

Along the track

Being Enriched

The Roman philosopher, Seneca is reported to have said that if you want to enrich someone, don't multiply their belongings but subtract from their desires.

Perhaps that's not as easy as it sounds.

In 1993, US federal securities regulators forced companies to publish the compensation and fringe benefits of their top executives in an attempt to curtail spiralling salaries, according to Duke University professor of psychology, Dan Ariely, in his book *Predictably Irrational*.

"The idea was once pay was in the open, boards would be reluctant to give executives outrageous salaries and benefits," writes Ariely, noting that in 1976 the average CEO was paid 30 times the income of the average worker. In 1993, CEOs earned 131 times the average.

"Once salaries became public information, however, the media regularly ran special stories ranking CEOs by pay. Rather than suppressing the executive perks, the publicity had CEOs in America comparing their pay with that of everyone else. In response, executive salaries skyrocketed." The average CEO in the US now makes more than 370 times the average worker.

Extraordinary, isn't it. And I wonder whether they are any happier or have they just loaded themselves with another set of problems. I wonder why we feel such a need to compare ourselves to others, especially those we perceive to be more fortunate. Is that the reason why the tenth commandment warns us against this?

You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbour's."

Covet is an interesting word, not one we use much today. It is more than just envy, although envy is part of it. It is stronger than just yearning for something – it means we crave it. And in general terms, some people will do almost anything to get what they crave for!

We can load ourselves up with a lot of 'stuff', things we think are signs of success, status symbols, things we think will increase our happiness. Most of it, we don't need. The link between what we earn and the degree of happiness it affords is pretty weak. Other things bring much more happiness to our lives, usually the simplest things that we often take for granted.

Seneca suggests we subtract from our desires. So did Jesus. He said "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal..... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Mt 6 19-21

Deciding where our treasure is, what the things are that we love, that mean so much to us, that we treasure can lead to some real soul searching. Sometimes we have to make hard choices. For example, Ariely suggests that, in order for us to maintain happiness 'we need to monitor the circles we socialise in. If someone is constantly boasting about their massive income or sticking it in your face, reduce your circle. Cut 'em out!' Is that what Jesus meant when he said that... "If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell (Mt 5 29-30). I don't think he meant that literally but sometimes we have to make some pretty hard choices.

Coveting is not just about wanting to amass more and more possessions but, we become greedy - we want everything, every experience, everything the other person has and more – more friends, more possessions, a higher position. And we want what 'they' have! We can become dissatisfied with our own lives and we begin to resent others' achievements, success, good looks, intelligence, athletic abilities, health, friends, family background... well, just about anything really. That can lead us to try to bring them down, to put them in their place – a story here, a negative comment there, a bit of gossip to spread and so on. Comparison can lead to a lot of unhappiness. I have been in workplaces where that happens.

Where does your heart lie, where are your treasures? Some time to reflect on questions like these may help identify them:

- What are five essential values we want our children to embrace above all others?
- What are the five things you are most thankful for in your life right now? What are some of the things you do to show this thankfulness?
- What is an accomplishment you feel most proud of?
- Your biggest goal in life?
- Before you die, what would you like to have accomplished?
- What fears do you wrestle with the most?
- What movie or television program have you seen in the last year that you wish all your friends could see?
- If you didn't have to worry about making a living, what would you most like to do for the rest of your life?

There are lots of other questions we might ask ourselves but mostly we want to find the things that really enrich our lives, rather than those things which just satisfy our desires.

Regards
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