Excess Without Happiness

No one, at least no one who claims to be leading a rational life, pursues wealth simply to become more wealthy. As individuals, and as societies, we treat wealth as a means to an end. We strive to become more productive, to create more wealth, only because we believe that wealth, at some level, can improve our lot in life, can make us, in a word, happier. Are we fooling ourselves? Can wealth actually bring happiness? And if wealth can bring happiness, does that mean that still more wealth will bring still more happiness, that those individuals who accumulate the most wealth will be the happiest of all?

Various thinkers, both grand and grinning, have pondered these questions down through the centuries. They seem to agree, more or less, on the basics: No amount of wealth can ever guarantee happiness. In all things, including wealth, moderation.

"Many very rich men are unhappy," as the ancient Greek historian Herodotus intoned, "and many in moderate circumstances are fortunate."[1]

"It's pretty hard to tell what does bring happiness," quipped Frank McKinney Hubbard, the early twentieth century Indiana humorist, over two millennia later, "poverty and wealth have both failed."[2]

Few of us today would quibble with either Herodotus or Hubbard. We generally look askance at people who turn their lives into a single-minded race after riches. In one 1996 Gallup poll, 80 percent of us said flatly we would not sacrifice significant family time to become rich.[3] Four years later, in another national survey, that same share of us, 80 percent, "expressed fears" that wealth might turn us "into greedy people."[4]

Do these attitudes mean that Americans don't want to become wealthy? Not exactly. In fact, not at all. In 2000, in the same poll that found people fearful about wealth, two-thirds of us said we "would like to give wealth a shot."[5] An earlier national survey, conducted in 1994 for *Worth* magazine, uncovered remarkably similar attitudes. Half of all Americans, *Worth* found, agreed wholeheartedly that "money can't buy happiness." Yet at the same time, almost 70 percent of Americans also felt "that doubling their earnings would make them a lot or somewhat happier."[6]

These sorts of conflicted attitudes fascinate social scientists. Some of them have spent years digging at the roots of these attitudes. They've explored,

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through surveys and interviews, observations and experiments, the possible ties between wealth and what psychologists call "subjective well-being," what the rest of us call happiness. The results from their research, interestingly, both confirm and reject a link between wealth and what makes and keeps us happy. Increases in income, the research makes clear, definitely do make people significantly happier — when these increases lift people out of deprivation. But once people have escaped deprivation, researchers have concluded, additional increases in income don't appear to make people any happier. The world's richest nations do not necessarily boast the world's happiest people.

"One of the central findings in the large scientific literature on subjective well-being," notes Cornell University economist Robert Frank, "is that once income levels surpass a minimal absolute threshold, average satisfaction levels within a given country tend to be highly stable over time, even in the face of significant economic growth."[7]

So does money not really matter to happiness, except when people need more of it to hurdle out of poverty? Things aren't that simple. People in rich nations may not be happier, on average, than people in nations that aren't as rich, but, within individual societies, money *does* matter. Affluent people, in every society, are happier, as a group, than their not-as-affluent neighbors. Not everyone making $200,000, of course, is happier than everyone making $20,000. Six-figure incomes do not, by themselves, turn sour cynics into smiling romantics. But six-figure incomes do make a difference. Someone with a sour disposition and a $200,000 annual income will almost always be happier than someone with that same sour temperament who takes home just $20,000.

We seem to have a bit of a contradiction here. On the one hand, according to the best statistical evidence, people in richer nations are, on average, no happier than people in nations that cannot claim quite as much wealth. On the other hand, *within* nations, richer people are, on average, happier than everybody else. How can this be? How can income differences *within* nations make a difference in how happy people feel when income differences *between* nations don't? Is there a logical explanation for this distinction? Indeed there is. Our friend context. In the lives we lead, money doesn't make us happy. Context does.

Imagine yourself a traveler. What do you need to be happy? A comfortable seat? Sounds reasonable. How can you be a happy traveler, after all, if you're crowded for hours in a tight, severely cramped space? Actually, you *can* be a happy traveler in a tight, cramped space. In fact, you can be a happy traveler in a tight, cramped space even if you're soaked and shivering. You wouldn't mind one bit that cramp and damp if you had been shipwrecked and just spent an hour treading water. You would be happy beyond belief to find any space at all, no matter how tight, in a lifeboat. You would shiver and smile.

Now imagine yourself flying high above those chilly waters, sitting comfortably in a airline aisle seat. You have plenty of room to stretch out. No one is sitting next to you, or in front of you or behind. Sitting in your infinite comfort, you strike up a conversation with the passenger across the aisle. He seems even happier than you are. You ask him why. You learn that he had found a fantastic deal on his ticket. He paid one-third of what you paid. Suddenly, despite your comfort, you don't feel happy at all. Context.

Are we happy? This simple question almost always begs another: Compared to what? We define our happiness by our position. And we define our position by comparing ourselves to others — or to ourselves, at an earlier stage in our lives.

Researchers have repeatedly documented the importance of this comparative dynamic. In one famous study, psychologists asked different groups of people to assess how happy they feel about themselves. One group was surveyed with a disabled person present in the room, the other group without a disabled person present. The people surveyed in the presence of a disabled person always turned out to feel happier about their own lives than the people quizzed in a room without a disabled person present.[8] Context.

This same comparative dynamic drives how we feel about our economic fortunes. If we grew up under a leaky roof, with rats underfoot, any clean apartment, even a tiny clean apartment, will make us happy. But if we grew up in a tiny clean apartment, worked hard all our lives, and still found ourselves unable to afford one of the roomier homes we see all around us, we are not likely to feel particularly content in our tiny clean apartment.

"The happiness that people derive from consumption," as researcher Alan Durning notes, "is based on whether they consume more than their neighbors and more than they did in the past."[9]

And that's why differences in wealth *within* nations make a difference in how happy people feel, why, as economist Robert Frank notes, the "upper classes in any society are more satisfied with their lives than the lower classes are, but they are no more satisfied than the upper classes of much poorer countries."[10] We compare ourselves to the people around us, the people whose lives we see and hear about every day. We don't normally compare ourselves to people from foreign lands, or to people from bygone days, because we don't experience their lives as part of our own daily lives.

All this suggests a possible economic formula for happiness: If most people in a society can sit back, think about their personal situation and conclude that they're doing significantly better than they used to be doing, and if most people can look around their society and conclude that they're doing just fine compared to most everybody else, then you have the makings of a generally happy society.

At the end of the twentieth century, the wealthiest nation in the world, the United States, did not fit this profile. Average Americans, as the new century dawned, were not sitting back and contentedly contemplating how nicely their personal fortunes had improved. They were, instead, struggling to maintain their economic status quo. Nor were average Americans feeling good about themselves compared to other people around them. Everywhere they looked, at century's end, average Americans could see signs that some Americans — affluent Americans — were doing incredibly better than they were.

America, in short, did not have the makings of a happy society.

Did the absence of these makings actually lead to an unhappier America? Over the final decades of the twentieth century, social scientists carefully tabulated the answers Americans gave, year by year, to the old chestnuts of happiness research, questions like "Taken all together, how would you say things are these days — would you say that you are happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?" and "How do you feel about your life as a whole?" These queries, acknowledges Yale political scientist Robert Lane, make for "imperfect measures," but they do help us determine whether a society's level of subjective well-being is undergoing any significant change.[11]

In the 1980s and 1990s, the level of subjective well-being in the United States did undergo a significant change. That level dropped.

Should this drop concern us? Or should we consider rising unhappiness an inevitable consequence of modern life? The hectic pace of Information Age life, some might argue, may simply dispose people to be less happy. An interesting conjecture, but if modernity were making people less happy, social scientists would be finding significant declines in subjective well-being in both Western Europe and the United States. They are not. Researchers have found, Yale's Robert Lane notes, that "the decline in happiness is largely an American phenomenon."[12]

"Something has gone wrong," Lane concludes. The United States is simply "not as happy as it is rich."[13]

HULA HOOPS GENERATED PLENTY OF SMILES in the 1950s. And so did Milton Berle. But clever toys and antic comics weren't why most Americans were feeling good about their lives in the decades right after World War II. In these postwar years, unlike the end of the twentieth century, Americans were feeling good because the United States fit the happiness profile. Average Americans were doing better, significantly better, than they had ever done before. And average Americans also seemed to be doing just as well as everybody else. Most people seemed to be living remarkably similar lives. A couple kids, a home in the suburbs, a car by the curb.

Every evening, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, these kids, these homes, these cars would flash across America's TV screens. The television families that Americans followed, from the Andersons on *Father Knows Best* to the Cleavers on *Leave It to Beaver*, lived lives that most Americans either led — or could see themselves leading. In America's postwar decades, the "good life" meant a modest, comfortable life, and most Americans could afford all the basic comforts.

That would all change, drastically, in the 1980s and 1990s. With more wealth concentrating at the top of America's economic ladder, luxuries, not basic comforts, would come to define the good life. Fancy watches. Expensive cars. Vacation homes. Most Americans could see this new good life all around them, but they could only ogle. This good life they could not afford.

But why should that, cheerleaders for the new America wondered throughout the boom years, make any difference to the happiness people feel?

"If you drive a Mercedes and I have to walk, that's a radical difference in lifestyle," argued Dinesh D'Souza. "But is it a big deal if you drive a Mercedes and I drive a Hyundai?"[14]

That difference, in fact, is a "big deal." A monstrously big deal. Luxury impacts everyone, even those who don't want to be impacted.

In the 1990s, reporter Peter Delevett counted himself one of those who didn't give one whit about luxury. In Silicon Valley, at the height of the dot.com wealth-amassing frenzy, he drove a plain car. He had always driven a plain car. But that plain car, and his modest lifestyle, would come to seem painfully inadequate in the boom years.

"As time went on, I began to feel, well, self-conscious pulling up to cover millionaire-packed dinner parties in my practical little Toyota Tercel," remembers Delevett. "We bought a red convertible. Silicon Valley, circa 1999, made you covet."[15]

Middle class Americans, at century's end, didn't need to sit at fancy dinner parties to feel compelled to covet. The explosion of wealth at the top of America's economic ladder had scattered this covetousness — what economist Robert Frank calls "luxury fever" — almost everywhere in American life.[16] In the twentieth century's final years, "super-spending by the super-rich" essentially raised the price of admission to the good life.[17]

Affluent Americans, those households that made up the topmost 20 percent of the income distribution, could meet this price, at least occasionally. The vast majority of American families could not. In a starkly unequal United States, Americans of modest means found themselves comparing the quality of their lives to the lives led by people of considerably more ample means, and, against that standard, their lives simply didn't measure up.

