us only one side. Whenever push comes to shove in terms of governmental public policy, Amazon reverts to its inherent corporate selfishness and greed.

When has a major corporation ever said, *"We're happy to make a little less profit (or at least not lobby for more) in this particular instance of proposed legislation or public policy, because we feel that the overall good of society or humanity would be better served by directing resources elsewhere than into our coffers."* Nope, we never hear that. I mean, literally NEVER. These companies keep their K Street lobbyists busy 24/7.

Apparently, the people who run corporations believe that the "slippery slope" of generosity or (god forbid) self-sacrifice must be avoided at all costs and in every instance. Do that even *once* and you'll lose your place in the queue for getting advantage or goodies. This has been the stance of the gun lobby for years: Make even one tiny concession to anything but total self-interest, and the floodgates will open to ruin your business. Yeah, I know, the gun industry prattles on about "personal freedom," but that's really just for the rubes.

On sure, corporations will allocate some resources to maintain an acceptable social face through the propaganda of public relations, as in the Amazon TV ad cited above, but those costs are written off — literally, meaning that, one way

or another, the public ends up paying for them, just like the public pays for the roads, bridges, and all the other infrastructure that corporations count on and take full advantage of to make their money).

The upshot is that in any and every transaction that counts, corporations do everything possible — and I do mean *everything*, which sometimes includes legal theft, bribery, and corruption — to maximize benefits to themselves. That's the neoliberal creed. Screw the greater good; it will take care of itself.

I have close friends who say to me, "*Bill, you can rail at corporations and the culture of greed all you want, but it won't make a damned bit of difference. Greed is a fundamental and dominant part of human nature. That's how life has always been, how it is now, and how it will always be.*"

Au contraire. I have another close friend who is an anthropologist. She tells me that greed is a recent phenomenon and a relatively new development in human social evolution, essentially a perverse mutation. In her well-studied and carefully considered academic view, over the entire 200,000 years where humans lived in small kinship bands (as hunter-gatherer-forager-horticulturalist-fishermen-nomadic herders), *cooperation* was the rule rather than *competition*. The good of the group was preeminent because survival depended on it. Greed was discouraged, and those who acted too much out of selfishness were shamed or shunned. From that historical perspective, greed developed and gained acceptance only with the onset of civilization, which limits its reign to the past 12,000 years or so. So, for 95% of our species' existence, greed was not a given. Thus, there's no reason to presume that it's inevitable, nor that greed must or will be permanent.

I don't know which of my friends is correct, but I probably don't need to tell you which position I'm inclined to affirm.

I don't buy the assumption that human nature is immutable and permanent. And I don't care whether someone who does believe that judges human nature as wonderful or terrible. In fairness, though, I can't honestly say that people who believe human nature to be cast in stone are wrong. Hell, they may be right for all I know. What I must assert, however, is that I will oppose that view with all my might and do so to my dying breath.

I accept that our programming is hard to change. Once attitudes, beliefs, and behavioral routines are converted into repetitive neural pathways and become automatic, they're a bitch to alter even a little, much less get rid of. Like so many facets of our unconsciousness, habit is an incredible force for human beings, whether as momentum or inertia. Very little of what's been created and achieved would have been possible without habit. But that doesn't mean that routinized patterns can't be changed.

From where I sit, spirituality and inner work on oneself is about making the unconscious conscious in order to refine the dance of acceptance versus change. This involves becoming aware of whatever is potent in shaping our lives that we have not been aware of previously. By itself, however, awareness is not the answer. It's only a step in the process — a necessary step, but not the end goal.

Shoot, I'm not sure there is an end goal, since death will inevitably come to claim us and end our lives before we're finished working out acceptance and change. But that's OK.

Another factor I recognize is the extraordinary power of *groupthink* in affirming and spreading any assumption held by a sufficient number of people. Once "normalized" by group consensus, even the most outrageous belief can become not only acceptable, but popular, and even sacrosanct.

This is the age-old adolescent complaint — "*But Mom, everybody's doing it!*" to which the mother replies, "*Well, if everyone jumped off a cliff, would you jump off too?*" The hoped-for answer the mother wants to hear is "*No,*" but more frequently the correct answer to that not-so-hypothetical question is "*Yes, I would.*"

Like the apocryphal lemmings to the sea, a fair percentage of people would watch the other people ahead of them reaching the cliff and jumping off and then do so themselves. Some of the jumpers might feel doubts or even fears that jumping off the cliff might not be wise, but even so, when their turn came, they would jump anyway. Others would harbor no doubts at all and would jump willingly or even eagerly, trusting that jumping must be the right thing to do because so many others were doing it.

Such is the awesome power among human beings of conformity in belief and behavior to maintain a sense of social belonging through group identity. It takes more than mere courage to defy the pressure of group conformity. In addition to courage, resisting such social pressure requires an independent moral perspective, as well as a strong iconoclastic inclination to challenge authority. I don't wish to assert that some humans have none of those qualities — each of us has facets of character where willful independence operates. Still, it's clear as a bell that, in any particular situation, a majority of people will not buck the tide of obedience to collective belief.

What we have in America and pretty much throughout post-modern civilization is a culture of greed. Selfishness has been normalized and reigns supreme. This is so despite every kindergarten-age child being exposed to the admonition to share and be generous with others. Somehow that teaching is subtly labeled as irrelevant or conveyed in a way that fails to sink in or otherwise not be taken seriously.

Again, some people would insist that this is because greed and selfishness are much deeper and more primal in humans than sharing and generosity. I would counter that argument by suggesting that our patriarchal culture has come to associate selfishness with masculine strength and winning. Generous, kind people are sometimes praised, but more often considered losers. Competition is valued more highly than cooperation. Winners are seen as competitive.

What will it take to change all this, to allow us to better balance the positive masculine and feminine qualities of our species? Not just competition versus cooperation, but the entire diverse range of laudable features that characterize each gender? When I was young, I thought we were collectively headed in that direction, but it hasn't worked out. Every step we've taken toward gentleness, inclusion, empathy, and compassion has been countered by reactive, dark-side expressions of harshness, exclusion, indifference, and cruelty. Yes, the perverse dance between fear and love is ongoing, and it appears that fear still holds most of the cards.

I don't want to suggest that masculinity is fearful while femininity is loving. That's a false equivalence that has already gotten us into a lot of trouble. Each gender within our nature has expressions that can be fearful or loving. Over the 12,000 years of civilization, however, the expression of masculine fear has had more obvious and blunt impact than feminine fear. Masculine fear is selfish and often violent, while feminine fear is more subtly cold and rejecting.

If there is a simple "Ah-Ha!" to be had about greed, I think it's probably not that fear is stronger than love, but rather that fear is a more urgent motivator. Fear is knee-jerk and convulsive, while love requires time and breathing space. I don't find any great insight in that, but there we are. We tend not to open our hearts when we're frightened.

My conclusion is that we must be very, very frightened.