

Beyond the Bottom Line

Hal Steger lives in a home worth over a million dollars and owes nothing on it. He has saved over two million dollars more. But every day he gets up at dawn, puts in twelve-hour days, and works ten more hours on the weekend. “I know people looking in from the outside will wonder why someone like me keeps working so hard,” he says. “But a few million doesn’t go as far as it used to.”

Gary Kremen, the 43-year-old founder of Match.com, has over ten million dollars, and he still puts in 80 hours a week because he feels he hasn’t saved enough. “You’re nobody here at ten million,” he says.

The *New York Times*, meanwhile, reports on a new urban luxury – high-end mattresses that go for as much as \$60,000. At that price, you might expect them to be stuffed with down from a golden goose, and in fact one maker does weave 22-karat gold into its mattresses, because “gold is a natural antimicrobial.” One customer explains, “What do you need in the city? I think you need a good bed. It’s so stressful here. The feeling of this bed is almost primal. You feel safe on this bed. You can’t forget this bed.”

Well, invention is the mother of necessity. You need a stressful job to afford sleep like that.

It seems many people are working longer hours for pleasures that are more and more expensive. Just when they think they’ve gotten somewhere, they find that their old furniture, their clothes, their vacation spots, the things they provide their children, aren’t good enough anymore.

Several young executives interviewed by the *Times* spoke of an exercise in futility. “I ask myself all the time why I do this,” says one, admitting that recently she and her husband have agreed to keep it up five more years for the sake of their bottom line. Another says, “Here, the top one percent chases the top one-tenth of one percent, and the top one-tenth of one percent chases the top one-one-hundredth of one percent. You try not to get caught up in it, but it’s hard not to.”

I suppose one might ask a lot of questions about such a life, none better than what the prophet Isaiah asked: *Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labor for that which does not satisfy?*

*

Pity the preacher. This is only my second Sunday and I have to talk with you about a difficult subject.

We’re not going to talk about a pledge campaign, though. Rather, we’re going to talk about what brings you joy, what makes you most alive, about happiness and blessedness.

These words of grace didn't cost me anything, and yet they may be the most valuable you'll hear all week:

Jesus said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Luke 12: 22-34

Let's not mislead ourselves into thinking that the people of his day already lived lives so austere that his suggestion had little force. No, they were probably a lot like us.

Although we commonly think of him as a peasant, Jesus moved among people of means – among the religious leaders, the local officials, the business people – perhaps because their spiritual needs were the keenest. These were otherwise self-sufficient people who had reached their limits; who hungered for joy, for blessings that would last.

They came to him with the same questions we do. *Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?* And when he gave them an answer, they said, *No, really, what do I have to do?*

Those who stayed with him, the ones who formed the early church, gave up their security, their hold on the world of the moment, for a bit of the kingdom; but I don't think they gave up their happiness. Far from it.

By all indications, they found more of it than they had ever known before. Letters and stories that survive from them radiate with calm and contentment. Here is Paul writing in Philippians: *I have learned to be content.* Here is the author of Hebrews: *Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you."*

If we want a taste of that happiness, that blessedness, then we might try doing without anxiety, and live generously.

Let's think of what God has given us, and give thanks, because it's all on loan to us, in much the same way that we would give a teenager a small allowance to see what she does with it.

The way of Jesus has always been counter-cultural. It offers sanity, grace that God gives freely, without price. We don't have to work for it – we just have to pass it on.

*

So let me say just a word about the theme of the day.

There's a lot of talk here every Fall about the budget. Forget about it. You shouldn't give to the church because it has a budget. It shouldn't even matter to your giving. That's between you and God, and the chance to give should be a delight, a joy – an opportunity to do what matters most to you. *To do what matters most.* As our longtime friend puts it, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

The only bottom line that counts is this: All that we have belongs to God, and one of the greatest joys in life is to share in God's generosity.

*

Not everybody has figured that out yet. In Manhattan, folks are lining up to pay \$250,000 for a parking space. Some of the buyers don't even own cars, but figure the property is a good investment.

You can spend \$100,000 or \$40,000 on a car and worry all the while about it getting the first ding. You can spend \$200 on a jacket and spill ketchup on it, or spend \$10 on a hamburger and wonder why you spent \$10 on a hamburger.

It's easy to become preoccupied with the things of life rather than the blessing of life itself.

It's so easy, in fact, that the habit remains even after our working years are over. As an ex-executive told the *New York Times*,

I have a 40 foot yacht that my wife says I love more than her. It's true. I worked very hard for my wealth, and was able to retire at 55 years old. Now I can enjoy the toys I buy for myself. I'm healthy, come from a lineage of long lived men, and can look forward to many, many hours, days, and years of self-indulgence.

Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also – indeed.

It's amazing how quickly the unimaginable becomes a must-have, how quickly the must-haves define a life. A stressful job supports luxuries, which cure and require the stressful job.

We can live that way if we want; God seems willing to allow any self-indulgence. But there's greater happiness beyond the bottom line.

Isn't that what we all want – happiness and blessedness? The best things are free and gracious, and the way to have them is to share them. As someone has said, and not in the *New York Times*, “I came that you should have life, and have it abundantly.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gary Rivlin. “In Silicon Valley, millionaires who don't feel rich.” *New York Times*, 5 August 2007

Penelope Green. “The money's in the mattress.” *New York Times*, 12 July 2007