But haven't Americans always measured their lives against the lives led by more affluent people? Haven't Americans always tried to "keep up with the Joneses"? Most certainly. So what was so different, so happiness deflating, about the 1980s and 1990s? The difference would be the extent of inequality that emerged over the course of these years, the significantly larger gap that opened between affluent Americans and everybody else.

In every society, in every age, people compare themselves to others around them. These others make up what researchers call a "reference group." If people feel they're doing well compared to their reference group, they're likely to feel good about their lives, happy in their circumstances. In the years right after World War II, average Americans typically found their reference group in their neighborhoods — and the idealized version of those neighborhoods they watched on TV. With this reference group, average Americans could keep up.

They might not make as much as the Andersons on *Father Knows Best*, but they didn't fall that far short. The affluent lived within hailing distance.

By century's end, after two decades of increasing inequality, America's affluent no longer lived within economic hailing distance of average families. The distance between the average and the affluent had substantially widened.[18] Television still brought us into the comfortable lives of affluent people. But the comforts of these affluent households had become luxuries most American families would never be able to easily afford.

"TV mainly shows people in the top 20 percent of the income distribution," Harvard economist Juliet Schor would note late in the 1990s. "A family that is supposed to be an ordinary middle-class family on TV has a six-figure lifestyle. That has had a profound impact on our sense of what normal spending is."[19]

How profound? In the mid 1990s, research conducted by Schor among employees at a major American corporation found that "each additional hour of television watched in a week" ups a viewer's annual consumer spending by an additional $208.[20] Watching affluent people in affluent settings, Schor concluded, inflates "the viewer's perceptions of what others have, and by extension what is worth acquiring — what one must have in order to avoid being 'out of it.'"[21]

These televised images of affluence would be reinforced by real life — as experienced in America's workplaces. In the late twentieth century, the workplace would come to replace the neighborhood as America's middle class reference standard, mainly because many millions of American women had begun working outside the home. In 1980, less than half America's moms worked for paychecks. By 2000, two out of three moms were stepping outside their neighborhoods for work.[22]

Neighborhoods, Juliet Schor notes, generally bring together households of comparable incomes. If you compare yourself to your neighbors down the street, as Americans typically did back in the 1950s and 1960s, you're comparing yourself to people with incomes not likely to be much different from your own. Workplaces, by contrast, bring together people of significantly different income levels, particularly when workplaces are offices. In the 1980s and 1990s, Americans of modest means spent their days in these mixed-income workplaces. They encountered, week after week, "the spending habits of people across a wider economic spectrum" than they had ever encountered before.[23] They sat in meetings with people who wore "expensive suits or 'real' Swiss watches." They could see, up close, just how much the affluent own and just how well the affluent live. And they couldn't match that affluent lifestyle, not even come close, especially in places where riches were rapidly concentrating. Places like South Florida.

"It's very difficult not to look down at your shoes and sigh," noted one South Florida sociologist, Lynn Appleton, in a 2001 interview. "You see car after car after car that costs more than your yearly income." The Joneses, added

Appleton, who taught at a university in Boca Raton, never "used to be so hard to keep up with."[24]

Wealth in the United States had become, in effect, not just more concentrated, but more visible. The inevitable result: a general ratcheting up of the sense of what it takes to live a decent life. One research project, in the boom years, asked people to estimate how much money they needed to fulfull their dreams. Between 1986 and 1994, that estimate doubled. Desires, as Juliet Schor pointed out, had clearly outrun incomes.[25]

"In order to be middle class as our culture is coming to understand the term," concluded author Barbara Ehrenreich in 1997, "one almost has to be rich."[26]

IN THE QUEST TO BECOME "ALMOST RICH," Americans, as we have seen earlier, are now devoting more of their waking hours to work than people anywhere else in the developed world. We typically accept this national workaholism as simply a natural, inevitable "fact of life." But these long hours are no natural phenomenon. They represent an enormous change in the rhythms of everyday American life. A half-century ago, Americans spent far fewer hours at work, so many fewer that some observers, back in the 1950s, actually worried about a national "leisure crisis." Work-free weekends. Nine-to-five jobs. Pensioned retirements. Would average Americans, commentators asked, become bored with all the time they had on the hands?[27]

By the 1990s, no one was worrying any more about excess leisure. In 1997, married couples with one or two kids were spending over six hundred more hours on the job — the equivalent of over fifteen forty-hour weeks — than they spent on the job in 1979.[28]

The American dream wasn't supposed to work this way. Progress in the United States was supposed to bring more leisure, more time for family, more time for fun. And progress *had* brought more leisure, before the final decades of the twentieth century. Americans in the 1960s spent considerably fewer hours on the job than Americans in the 1910s. But leisure time stopped expanding in the late 1960s and then started shrinking, a turnaround that went largely unnoticed, by press and public, until Juliet Schor's eye-opening 1991 book, *The Overworked American*. By the 1990s, as Schor detailed, almost a third of men with kids under fourteen were working fifty or more hours a week. Employed mothers in one big city, Boston, were *averaging* over eighty hours of work a week on housework, child care, and employment. Between 1973 and the late 1980s, poll data indicated, the typical American's "free time" had dropped 40 percent.[29]

American families, Schor argued, had become trapped in "an insidious cycle of 'work-and-spend.'"[30] To afford America's ever-inflating middle class lifestyle, Americans were spending ever more hours at work.[31]

"Clearly, middle-income families in America have acquired more possessions than their parents and grandparents had," *New York Times* reporter Louis

Uchitelle would note in 1999. "But the middle-class comforts of an earlier day were accessible to families with just one earner; today, middle-income families find that they must combine at least two incomes, and often three, in pursuit of a life style that seems always out of reach."[32]

How out of reach? In one 1998 Marist College survey, 63 percent of Americans told pollsters they had difficulty paying monthly bills. A poll conducted later that same year by Peter Hart Research found that 67 percent of Americans felt their earnings weren't enough to keep up with the cost of living.[33]

Americans kept up anyway, as we have seen, by going into debt. On average, by midway through the 1990s, credit card holders were paying $1,000 a year in interest and fees.[34] In 1996, for the first time ever, over a million Americans filed for personal bankruptcy.[35]

"These are the people I'm seeing in bankruptcy court," one bankruptcy judge noted that year. "The guy loses his job and finds another one. It's a dead-end job, but at least it pays the mortgage. He gets depressed with his life and finds himself lured by the ads touting 'pay no interest for a year,' and so he buys a big screen TV and a satellite dish. He loses his job again and can't pay for the luxuries he's charged. Interest charges cause the balance to skyrocket. He finds another job and the cycle repeats. Eventually he finds himself with one option — to file for personal bankruptcy. I can't fault him."[36]

Most American families, of course, would not go bankrupt in the boom years. But they wouldn't become happier either. The game of life, more and more Americans had come to feel, was rigged against them. No matter how many hours they worked, no matter how much debt they risked, they could not "make it" to the bar that defined the good life. That bar kept rising. The affluent saw to that. These affluent, in an increasingly unequal America, could always afford to ratchet their consumption up to another level. And they did, to keep their distance from the mere middle class. By century's end, reporters were chronicling a product-by-product consumption spiral that seemed destined to never end.

"One year, a wealthy person's kitchen must have a $3,800 Sub-Zero refrigerator hidden discreetly behind wood paneling," journalist Richard Connif noted. "The next year, Sub-Zeros become 'middle-class,' and the better kitchens tend to have $30,000 Traulsens."[37]

Granite countertops, added reporter Margaret Webb Pressler, had for years defined the truly classy kitchen. But then tract-house developers "began offering granite as an upgrade, enabling the merely comfortable to buy in." The rich "moved on," to countertops fabricated from poured concrete.[38]

"And when those become too widely dispersed among the middle class," Pressler predicted, "the rich will rip apart their kitchens and start over again, continuing the lavish cycle."

The comfortably affluent could afford to laugh about this rising consumption pressure.

"I've learned that Abraham Maslow got it wrong," one analyst joked. "The eminent psychologist thought that once we satisfied our basic need for food, clothing and shelter, we would seek a higher happiness through art, human fellowship and the life of the mind. Spiritual transcendence would be the ultimate payoff of prosperity. But it hasn't worked out that way. Instead, everyone would rather go shopping."[39]

But not everyone could afford to chortle. For the millions of Americans "just struggling to get by," Juliet Schor noted, the game wasn't just rigged. The game was brutalizing. People, Schor explained, "are suffering tremendously because this is a system that says to be somebody, you have to wear these shoes and drive this car and live in this house."[40] In an unequal America, those who could not afford to accumulate ever more and better things would not find much happiness.

Neither, sadly, would those who could afford things aplenty.

WHY DO WE PUT SO MUCH FAITH in the power of "stuff' to make us happy? We believe that the things we buy can make us happy for a perfectly understandable reason. Things sometimes *can* make us happy, and almost all of us have experienced, at some point in our lives, the happiness that things can bring.

But not all things are equal. Only *some* things can bring us happiness, things that serve a real function and fill a real void in our lives.

Consider, economist Robert Frank suggests, the situation of a struggling, low-income grad student with a washing machine on its last legs. Laundry is one aggravation after another. The student, unfortunately, can't afford a new washer or even a servicing visit. He searches instead for replacement parts, wasting the better part of two weekends in the process. In the end, the student's do-it-himself repairs break down.

Would this student have been happier if he had been able to afford a new washer? Of course. A new washer would have filled a real need.[41]

Things that serve real needs can significantly enhance our subjective well-being. A working washing machine makes us happier not so much because other people have washers but because, outfitted with a working washer, our lives will be easier. By the same token, in a neighborhood ill-served by public transportation, a car can bring happiness. We need reliable transportation.

People in poverty typically can't afford enough of the things they need to function successfully in the society that surrounds them. That's why increases in income, for people in deprivation, can significantly enhance well-being. Added income enables people in poverty to purchase the things that serve basic unmet needs.

On the other hand, for people who live comfortably above the poverty level, most purchases do not involve the meeting of previously unmet needs. The purchases most of us make, most of the time, either replace or supplement something we already own. We trade in an adequately functioning old car for a brand new one. Our ability to move ourselves from place to place is not enhanced. We add another topcoat to our closet. We have not enhanced our ability to stay warm in the winter.

