

5,000 Shoes

When the Philippines' long-time dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, was overthrown in 1986, rebel authorities seized all government and personal property while Marcos and his wife fled the country. Among Imelda Marcos' things were 2,700 pairs, or over 5,000 individual shoes.

Five thousand shoes: enough to have worn a different pair once, every day, including Sundays, for over seven years.

Imelda didn't need this many shoes. Yet, she indulged in her pursuit of shoes without conscience or restraint. She was oblivious to the consequences of her and her husband's conspicuous and unlimited consumption of wealth as rulers in the midst of a country of poor people.

What was it that drove Imelda Marcos, and that drives heirs to pursue more and more of what they do not need, even when their behavior is destructive to family relationships and ultimately destructive to their own self-interests?

A key element of inheritance disputes is the quest of children for validation of their parents' love.

Love doesn't come in a bushel or bag, and cannot be accurately measured or weighed. We find it in the words and actions of our loved ones and often attach it to quantifiable things like money and personal possessions.

It is not surprising, then, that at death we measure our parent's love by how much we inherit. To vigorously pursue our parents' stuff, especially to the exclusion of our siblings, is related to the familiar concept of "greed."

"Greed" has been called by different names (avarice, envy, jealousy, "filargyria") and has been written about since ancient times. The root of the word comes from the Germanic and then Old English form "gredig," meaning "hunger." To be "greedy" is defined in the American Heritage Dictionary as being "excessively desirous of acquiring or possessing, especially wishing to possess more than what one needs or deserves."

The philosopher and theologian St. Augustine of Hippo wrote during the

Middle Ages that "avarice," or "wanting more than is enough," is the "root of all evils," and recognized that the reach of avarice went beyond money to "all things which are desired immoderately, whenever someone wants absolutely more than is enough."

Psychologically, greed has its roots in the infant's instinctual need to consume and retain. Social biologists view the urge as part of our hard wiring. As humans, we survived by virtue of our success at securing for our selves those things necessary for survival, and therefore evolved genetically to be selfish. Those that failed to provide for their individual needs perished.

Greed also emanates from real or imagined scarcity. Unmet needs lead to a sense of being deprived, which in infants is overwhelming. Any parent can identify with the screams of hungry, wet, or frightened infants.

Deprived infants develop a personali-



Imelda Marcos

ty orientation which includes the element of excessive hunger, or greed. The hunger of the infant is never forgotten. Instead, it matures and grows in the psyche of the adult and is often accompanied by a sense of self-justification and entitlement.

The development of the greedy urge begins before we even learn to talk and to varying degrees is retained throughout life. Greed is virtually never seen or understood by its owner.

Although it is the motivation and source of a complex array of motivations and behaviors, the greedy actor is likely to be completely blind to the fact that he is acting out of greed. Instead, the greedy personality believes that his actions are justified and the more he has the safer and happier he will be. Projecting his greed on to others, the greedy person doesn't see himself as greedy, he thinks everybody is.

Adult greed is destructive both to the individual and to society. As greed becomes chronic, the greedy person is willing to suspend prudence, thoughtfulness, and good judgment, all in an effort to get more.

The story of Michael Milken is a very good example how greed can trump thinking. Milken pioneered high-risk investment junk bonds, and employed the strategy to finance the takeover of major corporations. Yet, he persisted even when it was clear he was extending himself too far. His actions would later be described as the epitome of

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"Wall Street greed."

His business practices and unremitting pursuit of more deals long after he had amassed riches beyond the dreams let to 98 criminal counts of racketeering and securities fraud. As anyone who read the business page or watched television news in the late eighties knows, Milken pled guilty to his crimes and was sentenced to ten years in prison.

The stories of Michael Milken and Imelda Marcos are newsworthy because of their incredible wealth. We wonder how they could have wanted



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more when they couldn't possibly spend everything they already had! Their stories, as well as many others like them (Martha Stewart and Al Taubman to name a few) underscore the fact that greed isn't rational or reality based.

Milken's acts are the same in substance, though larger in scale, as the countless acts of overreaching in family inheritance contests.

Greed, a form of hunger, is one of many factors underlying and motivating such disputes. It represents the lingering primal urge to satisfy long-ago perceived needs of the combatants including competition for recognition and validation in the eyes of the now deceased.

We ask the same questions about families who fight over inheritance. We wonder why they fight over things they don't need and why they try to cheat their brother or sister out of their rightful share.

You needn't ask them; they don't know. They fight like children in a sandbox without understanding why. They can't see their own greed. But if you have the time, they are happy to tell you in embarrassing detail about how their brother is a greedy so and so.

The truth is that we are all capable of greed; even the rich and famous. Greed is part of our genetic code; it won't be going anywhere soon. Nonetheless, we must all be vigilant to monitor our emotional urges and be understanding of the human frailties of others.

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