

Why Poetry is Better than Money

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Everybody dies, and dying hurts – if not physically, then emotionally; if not you, then the people you love. It's reasonable to be afraid of dying.

The more resources you have, though, the better you'll be able to manage that fear – with care, with comfort, with legacies and with wisdom. The first two represent ways of easing the inevitable, the third attempts to get around it, and as for the last, who can say?

So, fear of death is a big reason people hoard. We try to stockpile good-will, family, and money, these three; but – these days and by far – the greatest of these is money. The problem is that amassing money for its own sake quickly becomes as destructive as any obsessive behavior; it's a symptom of our fear, not a solution.

Like an oyster that can't stop throwing up layers of nacre over an irritating piece of grit, for the very wealthy, there's no such thing as enough. Apple Corp. made \$419,528 per employee in 2010-11 (“Apple”), however it sure doesn't pay the 46,600 people who actually make and sell their stuff anything close to \$400,000 each. A vast percentage of that income goes into secreting more layers of nacre for those people who'd had the good fortune to invest in the company's stock.

And, sure, some of the super-rich spread the pearliness around. Bill Gates's Foundation funds “innovations in health, development, and learning in the global community” (“Bill”), including strengthening charitable giving among the wealthy. Squillionaire Warren Buffett has famously declared that the American super-rich should pay more taxes (Weardon). But neither Gates nor Buffet suggest that they should not be able to achieve such wealth, just that they should be more generous – voluntarily or otherwise – once they've got it.

Charity on the part of the super-rich isn't likely to raise the minimum wage, and save my student who works at McDonalds from having to busk at two in the morning every weekend, just to cover his basic expenses. Higher taxes in the billion-dollar bracket aren't likely to give another of my students enough hours at one job so that she can quit the other three and still pay her mother's medical expenses. However, and despite logic's dictates, she continues to work absurdly hard at maintaining an A average in arts courses while supporting her family. She's got a notion that it's more important to study poetry than get so-called marketable job skills. She's

observed that job skills training doesn't necessarily mean job security, or a living wage, or even a job.

Neither does poetry, but it never made those promises. What poetry promises, is to help make your life more bearable no matter what tax-snack-bracket you currently inhabit. It does so partly by providing alternate ways of looking at everything from the glorious to the mundane, and partly by bearing out the adage that misery loves company. Every now and then, you'll find a poem expressing your own desolation, distress, or joy so perfectly that you are comforted simply to be part of a species capable of such expression.

Pragmatically, learning to read poetry skyrockets literacy levels. And if, as Jacques Lacan posited, our unconscious is structured like language (44-45), then surely increasing linguistic literacy increases the capacity to perceive complex problems and formulate flexible solutions, skills crucial to understanding (a) the ultimately destructive compulsion to slather more wealth over our wealth, and (b) how to convert that systemic compulsion to a systemic compassion. Substantial literacy teaches you to synthesize diverse sources of information into a clear, critical analysis. *Comme ça.*

Even so, and despite Scott Griffin's endowment of the Griffin Trust for Excellence in Poetry in 2000 (Griffin), I'm not sanguine about poetry's chances in our world. We're losing ground. In 1950, the average 14-year-old American had a vocabulary in the 25,000 word range; as of 2000, it was closer to 10,000 (Vasquez). That's a lot of capacity for nuanced thought gone, largely replaced by visual literacy. And, as Chris Hedges observed, every totalitarian regime in human history has privileged visual culture over literacy (45, etc.).

Thankfully, there's another "every" to consider; poet Don McKay once pointed out that every single human culture had or has poetry (McKay). I've noticed that when we come forehead to forehead with our own mortality – births, illnesses, funerals – even the most anti-literate among us will write poetry. We may have gone shopping beforehand, but eventually discovered that however large our pearls have gotten to be, they can't satisfy our needs for both self-expression and connection to community or ameliorate our fears. Poetry can.

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