The brand-new car, the extra topcoat, to be sure, do bring pleasure. But this pleasure soon fades, as quickly as the aroma from a new car's upholstery. New cars and topcoats have introduced no new functional value to our lives. They fill no lasting need. They give us no lasting pleasure. We quickly adapt to their newness. And the more affluent we are, the more often we can afford to buy a new car or a new coat, the smaller the pleasure we take from each new purchase. Newness, by itself, no longer gives us much of a thrill when we experience newness all the time.

Eventually, to get any thrill at all, the affluent must go beyond the new. To keep themselves satisfied, they need not just another new car, but a BMW, not just a new coat, but an ermine. They cycle endlessly through ever more costly exotics, pushing ever harder for a satisfaction that always seem to elude them. They are trapped, the psychologists tell us, on a treadmill, a "hedonic treadmill" where "the pleasures of a new acquisition are quickly forgotten."[42] Like addicts, they crave new fixes. And each new fix only accelerates the treadmill — for everyone. Formica, granite, poured concrete. The wealthier the wealthy, the faster the treadmill.

The faster the treadmill, the less the satisfaction.

In 1975, at the depths of America's worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, nearly three quarters of the American people, 74 percent, were still able to agree that "our family income is high enough to satisfy all our important desires." By 1999, after nearly two decades of the most robust economic expansion in American history, the share of Americans who felt they could satisfy their most basic desires had actually dropped, to 61 percent.[43]

OUR PURCHASES, WE HAVE NOTED, can sometimes make us happy. But the accumulation of more purchases, once we have met our basic functional needs, doesn't make us happier. What does? Many Americans, after all, still walk around smiling, despite America's ever faster treadmill. What's their secret? Are these smiling people drugged? Have they discovered some secret path to happiness?

Some of these smilers, of course, may be drugged. But the addict's high never lasts. Nor do any of the other highs, financial or sexual, promised by the happiness hucksters who cram spam into our e-mail in-boxes. In the end, suggests political scientist Robert Lane, only one aspect of life always delivers satisfaction over the long haul. And that aspect is companionship, the solidarity and fellowship of family and friends.[44] From webs of companionship, or community, adds sociologist Amitai Etzioni, we take "profound contentment."[45]

Authentic companionship and community cannot be bought. They must be nurtured, by an ongoing stream of interpersonal interactions. A shared meal. A neighborhood struggle to get a new stop sign. An evening spent volunteering. A good laugh watching a ballgame with friends. Over time, enough such interactions "bind people together and strengthen the places they live." They create what Harvard's Robert Putnam calls "social capital."[46] They foster happiness.

In 2001, Putnam released a massive national study that documented just how powerful a difference community and companionship can make. To complete this study, researchers had surveyed over twenty-six thousand people in forty communities and interviewed three thousand other Americans selected from a random national sample. People who live amid high concentrations of social capital, the researchers found, live happier lives than residents of financially wealthier communities that sport less in the way of social capital. Putnam's conclusion: Social capital, "much more so than financial status," makes for "a very strong predictor of individual happiness."[47]

Yale political scientist Robert Lane, in his research, had reached much the same conclusion the year before. Commodities, Lane noted, "are poor substitutes for friends."[48]

That sounds right, most Americans would no doubt agree. But who has time, they might add, for friends — or family or community? And therein lies the ultimate irony of our times. To be able to afford the good life, and the happiness we feel sure the good life must bring, we devote ever larger chunks of our lives to making as much money as we can. In the process, we end up with less time for the things that really do make us happy.

Less time for friends. On a typical day in 1965, Robert Putnam notes, about two-thirds of Americans, 65 percent, spent at least some time informally socializing. Thirty years later, in 1995, only 39 percent of Americans devoted any time to socializing on a typical day.[49]

Less time for family. At century's end, nearly 7 million children five to fourteen regularly cared for themselves, all alone, while their parents were working.[50]

Less time for community. In the 1960s, about half the American people "invested some time each week in clubs and local associations." In the 1990s, less than one quarter of Americans devoted time to community groups.[51]

Not every American, of course, was racing through life as the millennium ended, shortchanging friends, family, and community, "feeling hurried and rushed every day, getting annoyed at long lines, going to bed wired, waking up tired."[52] But enough were to produce a remarkable social shift. In 1973, a Harris poll asked a random sampling of Americans how much time they needed to earn a living, attend school, and care for home and family. Half the Americans surveyed said they needed more than 40.6 hours a week to meet these responsibilities, half said they needed less. A generation later, in 1999, that halfway point, the median, had climbed to 50.2 hours, nearly a 25 percent increase.[53]

No wonder leisure suits bombed.

ARE AMERICANS OVERWORKED AND OVERSTRESSED? If they are, various commentators routinely declare, they have no one to blame but themselves. These distinctly unsympathetic observers, notes economist Robert Frank, "insist that if middle-income families can't afford to keep up with the consumption standard set by others, they should simply spend less and stop complaining."[54]

W. Michael Cox, the chief economist at the Dallas Federal Reserve Bank, has been among the busiest of these critical commentators. His book, *Myths of Rich and Poor: Why We're Better Off Than We Think*, co-authored with Richard Alm in 2000, helped spell out the spend-less-and-stop-complaining mantra.

"It's not the high cost of living that gets us," Cox argues, "it's the cost of living high."[55]

Want more quality time with your kids? More hours for relaxation? A less stressed existence? Just do it. No one forced you onto the treadmill. No one's keeping you from stepping off. The choice, Cox-like commentators assert, is up to every individual. It's a free country. So suck it up, be an adult, and live with the consequences of your decisions.

Some people, to be sure, have been able to step off America's hedonic treadmill. But their example has touched off no mass exodus. How could it? America's entire economy — entire culture, for that matter — is geared toward defining happiness as the sum total of goods and services consumed. Every day, in malls, on television, and almost everywhere else as well, average Americans are constantly updated on the acquisitions that define the life that any self-respecting American ought to strive to reach. Average Americans have no say in this standard setting. But they strive to meet these standards anyway. In the marketplace that is America, they have no real choice. Average households may be absolutely free, in theory, to ignore society's consumption standards, but, in real life, they ignore these standards only at their peril.

"When upper-middle-class professionals buy 6,000-pound Range Rovers," explains Robert Frank, "others with lower incomes must buy heavier vehicles as well, or else face greater risks of dying."[56]

Parents who fail to spend what society says they should, adds Frank, expose their loved ones to dangers "few families could comfortably tolerate." Unwilling to buy a "nice" house because you don't want to have to assume a back-breaking mortgage load? What real option do you have? "Living in a house priced well below average," Frank notes, "can mean living in a dangerous neighborhood, or having to send one's children to a substandard school."[57]

In an increasingly unequal America, agrees economist Juliet Schor, average Americans work and spend at rising rates not to "live high," but to protect themselves.

"Americans did not suddenly become greedy," she notes. "Upscaling is mainly defensive."[58]

Americans spend defensively, Schor points out, for both practical and psychological reasons. In some occupations, consumption standards simply must be met, no matter how high these standards might shoot. Salespeople, professionals, and the self-employed, to make anything close to a decent living, "have to dress, drive, even eat the part." Nothing projects "failure," says Schor, more than a salesperson in a twelve-year-old car.[59]

Salespeople, in turn, bring the same attitudes about consumption into interactions with their customers. Researchers have documented, notes Schor, "what most people already know: the way you dress affects how salespeople treat you."[60] What you own, researchers have also shown, can make a powerful impact in even the most fleeting of daily encounters. Studies have demonstrated, for instance, that motorists who delay at a green light "are less likely to be honked" from behind if they're driving a luxury automobile."[61]

Some of us can tolerate occasional intemperate honking. Few of us can tolerate the full psychological cost of jumping off the hedonic treadmill. Honking only costs us a moment's peace of mind. Once off the treadmill, we risk losing something far more important, our status in the groups that matter most to us. And our most valued group identity, in any society split into economic classes, usually involves where we stand, or seek to stand, in the class structure. Consumption defines that standing.

"We display our class membership and solidify our class positioning," notes Juliet Schor, "in large part through money, through what we have."[62]

In a relatively equal nation, a society where relatively minor differences in income and wealth separate the classes, people will typically not obsess over meeting consumption standards. If nearly everyone can afford much the same things, things overall will tend to lose their significance. People are more likely to judge you by who you are, not what you own, in a society where incomes and wealth are distributed somewhat equally.

The reverse, obviously, also holds true. "As inequality worsens," as Schor puts it, "the status game tends to intensify."[63] The wider the gaps in income and wealth, the greater the differences in the things that different classes are able to afford. Things, in markedly unequal societies, take on greater symbolic significance. They signal who has succeeded and who has not. You are judged, in these societies, by what you own, by what you consume, not who you are. In these unequal societies, if you are willing to risk getting labeled a loser, you can decline to play by the consumption rules. You can step off the treadmill. But you don't. After all, what right do you have to expose your child to the loser label? What right do you have to force your friends to choose between you and the stigma of hanging out with a failure? You keep treading. We all keep treading.

We tread with no illusions. We know we will never be able to achieve all the trappings of success, not when the incomes of the most "successful" are increasing at much faster rates than our own. But we can, if we keep treading, afford at least a taste of that success.

"At Starbucks," as journalist Peter Grier put it at the turn of the century, "coffee costs twice as much as at a no-name carry-out, yet it's only $1.45."[64]

That container of coffee at Starbucks, says the University of Florida's James Twitchell, amounts to "luxury on the cheap."[65] We can't have it all, but we can have some.

NOT ALL OF US, OF COURSE, GET THRILLS FROM TRIPLE LATTES. Nor do we all need fancy cars to feel good about ourselves. Many of us buy only at sales. We study *Consumer Reports.* We are proud of our consumption prudence. The high-pressure consequences of living amid gross inequality may mess with other people's heads, we tell ourselves, not ours.

Or so we think. We think wrong. In an unequal society, no consumer escapes inequality. Where wealth concentrates, average people only have one choice. They can live like hermits or spend more than they want — on products they don't really need.

