

* V. Michelle Parry

Insufficient Excess

*"...The desire of power in excess,
caused the angels to fall;
the desire of knowledge in excess,
caused man to fall..."*

- Sir Francis Bacon -
(1561-1626)
Of Goodness & Goodness of Nature

Abraham Maslow began studying and writing about motivation in the 1940s. He used a triangle to classify his hierarchy of human needs that also demonstrated how each lower level need must be met before a human being is able to attempt to meet the next higher level of need. The lower level included physical needs like shelter, food and water, and above that safety, then love and belonging, and then esteem, with actualization being at the very tip-top. Maslow later described people at that top level as being problem-focused, appreciative of life, concerned for personal growth and able to have meaningful experiences. He eventually added another level above actualization for when people were able to connect with something beyond themselves and/or were able to help others to realize their potential: transcendence.

So, why is it that many of us feel our increased standard of living has not necessarily delivered us to an improved quality of life? One 'values theory' approach suggests that when the focus is on accumulating and protecting individual material wealth, less attention is given to strengthening communal bonds and relationships, resulting in psychological tension, which raises our stress level and reduces our sense of well-being. Of course, your answer will depend in large part on your value system.

Each of our value systems define for us what is important, what is right and good, how we should live and for what we should strive. For example, if you tend to concern yourself with building and maintaining strong positive relationships, then your value system will likely be one that reinforces social obligation, self-restraint and that also discourages indulgent behaviors. If you tend to concern yourself with extrinsic goals such as prestige and recognition, or attainment and expressions of wealth, then your value system is likely to be one that reinforces production, ownership, individual achievement and advancement.

How these value systems play out in our daily lives could go something like this: My spouse/parent/sibling/in-laws will understand that I am missing 'family night' because this contract/brief/presentation/report has to be perfect. Or instead: The project is in good shape and my team/boss/employees/client will understand that I can not work late because it is 'our family night'. Which is the more common scenario for you? Which is more acceptable? Do you feel that no matter what you do, someone is getting short-changed; either there is not enough time to do all the things that must be done or there is nothing left in you to be the person that you need to be?

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In his Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus* No. 36, Pope John Paul II (1920-2005) wrote: "... a great deal of educational and cultural work is urgently needed, including the education of consumers in the responsible use of their power of choice ... It is not wrong to want to live better; what is wrong is a style of life which is presumed to be better when it is directed towards "having" rather than "being," and which wants to have more, not in order to be more but in order to spend life in enjoyment as an end in itself. It is therefore necessary to create lifestyles in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices, savings and investments."

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810) wrote "A person needs great wisdom and understanding in order to prevent money from destroying all the days of his life." (Likkutei Moharan 23:5). He is said to have often discussed Exodus 23:5, which is translated: "If you see the donkey of the one who hates you collapsed under its load, you shall prevent yourself from passing him by; help, you shall surely help with him." Rabbi Nachman saw the donkey as the human body running after desires and whose deeds have brought dishonor. The spirit is immobilized because the body is weighted down and trapped by gross materialism. It cannot rise without help. It is in need of help twice over, *ah'zov ta'ah'zov*, assistance with the physical burden, and spiritual aid. He taught extensively about *tzedakah*, *teshuvah* and *tefilah* – righteousness, repentance and prayer, and also about Shabbat, with the idea being that time is needed to cease, to remember and to enthusiastically meet the spiritual.

Sura Sad of Al Qur'an Al Karim (38:30 through 38:54) speaks of two devoted men, Solomon (Sulayman) and Job (Ayyub). Both men were tested, one by having it all and the other by losing everything he had. Solomon owned many beautiful horses, and one day he forgot to pray because he was admiring them. As the sun set he realized how he had put himself in jeopardy, so he sent them away and asked forgiveness. In comparison, Job did not waiver, even when his cattle were destroyed, his servants killed, his roof fell in, his health was lost and his friends and family abandoned him. His story is further told in Sura Al-Anbiyya (The Prophets, 21:83-84), Sura Al-Nisa (The Women, 4:163) and Sura al-An'am (The Cattle, 6:84).

If you think all these ideas are not within our reach, consider that Maslow noted that self-actualized people can still be 'boring, stubborn, irritating and equipped with silly wasteful thoughtless habits'. Further, that his initial inspiration was an article he read in "American Naturalist" when he was 27 years old. It described a study that was conducted with barnyard chickens. The chickens were allowed to choose their diets from a variety of food sources; some containing more nutrition than others. The chickens that consistently chose well grew strong and healthy. The chickens that chose poorly were sickly and scrawny. When the scrawny chickens were confined to the foods selected by the healthy chickens, they too grew stronger and healthier. When the restrictions were removed, they returned to their previous behavior.

"The hardest arithmetic to master is that which enables us to count our blessings."
Eric Hoffer (1902-1983)