

## Neurotic Guilt vs. Existential Imbalance



I used to think that I would spend my professional career writing about the integration of psychotherapy and spirituality while concurrently trying to put it into practice. It seemed possible to shuttle between ivory tower, ashram and consulting room and to feel full. Protesting Vietnam was seen as a temporary digression, in response to a unique and urgent situation—sort of my generation's Hitler in need of being stopped. Now it seems that my illusion of being involved in work that is fairly separate from politics is going the way of all illusions. As I write this (some time after

having written this article) I realize that Alex Redmountain has been encouraging people to give up that illusion (along with others) as long as I have known him. Thanks, Alex.

I am still uncomfortable with my wealth after all these years. Many of these years have been spent in therapy aimed at learning to take good care of myself and to accept life's pains and blessings gracefully. But I hear those awful statistics about how I belong to the 2% of the world's population that uses 50% of its (increasingly limited) material resources, read how many children will die of starvation around the world in the time it takes me to eat my lunch, and walk downtown where I see homeless people huddled over heating grates to try to keep from freezing to death. As I sit here tapping away at my word processor in my well-heated office, the list expands endlessly in my head, and my discomfort grows.

The list evolves further, and I find myself ruminating over certain themes. Most salient among these is the way in which I feel crazed by the desire to acquire and hoard wealth. I call it "making a living" and "retirement planning" and I even have hired a guy to help me to do the latter part well, taking full advantage of every nuance and change in the tax laws. Doing it feels crazy and so does not doing it. I feel embarrassed when I see myself quietly pleased to note that a new patient's pain is powerful enough to guarantee a good chance of a solid connection with the therapy process and therefore a steady source of income for me for a while. So I am going to write this article in part to get myself to slow down and look at the process, ruminate a bit, and maybe make some sense of it.

My ruminations already have led to a theory of sorts. The theory holds that we are driven by a largely unconscious belief that we will be (or have been) abandoned by God (or the Universe, the Cosmos, Mother Nature, the Great Spirit, etc.). This in turn leads to a great fear—a sort of chronic panic

reaction—to which the seemingly natural response is the acquisition of power. The power in question is the power to control the deployment of physical and human resources (e.g., food, shelter, medical care) in such a way as to maximize the comfort and probability of survival of me and of those I love.

There are two models of how this power can be distributed: consensus and force. The consensual model can be an economic one, such as capitalism, in which rules of ownership allow certain persons to acquire great financial power. It can also be a political one, such as has been practiced in most modern communist states, in which power accrues to faithful party members who hold important political positions. Finally, a consensus-based system can also stem from a certain cosmology, such as a caste system or monarchy, so that power is accorded to certain persons due to the circumstances of their conception and birth. In the absence of consensus, power can also be distributed using the force model, as in a military dictatorship. In the real world, of course, many of these distinctions blur. Power based on consensual validation of the political hierarchy can also be supported by the force of the secret police, and a military dictatorship may also at times enjoy a certain consensual support of the populace.

By whatever means power is acquired and maintained, it seems to show a universal tendency to become more and more concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. This tendency is episodically interrupted by some sort of revolutionary upheaval and more equitable redistribution of power, only to have the cycle of concentration of power and redistribution repeat itself again, apparently endlessly. The cycle also seems to guarantee quite a good deal of suffering, both in the deprivation of those who have relatively little power during the concentration part of the cycle, and then in the bloodshed and/or turmoil during the revolution part of the cycle.

To make at least a gesture toward connecting with the designated theme of this essay, it should be noted that the suffering caused by the deprivation experienced by those with relatively little power is a major social issue for most of the industrialized world today. It is the source of the discomfort outlined at the beginning of this essay, and, as the theory would predict, it is getting worse.

The theory says more. In addition to being driven by a fear that God does not care about us, we also spend a good deal of our lives believing in the illusion of our essential separateness, one from another. It is this illusion that allows me to invest my IRA funds in a mutual fund which in turn holds stock in a company that makes me a handsome dividend while polluting someone else's environment, making munitions that will be used to kill and maim someone else's children, and exploiting minorities of which I am not a genetic member—with me all the while imagining that the suffering caused by all this activity does not touch me.

There are even a few more subtle twists to the theory. Consider a capital-