An exaggeration? Consider this exercise. Imagine yourself an automaker in a nation with 100 million households. The vast majority of these households, some 80 percent, earn middle class incomes between $30,000 and $50,000. The rest of your nation's households split evenly between affluence and poverty. Ten percent earn over $50,000, 10 percent below $30,000.

Your nation's middle class households have adequate, not affluent, incomes. They're extremely sticker-price conscious. As an automaker, you can't expect to make much more than $1,000 per car profit selling to this middle class market. Still, you *can* make a lot of money marketing to your middle class. If every middle class household bought a new car once every five years and you cornered just one quarter of the middle class market, you could sell 4 million new cars a year — and make a $4 billion profit.

What about your society's affluent households, that 10 percent of families making more than middle class incomes? These families are not as price sensitive. You can sell them more car. You can earn, in fact, a $2,000 profit on every "luxury" car you sell an affluent household, twice as much as you can earn selling to a middle class household. If you could capture a quarter of this affluent market, you could clear $800 million a year.

So which market would get your prime attention, as an automaker, the middle class market or the affluent market? Both would surely be profitable, but, in a middle class-dominated society, you would likely choose to focus on the middle class market, because that's where the biggest returns would be. You would work hard to build the best modest-priced cars you could. Your prize — a meaningful share of the immense middle-class new car market — would be well worth your effort.

Now imagine yourself an automaker in a considerably *less* equal nation of 100 million households. In this more unequal nation, the middle class makes up only half the total 100 million households. About 20 percent of households make over $50,000, with 30 percent making less than $30,000.

In this nation, middle class families are struggling. They'll still buy new cars, but they're more sticker-price conscious than ever. You can't expect to move cars off the showroom floor in this market unless you keep prices way down. On each new car sale to these middle class households, you figure to average just $500 in profit. If you capture a quarter of this middle class market, you stand to register a $1.25 billion profit.

Meanwhile, in this more unequal society, affluent households aren't just more plentiful, they're also wealthier. For just the right automotive experience, these wealthier households are willing to pay a premium. A savvy automaker can now earn a $3,000 profit on every new car sale to an affluent household. Ka-ching! These sales add up fast. An automaker who captured a quarter of this luxury market could walk off with $3 billion. So where are you, as an automaker in an unequal society, going to place your automaking energy? You would, of course, choose to focus on the luxury market.

A far-fetched scenario? Not hardly. In fact, in the closing years of the twentieth century, automakers in the United States faced essentially these exact inequality dynamics.

Until the 1980s, these automakers had historically, ever since Henry Ford, always focused their factories on "building cars for everyday American families."[66] But this middle class-oriented approach, by the late twentieth century, no longer made any business sense. In an increasingly unequal America, as *Washington Post* automotive expert Warren Brown would note in 1997, the wealthy had become "practically the only customers the automakers can count on."[67]

By century's end, the mass middle class market for new cars had essentially evaporated. The bottom two-thirds of American income-earners, people making under $50,000, were buying just one-third of the nation's new cars, and most of the new car buyers in this bottom two-thirds weren't really people of modest middle class means at all. They were, observed W. Van Bussmann, a DaimlerChrysler economist, either young people with prosperous parents or retirees with a lifetime of assets to draw from.[68]

In this new market environment, with fewer families able to afford new cars, automakers felt they had little choice. If they wanted to continue making big money, they would have to start making much more money on each car sold. And that they proceeded to do — by "supersizing" their products. In the 1990s, automakers made cars bigger. The bigger the vehicle, the more option-laden, the bigger the per-vehicle profit.[69] The new strategy worked wonders. Ford, G.M., and Chrysler, amid record levels of inequality, all registered record earnings over the decade's last six years.[70]

Middle class motorists who still yearned for that new car aroma, in the meantime, found themselves paying through the nose for that most essential of American middle class entitlements, the basic family sedan.[71] Back in the mid 1960s, the most popular sedans, the Chevy Impala and Ford Galaxie, had cost consumers about $2,600, or around $13,000 in 1996 dollars. Most middle class households could, without much squeezing, afford that cost. By contrast, the comparable 1996 vehicle, the Ford Taurus, ran about $20,000, a price that shoved the Taurus "out of the reach of many middle-class consumers."[72]

Consumers who went looking for more affordable vehicles, by the end of the 1990s, found their choices limited. The inexpensive Ford Escort, for instance, "faded away without much notice" in 1999, as Keith Bradsher, the *New York Times* Detroit bureau chief, would later note. Ford replaced the Escort "with the taller, fancier Focus."[73]

America's auto industry had, in effect, totally reverted to the bad old days *before* Henry Ford, a time when average Americans could only daydream about becoming new car owners. In 1914, Henry Ford had attacked that reality. He had upped the wages of his autoworkers to $5 a day. On this Spartan, barely middle class wage, his workers could afford a spanking new Model T by saving up the equivalent of five months pay.

In 2000, to buy an average-priced new car, America's middle class families would have to set aside the equivalent of more than six months pay.[74]

Detroit didn't care. The middle class had become irrelevant. America's affluent didn't just buy more expensive cars, they bought more cars per person. By century's end, Keith Brasher would note, the hawking of "third and fourth automobiles to high-income families" had become one of the auto industry's "fastest-growth" market segments.[75]

BY THE END OF THE 1990S, nearly every major consumer industry in the United States, not just automakers, had come to grips — or ruin — with the phenomenon retailers had come to label the "two-tier market." America's growing concentration of wealth had essentially divided consumers into two camps, a luxury market at the top, a bare-bones market for everyone else. America's single, giant, dominant middle class market had vanished.

"The middle class, which once seemed to include almost everyone, is no longer growing in terms of numbers or purchasing power," noted *Business Week* in 1997. "Instead, it's the top and bottom ends that are swelling."[76]

As a retailer, you either recognized that reality or went under. America's classic middle class emporiums, department stores like Gimbel's, could not survive in a two-tier world.

"You could run the perfect store," explained economist Lester Thurow, "and if your customers go broke, you go broke with them."[77]

Those stores that didn't want to go broke targeted the swelling top and bottom. Discounters claimed the bottom. Everybody else dashed for the top, in the greatest retail gold rush ever. Retailers had seen bottoms swell before, but no one, anywhere, had ever seen the swelling at the top that American retailers witnessed in the 1980s and 1990s.

Outfits like the New York-based Spectrem Group, a research and consulting firm, began specializing in helping retailers understand the massive new affluent market. About 18.4 million households, Spectrem reported in 2000, could claim either an annual income over $100,000 or at least $500,000 in net worth, over and above the value of their primary residence. But the real explosion in affluence, researchers made plain, was breaking out at the tippy top.

Millionaire households, analysts at the Tampa-based Payment Systems Inc. related, were growing almost twenty times "faster than the general population."[78] The ranks of "pentamillionaire" households — families worth at least $5 million — were jumping even more rapidly. They totaled six hundred thousand by 2000.[79]

The wealthy, for the first time ever, now constituted a mass market in and of themselves, an enormous "rich niche," to use *Fortune*'s phrase.[80] By 1997, the Merrill Lynch financial services empire alone could count 125,000 customers with $1 million in their accounts. The bankers at Citicorp could claim, that same year, 75,000 customers with accounts worth at least $3 million.[81] By 2005, predicted the Affluent Market Institute, America's millionaires would control "60 percent of the nation's purchasing dollars."[82]

Amid this affluence, spending on luxury goods and services spiraled upward at rates marketers had never before imagined possible. Some thirty-seven hundred Porsches rolled out of U.S. showrooms in 1993. In 1999, dealers unloaded almost twenty-one thousand of these luxury sports cars, an increase of 476 percent.[83]

Retailers rushed to partake in the luxury feeding frenzy. In the fashion world, the *Boston Globe* reported, Giorgio Armani began "a new clothing line targeted at upper-strata status seekers." The gowns in this new line started at $12,000.[84] In hardware and appliances, Home Depot unveiled a chain of Expo Design Centers, well-appointed warehouses designed, the *Washington Post* noted, "to display and sell home furnishings you didn't know you wanted." Among these furnishings: chandeliers at $5,595 each, refrigerators at $3,996, and hand-painted tiles at $145 apiece. By 2005, Home Deport hoped to have two hundred Expo Design Centers up and running across the United States.[85]

Best of all, this luxury market appeared recession-resistant. In March 2002, two years after Nasdaq started tanking, waiting lists for $13,000 Hermes Birkin handbags still stretched for more than a year.[86]

No business, in the entire United States, would exult in this new, mass luxury market more joyously than banking. Bankers, of course, could count. By 1993, they knew that individual Americans with at least $1 million to invest owned assets worth about $4 trillion, "the near equivalent of all pension and mutual funds combined."[87] America's bankers rushed in to serve this gigantic new market. By the end of 1999, affluent households were handing financial services companies $270 billion a year to manage their money.[88]

"There's nothing but upside in this business," gushed Geoffrey von Kuhn, the chief of Citibank's American private-banking operations.[89]

For their new well-heeled clients, bankers were happy to provide almost any service imaginable. "Wealth management" would come to cover everything from checking accounts to advice on buying art and pearl necklaces.[90] And banks would be amply compensated for their thoughtful assistance. Profit margins in wealth management, a PricewaterhouseCoopers survey revealed in 2001, would run 35 percent.[91]

"It's simply easier," *Fortune* concluded, "to make money dealing with rich people."[92]

So why, if you were a retailer, would you bother dealing with anybody else? Why indeed? Bankers, for their part, spent as little time dealing with the hoi polloi as they possibly could. At the same time bankers were helping swells find just the right pearls, people in poor neighborhoods, the *Washington Post* reported, were finding it "harder than ever to find a bank branch or even an ATM within walking distance."[93]

By 2001, wealth had become so concentrated that even mere millionaires could find themselves treated as second-class consumers. To qualify for high-class handholding from Goldman Sachs, for instance, an affluent household needed $25 million. Households with only $1 million, sources inside Goldman Sachs told *Investment News*, would "soon be able to come on board," but these less affluent households would not be able to expect much in the way of personal attention. Mere millionaire households would "be asked to do most of their business online."[94]

IN AN UNEQUAL SOCIETY, living amid a marketplace of goods and services gone upscale, average consumers always lose. In a luxury market, goods and services cost more than they need to cost, often much more. Among the reasons: simple supply and demand.

"No matter how rich Seattle gets," as columnist Michael Kinsley would explain at the turn of the century, "the number of people who can enjoy a house on Lake Washington will stay about the same. What increases, of course, is the price."[95]

And the wealthy don't particularly care about that price, because they don't have to care. If you have to ask how much a bauble costs, as the old saw goes, you can't afford it. New York banker John K. Castle was asked, in 1999, how much he paid for his yacht and its plush interior decoration. He couldn't say. "One of the things about my lifestyle is that I don't want to know what anything costs," Castle explained to a *Wall Street Journal* reporter. At the top of the economic ladder, he added, price "doesn't really make any difference. That's part of the freedom."[96]

In a marketplace dominated by concentrated wealth, more than prices change. Products themselves change. Manufacturers and merchants, in markets dominated by the wealthy, come to lavish their attention, their creativity, their quality on the luxury market. Everything else goes to seed. Some analysts call this phenomenon "model feature creep." Year by year, economist Robert Frank explains, "products embody more and more costly new features." Over time, one year's high-end models become the next year's base models.[97] "And as this happens," Frank adds, "simpler versions of products that once served perfectly well often fall by the wayside."[98]

We see this marketplace dynamic all the time. We set out to buy a simple, sturdy barbecue grill to replace a now rusted grill we bought a dozen years ago.

That simple, sturdy model no longer exists. We find ourselves paying for racks and ash collectors we don't want and probably will never use. We grumble, but we buy that feature-laden grill anyway. But the extra features, the extra costs, eventually add up to too high a price. At some point, we start cutting back on the middle class basics.

"More families can no longer afford things that were once seen as the birthright of the middle class — the occasional new car, the new clothes, the annual vacation," *Business Week* would report in 1997. "Many have cut back in areas their counterparts wouldn't have considered skimping on in decades past."[99]

Inequality, the sage British social commentator, R. H. Tawney, observed back in 1920, "diverts energy from the creation of wealth to the multiplication of luxuries."[100] And that diversion invariably undermines, in every unequal era, the social capacity to satisfy basic consumer needs.

Especially that most basic consumer need of all, a home.

HOMES ARE THE SINGLE BIGGEST PURCHASE the typical American family ever makes. The entire American dream revolves around having a home to call your own.

By the late twentieth century, vast numbers of American families could only afford that home by going far deeper into debt than average Americans had ever before gone. In some areas of the country, even a willingness to take on massive debt wouldn't be enough. In turn-of-the-century San Francisco, only 12 percent of local families could swing a mortgage for one of the city's median-priced homes.[101] Bay area housing costs were running so high, in 2000, that one nonprofit group was relocating low-income families as far away as Reno, Nevada, the closest place with affordable housing. Complained the group's director: "The whole housing system is breaking down."[102]

In 2002, researchers from the National Low Income Housing Coalition would document the extraordinary extent of that breakdown. Across the country, on average, anyone working full-time had to earn at least $14.66 an hour, about triple the federal minimum wage, "to be able to afford to rent a modest two-bedroom home."[103]

In earlier years, an affordable, comfortable home had been an American middle class given — and an achievable goal for many lower-income households. Younger families would typically rent for a while, set aside money for a downpayment, then buy a home and start building up equity. By the 1990s, this pattern no longer played out. Housing simply cost too much. Renters could not save up for downpayments. Homeowners could not build up equity.

What had happened to America's middle class housing market? Middle class housing had been done in by the luxury dynamic, the same inequality-driven dynamic that had distorted everything else from cars to barbecue grills. In a market environment where price is no object for some people, prices will eventually be higher for all people.

In places like metro San Francisco, middle class families should have been living quite comfortably at the end of the 1990s. They earned, after all, about 33 percent over the national average. But they weren't living quite comfortably. They were struggling — with home costs nearly four times the national average. Why did homes cost so much in the San Francisco area? The "intensely competitive bidding from freshly minted millionaires," concluded the *San Francisco Chronicle*, after a lengthy investigation.[104] These freshly minted millionaires, *USA Today* added, frequently think "nothing of plunking down $500,000 for a San Francisco tear-down with a view."[105]

The new homes that replaced the tear-downs — and filled virgin spaces — would be grand homes. In the 1980s and 1990s, developers built homes the same way automakers built cars. They built them big, to maximize the profits they could expect to receive from their affluent customers. In 1984, just 7 percent of new homes topped three thousand square feet, the size usually thought large enough to require household help to maintain. Fifteen years later, 17 percent of America's new homes sprawled over three thousand feet.[106] Even garages were getting bigger. By century's end, 16 percent of all new homes came with garages that held three or more cars.[107]

Homes with super-sized garages concentrated, of course, wherever wealth concentrated. And in those areas where wealth concentrated, average families could seldom find anything affordable, not anywhere close. Where wealth congregated the most conspicuously of all, in America's trendy beach and mountain resorts, the unavailability of affordable housing created entire towns off limits to working families. In the Hamptons, the East Coast's ritziest summer resort, small cottages that went for $5,000 in the 1940s were fetching up to $900,000 by the mid 1990s."[108] People who worked in the Hamptons — plumbers, teachers, sanitation workers — couldn't even afford to rent locally.[109] Many simply gave up and left. At one point in 2000, half the thirty-six jobs in East Hampton's town road crew were going unfilled. Workers couldn't afford to take the $25,000 jobs, a town official explained, because local housing cost too much.[110]

The deep pockets who descended upon the Hamptons every summer — and made the area unaffordable for working families — would return every fall to Manhattan, another locale largely off limits to working families. In 2000, Manhattan apartments south of Harlem averaged more than $850,000.[111] In the Manhattan apartment market, one amazed realtor would note, "if you have a terrace and you have a view of Fifth, there is no number that you could put on your apartment that is impossible to obtain."[112]

What would be impossible to obtain, in end-of-millennium New York, would be an affordable place for an average-income family. A quarter of New York City's households ended the 1990s paying more than half their income on rent.[113] In the 1990s, even reasonably affluent families could no longer afford Manhattan addresses. Many would cross the river to Brooklyn — and set Brooklyn's housing market on fire. In 1997, thirty-five of Brooklyn's thirty-six zip codes registered double-digit hikes in home prices.[114]

In Brooklyn, and elsewhere in America, many middle class families would refuse to go deep into debt to buy a luxury-priced home. Instead, they would leave the neighborhoods where they had grown up. They would leave the communities where they worked. They would find housing they could afford in distant suburbs and small towns. These families would escape the mortgage squeeze. They would pay a different price for inequality.

TO SOME INCONVENIENCES, WE NEVER ADAPT. Loud sudden noises always make us irritable, no matter how many times we hear them. Traffic congestion makes a similarly unpleasant impact. People who travel long distances, in traffic, to arrive at work don't "get used" to long commutes. They die from them. Literally. Commuters in heavy traffic, researchers have found, are more likely to quarrel with co-workers and loved ones, more likely to have high blood pressure, and more likely, economist Robert Frank notes, "to experience premature deaths."[115] Traffic saps smiles out of life.

Unfortunately, Americans now spend more time in traffic than we ever did before. Between 1982 and 1999, a Texas A & M research team has estimated, the number of hours Americans spent "stalled in traffic" tripled.[116] Morning and evening rush hours, combined, averaged six hours a day in 2000, twice as long as they lasted in 1980.[117]

Why have America's roads become so congested? More people? Population growth only explains an inconsequential portion of the nation's increased traffic flow. In the 1980s and 1990s, traffic congestion actually rose eleven times faster than population.[118] So what's clogging America's highways? Commuters are clogging our highways. Americans are driving many more miles on them — to get to work.

Robert Frank calls the phenomenon the "Aspen effect," after the Colorado mountain resort. The phenomenon's stage one: Wealthy families bid up real estate in a desirable community. Stage two: With rising home prices, people who provide basic services in that community, everybody from cops to cooks, can no longer afford to live locally. Stage three: Service workers buy and rent housing far from where they work — and start commuting considerable distances. The end result? In Colorado, by the late 1990s, all roads in and out of "Greater Aspen" were almost always "clogged morning and night with commuters, many of whom come from several hours away."[119]

"The lower you are on the wage scale," explained Rick Stevens, the mayor of one Greater Aspen community, the town of Basalt, "the farther away you have to live."[120]

By century's end, Greater Aspen-like situations could be found all over America. Workers in California's Santa Clara County, the heart of Silicon Valley, found themselves commuting from Livermore and Tracy, communities about a hundred miles away.[121] In 1999, one worker at a Hewlett-Packard plant in San Jose, Santa Clara's biggest city, would leave his home in distant Stockton at 3 a.m. to "beat the traffic." The worker, according to a *San Francisco*

Chronicle profile, would arrive at the plant at 4:30 a.m., nap for an hour, then work a full shift. He would clock out at 2:30 p.m. and typically arrive home in time for dinner — but only if traffic were light.[122]

A continent away, on Long Island, another harried commuter, David Kavanagh spent his days fixing cooling systems for the Grand Union supermarket chain. He usually worked at a different store in the New York metro area every day. Management would let him know which one the night before. Kavanagh would leave home at 4:30 in the morning and not be home until 10 at night. He would eventually sue Grand Union over the company's refusal to compensate him for his travel time. He lost the case. An appeals court ruled that employers are under no legal obligation to pay for "normal" commutes.[123]

Workers with commutes as horrible as David Kavanagh's still make up a distinct minority of America's commuters, but their ranks are growing. The number of Americans who spend at least forty-five minutes driving to work every day jumped 37 percent between 1990 and 2000, according to Census figures. The number of Americans who spent at least ninety minutes driving to work, those same years, soared by 95 percent, to over 3.4 million unfortunate souls.[124]

Some of these souls, to be sure, may not consider themselves unfortunate. Some people chose to commute long distances. To spend weekends close to nature, they happily endure brutal commutes during the week. But millions of other Americans endure these brutal commutes with teeth gritted. And some Americans can't endure them at all. Road rage, in the late twentieth century, would become a mass social reality. Between 1990 and 1995, road rage incidents increased by over 50 percent.[125] By 1999, lawmakers in seventeen states were debating anti-road rage legislation.[126]

At century's end, no one could be totally shielded from road rage and traffic congestion, not even the affluent. And the affluent didn't appreciate that. In Southern California, midway through the 1990s, highway officials felt their pain — and came up with a solution to their distress. That solution, "congestion pricing," debuted on a privately operated highway in Orange County. For a fee, up to $4 a ride, motorists could zoom along in special "High Occupancy Toll" lanes. These "Lexus lanes" quickly caught the attention of transportation planners elsewhere. They also outraged many middle-income motorists. Pay-for-speed lanes, complained one, are really about "giving the rich people an advantage." With Lexus lanes, added Maryland commuter Rob McCulley, "you don't have to sit in traffic if you have enough money to pay your way out of it."[127]

True enough, of course. But Lexus lanes, as a solution to America's traffic snarls, did offer a certain social symmetry. Inequality had, after all, helped create traffic jam America. Why not let more inequality fix it — at least for the affluent?

SITTING IN TRAFFIC, WATCHING CARS ZOOM PAST IN A LEXUS LANE, we daydream about how sweet life must be for people who can always afford convenience. We imagine never having to settle for second-rate, never having to deny ourselves a simple pleasure, never having to make do because we don't make enough. The wealthy, we imagine, live that sweet life. We envy them for it, and we race to grab, in our own daily lives, as much of that sweetness as we can.

Some do counsel us against making that race.

"We need to have the idea that you can have growth in your life," Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity, tells us, "without having growth in the size of your home or bank account."[128]

We appreciate the concern. But we are torn. We are of two minds about wealth. On the one hand, we gape at how easily rich people can make their dreams come true — and their disappointments go away. We see, for instance, a Steve Hilbert, the CEO of the Indiana-based financial services company, Conseco. As a boy growing up, Hilbert wanted nothing more out of life than to play basketball for Indiana University. He would never make the team. But he did make so much money at Conseco that he was able to build, at home, his own exact replica of the Indiana University basketball court. Weekends in the 1990s would find Hilbert dribbling away on his $5.5 million replica, playfully experiencing the hoop glory he never knew.

"On Saturdays," Hilbert would tell *Forbes*, "I hit the winning shot to beat everyone from UCLA to Michigan."[129]

On the other hand, we know that rich people sometimes shoot and miss. Every week, thumbing through the tabloids at supermarket checkout counters, we read about the wrecked and wretchedly unhappy lives rich people can lead. We read about Herbert Haft, the patriarch of the Trak Auto and Shoppers Food Warehouse empire, living alone in a huge mansion, divorced from his wife, totally estranged from his daughter, oldest son, and five grandchildren.[130] We scan the stories about Alice Walton, the Wal-Mart heiress who had become, before she hit fifty, the world's richest woman. Poor Alice suffered through three auto accidents before the 1990s ended. In the last of the three, she nearly lost a leg after smashing her SUV. The police charged her with drunken driving.[131]

"You know who I am, don't you?" she slurred to the arresting officer. "You know my last name?"[132]

Anne Scheiber didn't inherit billions nor snare, in her lifetime, any headlines. But riches dominated Scheiber's unhappy life every bit as much as Alice Walton's. Scheiber had begun pursuing her fortune back in the Depression, after her brother, a stockbroker, had invested and promptly lost all her savings.

"She was bitter with my father for the rest of her life," that brother's son would later relate. "In fact, she got more bitter the older and richer she got."[133]

After the loss, Scheiber started all over. She scrimped and saved in every way imaginable. She lived alone, skipped meals, walked to work, and wore worn-out clothes. By 1944, Scheiber had accumulated a $5,000 nest egg. Over the next half-century, she grew that $5,000 into a portfolio worth over $22 million. Nurturing this portfolio would be all that ever mattered to Scheiber. She would never marry or get close to anyone.

"A big day for her," Scheiber's stockbroker would later recall, "was walking down to the Merrill Lynch vault near Wall Street to visit her stock certificates. She did that a lot."

Scheiber died in 1995, at the age of 101. Over the last five years of her life, she didn't receive a single phone call.

In the closing years of the twentieth century, a rather sizable cottage industry emerged to help people of means avoid the unhappy fates of the Herbert Hafts, the Alice Waltons, and the Anne Scheibers. A host of organizations, by century's end, specialized in helping the affluent bear the "emotional burden of opulence."[134]

More than Money, a nonprofit launched by assorted younger heirs and dot.com millionaires, offered counseling and workshops. The Sudden Money Institute fielded a range of specially trained advisers. The Money, Meaning and Choices Institute zeroed in on "the psychological challenges and opportunities that accompany having or inheriting money."[135] In Chicago, an annual "Ministry of Money" retreat for those worth over $5 million, hosted by Father John Haughey, S.J., a Loyola University professor, encouraged the well-endowed to talk candidly about the burdens wealth imposes.[136]

This notion that wealthy people can bear terrible "burdens" strikes many people of modest means as outrageously silly. Chris Mogil, a New Englander, would see this outrage after, as a young man, he inherited a fortune from his grandfather.

"I was haunted by the question why I should have this privilege," says Mogil, who later started his own nonprofit to help wealthy people "take charge of their money and their lives." But Mogil found that he couldn't expect much sympathy from his nonwealthy friends. Their typical reaction: "Well, if the money bothers you, give it to me."[137]

But wealth does impose burdens, as Mogil and almost all thoughtful wealthy people so clearly understand. These burdens can weigh heavily on nearly every aspect of daily life, from the search for meaningful relationships to the ambition to achieve. Living with great wealth can be like living amid fun-house mirrors. Wealth distorts. You can never be sure about what you see. Is this person nodding approvingly at what I say because I have expressed a keen insight or because I might contribute to her cause? Is the smile on his face a sign of undying affection or a lust for my fortune?

"After I've gone out with a man a few times, he starts to tell me how much he loves me," heiress Doris Duke, worth $1.2 billion at her death in 1993, noted back in her thirties. "But how can I know if he really means it?"[138]

Someone who holds great wealth, suggests philosopher Philip Slater, can never know.

"If you gain fame, power, or wealth, you won't have any trouble finding lovers," Slater notes, "but they will be people who love fame, power, or wealth."[139]

The wealthy respond to this reality in various ways. Some become angry, upset "that money rather than affection or love seems to attract people to them."[140] Others become wary of any intimate relationship. And still others respond by seeking a safe refuge. They find intimacy in their fortunes.

"Money," as the industrialist Armand Hammer once boasted, "is my first, last, and only love."[141]

Sports impresario Jack Kent Cooke, the real estate and media tycoon who owned four different pro sports teams, might have chuckled at that line. Over his eighty-four years, Cooke amassed a near-billion-dollar fortune — and four wives. He died in 1997. In his will, Cooke mentioned every wife by name and left not a penny to one of them.[142]

J. Paul Getty, mid-century America's oil king, outdid Cooke. He divorced five times.

"A lasting relationship with a woman is only possible," Getty concluded, "if you are a business failure."[143]

Brutish patriarchs like Jack Kent Cooke and J. Paul Getty, some might argue, reflect their times more than their wealth. Both grew up in unenlightened, pre-feminist times, amid paleolithic attitudes toward women. In more modern times, the assumption goes, more sensitive and successful family relationships can unfold in wealthy households. But great wealth, author Ann Crittenden notes, can distort healthy, loving relationships just as easily in enlightened as unenlightened times. In the 1980s and 1990s, Crittenden notes, wealth concentrated overwhelmingly in male pockets. Men "struck it rich" much more frequently than equally competent women because few women were either willing or able to devote most all their waking hours to the money chase. And that dynamic created — and still creates — an enormous earnings gap between affluent men and their wives.

"Whether or not she works outside the home, the wife of a high-income man risks becoming a privileged employee rather than an equal partner," Crittenden observes. "As an exceedingly rich man once told me: 'My first wife was like my housekeeper.'"[144]

Men with fortunes don't need wives who do housekeeping. They can afford housekeeping staffs. So why keep a housekeeping wife around? They often don't. Not when a trophy wife can look ever so much better beside the mantel.

ALL RELATIONSHIPS, NOT JUST ROMANTIC COUPLINGS, tend to be twisted by wealth. Rich people "possess and enjoy early," as novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald once famously wrote, "and it does something to them, makes them soft where we are hard, and cynical where we are trustful, in a way that, unless you were born rich, it is difficult to understand."[145]

Even someone born rich might be unable to understand a J. Paul Getty. In 1973, mafiosa kidnapped his sixteen-year-old grandson, John Paul III, then in Italy. The kidnappers demanded a ransom the boy's father, Getty's son, could not pay. Getty did eventually come through with the money, but only after his son agreed to pay him back, at 4 percent interest.[146]

How can such behavior possibly be explained? The wealthy, speculates columnist Nicholas von Hoffman, "grow up convinced everybody around them is after their money."

"They're right, of course," he adds, "which only warps their personality the more."[147]

Out of this suspiciousness that comes so naturally to rich people almost always grows, equally as naturally, an isolation from all those who aren't rich, because all those who aren't rich are always suspect. The greater the wealth, the greater the isolation. The greater the isolation, the more perverse the efforts to rejoin the human family, as historian M. H. Dunlop notes in her recent study of Gilded Age New York at the start of the twentieth century. In New York's original Gilded Age, with wealth concentrated as never before, strange new rituals evolved to reconnect the wealthy to the greater society they kept at arm's length. Men of means, relates Dunlop, "went on midnight slumming tours and sneaked peaks at the dirty feet of the unimaginably poor."[148]

These slumming tours would be fastidiously organized. Guidebooks even carried listings of them. But wealthy New Yorkers sometimes took their cheap thrills in less formally organized outings. Some would drop by "the toy departments of New York City's great department stores" to watch poor children gaze longingly through the windows at "toys they would never have a chance to touch."[149] Such behavior by the wealthy, historian Dunlop concludes, reflected a basic boredom with life. The rich had "retreated to the close company of their own," then "wearied of seeing only persons like themselves who owned the same things they owned." Out of ennui, New York's Gilded Age gentlemen "moved in new and risky directions." They "sought the thrill of watching other beings suffer in ways that were closed to them."[150]

Contemporary commentators have observed a similar mental exhaustion among the gentlemen and ladies of America's new Gilded Age. Wealthy people, they find, are subject to "consumption fatigue." Philosopher Philip Slater traces this fatigue to the control that wealth enables wealthy people to exercise over their lives.

"When you can control what comes to you in life," Slater points out, "life itself loses most of its excitement."[151]

Stanley Marcus spent his entire adult life working feverishly to put that excitement back in to wealthy lives. The original brains behind Neiman Marcus, the Dallas-based retailer to the rich, Marcus "sought to rekindle interest in possessions among those who wanted for nothing," as one obituary noted after his death in 2002, at the age of ninety-six. Toward that end, the famous Neiman Marcus holiday catalog each year endeavored to offer ever more outrageous extravagances, from his-and-her miniature submarines to his-and-her matching camels. Marcus even marketed silver-plated barbecues complete with live bulls. His fame grew world-wide.[152]

"He never let up in his mission," the British *Economist* magazine eulogized, "to save the very rich from the wasting disease of boredom."[153]

Marcus never succeeded, not in any lasting fashion. His "stuff" could not guarantee happiness, not to the daughters of quick-rich Texas oilmen his early retail empire set out to serve, not to digital economy dot.com wonderboys two generations later.

These dot.com'ers, notes psychologist Stephen Golbart, had no idea what they were getting into when they pulled in their first windfalls. Many would go out on spending extravaganzas, buying up two or three houses, cars, and assorted other "stuff" before binging out. But the spending would never "do it" for them. They would, Golbart found, "become depressed, empty and uncertain about what to do with the rest of their lives."[154]

Sudden new wealth, adds Irwin Rosen, a psychoanalyst at the Menninger Clinic in Kansas, always at first seems the ultimate answer to all prayers. "How many people," he asks, "say, 'Boy, if I had a million bucks, all my problems would be solved?' But when they acquire wealth, they learn that all their problems aren't solved."

Indeed, those who come upon significant wealth find they face new problems. They face "the envy of others." Perhaps even worse, observes Rosen, they face their own guilt, the sense "they don't deserve the money at all."[155] This guilt can become particularly intense among those born into exceedingly good fortune, people like the clients of Myra Salzer, a financial adviser in Colorado who runs a four-day seminar on inherited wealth. Her clients, says Salzer, feel "undeserving." And that doesn't surprise her. "They've almost been denied an opportunity to see what they can do for themselves," she explains.[156]

Those wealthy individuals who speak candidly in programs like Salzer's seminar have, at some point, made a decision to try to confront the guilt their fortunes make them feel. Other wealthy people do not confront guilt. They deny it. If I am far more wealthy than most all other people, they tell themselves, I must be deserving. If I weren't deserving, I wouldn't be so favored by fortune. In 1997, researchers at Roper Starch polled a national cross-sample of America's most affluent 1 percent. Everyone surveyed made at least $250,000 in income or held $2.5 million in assets. These wealthy Americans were asked to agree or disagree with a simple statement: "I deserve all my financial success." Nearly 90 percent agreed, 54 percent "strongly" and 32 percent "mostly."[157]

A harmless self-delusion? Unfortunately, no, because those of ample means who believe they fully deserve their good fortune usually also come to believe, come to insist, that those not blessed with abundance must deserve their ill-fortune. These self-satisfied wealthy come to see poverty "as a sin of the lazy" and great wealth "a reward for hard work."[158] If the poor were deserving, they would not be poor. The unfortunate get the little they deserve.

This contempt for the poor becomes increasingly vicious as societies become increasingly unequal. The more bountiful the wealth of the fortunate and the more vile the deprivation of the unfortunate, the greater the pressure on those at the top to see their society's starkly unequal distribution of wealth as based on a just system that rewards superior work — and punishes sloth. How could the fortunate come to feel otherwise? If they acknowledged that hard-working people could still be poor, then their society would not be just and their good fortune in it might not be deserved. How much easier to assume that society works justly — and blame the poor for being poor.

In America's original Gilded Age, historian M. H. Dunlop reminds us, one orator by the name of Russell Conwell made a considerable name for himself by delivering, over five thousand times, a lecture entitled "Acres of Diamonds." Conwell told his audiences a century ago that "it is your duty to get rich."

"While we should sympathize with God's poor — that is, those who cannot help themselves — let us remember," orated Conwell, "that there is not a poor person in the United States who was not made poor by his own shortcomings, or by the shortcomings of someone else."[159]

About one hundred years later, in America's second Gilded Age, this same contempt would return, only delivered by syndicated columnists, not itinerant lecturers. In 1995, a liberal pollster, Stan Greenberg, had called on Democrats to push policies that appeal to downscale voters. How outrageous, shot back columnist Robert Novak. Greenberg, Novak asserted, was asking America to coddle "the country's losers."[160]

These losers didn't deserve help, in the eyes of America's smug — and they didn't get it in the boom years of the 1980s and 1990s. The rich did not share their good fortune with the less fortunate. Instead, notes author Michael Lewis, "the rich man's empathy for the nonrich" dwindled. Lewis, a Wall Street refugee, found this absence of empathy repugnant but understandable. After all, he explained, "you can't give money to anyone you don't respect, and you can't respect anyone who doesn't make money."[161]

In fact, if you're rich enough, you can't really respect anyone who isn't rich. You become contemptuous, not just of the poor, but all the rest of America's freeloaders.

"Let's face it," as one affluent entrepreneur told *Worth* magazine. "In this country the destructive behavior is done by the bottom 5 percent. The productive behavior comes from the top 5 percent. Everybody in the middle just eats the food."[162]

Worth's Richard Todd would report these comments in a 1997 analysis of wealth in America. Wealthy people, Todd related, hardly ever utter such sentiments in mixed company. But the entrepreneur's explicit comments, he added, were not isolated ravings. They represented, Todd noted, "something that one often senses at the top ranks of our country but seldom hears: a true abhorrence of the people in the middle."[163]

AVERAGE PEOPLE, WE HAVE ARGUED IN THESE PAGES, are of two minds about the wealthy. The reverse, interestingly, also holds true. The wealthy, for their part, are of two minds about average people. Many may abhor people in the middle, but, deep down, many would also feel more at ease if their children lived a middle class life. Wealthy people, at least wealthy people with any sense, worry all the time about the dangerous impact wealth may have on the happiness of their kids.

In 2000, one fascinating survey of wealthy people, conducted for U.S. Trust, a wealth-management services company, revealed just how deeply many wealthy parents worry. Those polled had either a $300,000 annual income or a net worth of more than $3 million. Of those surveyed, 61 percent acknowledged worrying that their children would grow up overemphasizing material possessions. Many also feared their children would "have their initiative and independence undermined by material advantages."[164]

These apprehensions, note caregivers who work with children, are well-placed. Spoiled children, psychologists explain, are children who come to expect their environment to always respond as they want.[165] These sorts of environments, of course, can be created by overly doting parents in homes of any income. But these environments evolve most readily in households where anything desired can be afforded. Those born rich, notes London psychiatrist Trevor Turner, grow up all too often "never having known what it is to want something and not have it."[166]

Children so "blessed" can grow up without a clue about the real world that everyone else calls home. The *New York Times*, in 2000, would publish a riveting and revolting profile of one of these "born rich," a twenty-nine-year-old Upper East Sider who had enrolled in a Chase Manhattan Bank management training program after she figured it would be "chic to have a career." The young woman's well-to-do father had found the training slot for her, and she started on the job in March. But things didn't quite go right. Supervisors didn't like the young woman's Park Avenue princess outfits. They asked her to conform to the bank's dark-suits-and-stockings dress code. She did, despite firmly believing that stockings were "especially middle class." Soon enough, summer neared. The young woman informed her immediate boss she needed three months off for her family's annual vacation in the south of France. The supervisor approved one week's leave.

"That was so ridiculous," the frustrated trainee would later tell a reporter. "That's not even enough time to shop."

New York's affluent circles, notes *New York Times* reporter Monique Yazigi, abound with similarly clueless young people, children of privilege who "lack the drive and the discipline of their hungrier peers."[167] Robert Elliott, an executive vice president at a trust company that serves old-line wealth, has seen this same story, over and over.

"It's hard for someone who has several million dollars, which produces income of over $100,000 or so, to be interested in a job that pays $40,000," says Elliott. "Ultimately they become less committed to their career than their peers, which obviously produces less success in their career and ultimately less satisfaction with their lives."[168]

Over the years, some immensely wealthy parents have gone to great lengths to shield their children from this dissatisfaction. They have simply refused to pass their progeny their wealth.

"I would as soon leave to my son a curse," Andrew Carnegie once thundered, "as the almighty dollar."[169]

In our own time, Warren Buffet, the billionaire investor, has followed Carnegie's lead. To set up his three children with "a lifetime supply of food stamps just because they came out of the right womb," he has informed the world, would be "harmful" and "antisocial." New York entrepreneur Eugene Lang took a similar stance. He announced that his three children would receive just "a nominal sum" from his $50 million fortune.

"I want to give my kids," Lang told *Fortune*, "the tremendous satisfaction of making it on their own."[170]

So does James Rogers, the chairman of Sunbelt Communications, a chain of television stations that helped him build a personal net worth of $500 million.

"Leaving children wealth," Rogers once noted, "is like leaving them a case of psychological cancer."[171]

Kids from wealthy families, parents like James Rogers believe, can be saved from this horrible fate by denying them fortunes they have not earned. Insist that sons and daughters make their own fortunes, they assume, and these sons and daughters will turn out fine. But in real life, more astute observers point out, denying wealthy children their due in no way guarantees these children happiness or fulfillment. Wealthy parents can refuse to pass on wealth. But they can never avoid passing on the high expectations their great wealth creates.

These expectations, San Jose family therapist Dale Lillak points out, can be as burdensome as any inherited bankroll. Kids from wealthy families who have been brought up to "make it on their own," explains Lillak, quite naturally want to emulate the success of their wealthy parents. But their chances of matching that success "are slim," no matter how well-adjusted and hard-working they may be. Their parents, after all, didn't become fabulously wealthy just because they were hard-working. They became fabulously wealthy because, at some point in their lives, fortune smiled their way. All riches, Lillak continues, represent "luck on some level," and all the healthy child rearing in the world can't teach luck.[172] And that means that children encouraged to make their own way in the world will never measure up to the standard of "success" their parents have achieved — unless lightning somehow strikes twice. Wealthy parents who expect their children to "make it" fully on their own, as a consequence, are doing their children no great favor. They have set their children up for failure, not fulfillment.

Wealth, in the end, traps wealthy parents. If they lavish wealth on their children, they risk steering their kids into empty, unsatisfying lives. If they expect their children to forge their own way in life, they risk dooming their kids to disappointment.

The saddest irony in all this? Giving, in human affairs, can be a wonderful source of joy, perhaps the greatest source of joy of all, and the wealthy, by dint of their fortunes, certainly have more to give than anyone else. But the dollars the wealthy can so easily afford to give too often bring no great joy, no joy at all. For the wealthy, giving becomes just another burden, partially because they fear the impact of that giving on their loved ones — and partially because they are expected to give, even hounded to give, by nearly everyone they encounter. Billionaire Larry Tisch, a fixture on the *Forbes* 400 list of the richest Americans, once complained he received "thirty requests for money a day."[173]

That constant drumbeat of entreaties makes giving an obligation, not a source of satisfaction. If you resist that obligation, you will be resented. If you accept that obligation, then *you* start feeling the resentment. You gave because you felt forced into it.

Over the course of a wealthy person's lifetime, the resentments, the frustrations, the burdens add up. For George Bernard Shaw, the most acclaimed playwright of his time, the mix did not paint a pretty picture.

"You can easily find people who are ten times as rich at sixty as they were at twenty," Shaw would note in his seventies, "but not one of them will tell you that they are ten times as happy."[174]

SOME AWESOMELY AFFLUENT AMERICANS consciously set out to overcome the burdens and strains that must always come with wealth. These affluent steel themselves against wealth's temptations. They set out to lead normal lives. To a remarkable extent, some of them succeed. The world's second richest man, Warren Buffet, drove his own car and lived in an eminently nondescript house throughout the 1990s, even as his billions mounted. Mitchell Fromstein, the CEO of Manpower Inc., ended the 1990s living in the same four-bedroom suburban Milwaukee home he and his wife had purchased back in the mid 1970s, before Fromstein started pulling in several million a year. He was driving a twelve-year-old Mercedes when the *Wall Street Journal* profiled him in 1999.

"I'm not trying to keep up with anybody," the seventy-one-year-old executive explained. "We don't need a lot of things to be happy."[175]

Any wealthy person in America can follow the path blazed by Buffet and Fromstein. But hardly any do. Why not? If wealth makes for such a burden, as these pages have contended, then why do so few wealthy people ever attempt to put that burden down? America's sociologists of wealth suggest an answer. Great wealth, they contend, may indeed distort and poison normal human relationships. But great wealth also empowers, on a variety of intoxicating fronts. Wealth gives the wealthy, sociologist Paul Schervish contends, the capacity to "overcome the usual constraints of time."[176] Wealth can add extra hours to the days of the wealthy, extra years to their lives.

"By hiring accountants, housekeepers, gardeners, and personal secretaries to perform various mundane tasks," Schervish explains, "the wealthy expand the portion of the day they can devote to doing what they want or what they deem important."

Wealth also empowers spatially. Riches enable the wealthy, notes Schervish, "to physically move about the world as they wish while, at the same time, insulating themselves from the movements or intrusions of others." And, finally, wealth empowers psychologically, by encouraging the wealthy to believe that their "self-determined goals are more important" than any other goals, that they have the right to pursue whatever goals they choose.

In our modern America, we all seek to become empowered. Our society, from right to left, considers empowerment a basic core value, an unalloyed good. We all should become "agents," as scholars might put it, empowered to shape our own personal destinies.[177] But the empowerment the wealthy find in their fortunes, sociologist Paul Schervish submits, goes far beyond mere agency. Wealth grants the wealthy "that extraordinary attribute of hyperagency."[178]

"As agents," Schervish explains, "most people search out the most suitable place for themselves in a world constructed by others." As "hyperagents," the wealthy construct their own world. Most of us spend our lives accommodating ourselves to the world. The wealthy, if wealthy enough, can accommodate the world to themselves.

Hyperagency means never having to tolerate any inconvenience. Why, for instance, miss the comfort of sitting in your own special chair when you go out for a fine meal? One July night in 1995, billionaire Marvin Davis had his favorite brass and green-leather armchair brought into the trendy Hamptons hotspot, Nick & Toni's. Three men carried the chair in from a van. After dinner, the three returned to carry the armchair back out.

"Mr. Davis," the *New York Observer* reported, "lumbered out of the restaurant under his own power."[179]

Hyperagency in refuges like the Hamptons also means never having to take anything, even Mother Nature, as a given. The Hamptons too cold in the winter for palm trees to survive? A mere trifle, easily overcome. In the 1990s, one deep-pockets couple had palms installed at their Southampton estate, then had the trees flown to Florida for the winter.[180]

Wherever the wealthy congregate, they bend the world to their priorities, their schedules, their pleasures. In palm tree-friendly Florida, billionaire H. Wayne Huizenga apparently couldn't bear the thought of having to apply for country club membership. He founded his own private country club, with only himself and his wife as members. The club featured an eighteen-hole golf course, three helicopter pads, and sixty-eight boat slips for invited dignitaries.[181] In California, the rich and the regal can't bear the thought of having eyebrows go unplucked, not for a moment. Anastasia Soare, the proprietor of one exclusive Beverly Hills salon, marched into the new millennium ready to pluck, any time, any place. She did local house calls that ran at least $400 for a five-minute pluck-cut-and-wax. For $3,000, she would even fly cross-country.[182]

In 1996, actor Charlie Sheen didn't want anybody to fly to him. He wanted a fly ball. For a Friday night baseball game that year, he bought a $5,000 block of seats behind the left-field fence at Anaheim Stadium. He and three friends then sat in the middle of that block all by themselves, for the entire game.

"Anybody can catch a foul ball. I want to catch a fair ball," Sheen explained. "I didn't want to crawl over the paying public."[183]

Hyperagency does sometimes have its limits. On that Friday evening in Anaheim, for instance, a homerun ball never came Charlie Sheen's way. Not everything can be bought, not all the time. In some rare situations, the world the wealthy encounter simply refuses to be shaped. Author Fran Lebowitz once found herself in a museum with a quite wealthy man. After twenty minutes, the man had to leave. He felt it, Lebowitz noted, "too irritating to see things that he couldn't buy."[184]

But the wealthy, over time, find that most of what they want in life can be bought. And with that understanding comes an arrogance peculiar to those who never need to compromise to get their own way, an arrogance that places their happiness and comfort first, whatever the impact on others might be.

Public officials in San Jose would encounter that arrogance, first-hand, in the late 1990s. These officials, to help ensure homeowners a "good night's sleep," had adopted regulations that restricted late-night jet landings at the local airport.[185] But billionaire CEO Larry Ellison saw no reason why the regulations should apply to him. He refused to abide by the local rules and kept landing his $38.7 million Gulfstream GV at all hours of the night. After the first violation, city officials sent Ellison a polite letter reminding him of the anti-noise ordinance his jet had violated. Eighteen months later, after the violations continued, officials issued a stiffer warning, then, late in 1999, threatened to sue.[186]

"San Jose has no right to tell me when I can land my airplane," Ellison retorted. "It's like saying people who weigh more than 200 pounds can't go into a store after 6 p.m."[187]

Ellison took the city to court. In June 2001, he won. A federal judge gave him the right to land his forty-ton private jet at the San Jose airport after the 11:30 p.m. curfew that all other big jets were still expected to honor.[188]

Hyperagency, of course, doesn't turn every phenomenally rich person into an arrogant, immature, totally self-centered boor. But hyperagency does seductively steer all who enjoy it down that same direction. To step back, to refuse to engage in and enjoy the hyperagent life that great wealth enables, is no easy task. We would all rather shape our world than be shaped by it.

Occasionally, of course, a wealthy person will not be seduced. In 1999, for instance, a Michigan-based construction mogul, Bob Thompson, sold his asphalt and paving business and shared $130 million of the proceeds from the sale with his 550 employees.[189]

"What was I going to do with all that money anyway?" asked the sixty-seven-year-old Thompson. "There is need and then there is greed. We all need certain basic comforts, and beyond that it becomes ridiculous."[190]

Why can't all rich people be like that, we wonder. If we were rich, we tell ourselves, *we* would certainly be like that. Nonsense. If we were rich, we would feel the same burdens rich people feel — and be seduced by the same pleasures. The wisest among us, people like the essayist Logan Pearsall Smith, have always understood this reality.

"To suppose, as we all suppose, that we could be rich and not behave as the rich behave," as Smith wrote in 1931, "is like supposing that we could drink all day and keep absolutely sober."[191]

"I have known some drunks who were happy at times," philosopher Philip Slater added half a century later, "but I've known no one who devoted a long life to alcohol and didn't suffer from it, and I believe the same to be true for wealth."[192]

THE CANADIAN SOCIAL SCIENTIST ALEX MICHALOS, a president of the International Society for Quality of Life Studies, once calculated from data on subjective well-being that nothing has a greater overall impact on an individual's satisfaction with life than an individual's sense of financial security. And this sense of financial security, he concluded, largely emerges from how individuals appraise three basic gaps in their lives: "the gap between what one has and wants, between what one has and thinks others like oneself have, and between what one has and the best one has had in the past."[193]

Over the closing decades of the twentieth century in the United States, decades of growing inequality, average Americans saw each of these three gaps widen. Our wants escalated as America's most affluent set new and higher standards for the good life. Our sense of what most of the people around us own inflated as we spent fewer hours with friends and neighbors and more hours in the workplace. Our past looked brighter than our present as we contemplated our stagnant paychecks and worried about our escalating health insurance premiums. Don't worry, the song said, be happy. We worried.

And we worried even if we were fortunate enough to sit on the other side of the great divide in income and wealth. Affluence, we found, brought new burdens.

"New wealth is rewriting relationships with friends, family and co-workers, and heightening everyone's sensitivity about where they fit in," journalist Michelle Quinn reported at the end of the 1990s, after interviewing what seemed to be half of Silicon Valley. "It's raised expectations and fueled frustrations. No matter what their economic status, people are on edge."[194]

On edge and not happy. Playwright Neil Simon could have predicted as much.

"Money brings some happiness," Simon had quipped years before. "But after a certain point it just brings more money."[195]

And trouble.

Still, as George Bernard Shaw once noted, some wealthy people do seem to be able to live lives largely trouble-free.

"Perhaps you know some well-off families who do not seem to suffer from their riches," Shaw observed in 1928. "They do not overeat themselves; they find occupations to keep themselves in health; they do not worry about their position; they put their money into safe investments and are content with a low rate of interest; and they bring up their children to live simply and do useful work."

In other words, concluded Shaw, the happy rich "do not live like rich people at all." They "might therefore," he concluded, "just as well have ordinary incomes."[196]

And if they did, we all would be happier.