

**Capitalism on Steroids:
Modern Media, Human Longing, and the Search for the Sacred**

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It is a real privilege to be asked to participate in the City Forum series and an honor to have an opportunity to speak to each of you today about some of the core issues that most directly influence our lives.

I'd like to begin this talk today with something of a confession: giving this message makes me quite nervous. I am, by profession, a psychotherapist - not an economist or cultural philosopher. My skills tend to be focused on matters of personal suffering and the search for emotional security. I know, with a fair degree of certainty, the intricacies and terrain of the human mind and soul. It is, after all, my job to listen, on a daily basis, to the pain of how people struggle - of how their longing for love has met dead ends; of how their desire for fulfillment gets tangled in repetitive patterns of dysfunction that tend to replicate themselves in circumstance after circumstance and relationship after relationship.

Even so, after thirty years of focusing upon the individual lives of the clients I work with, I have come to realize that it is not enough to only address their deeply personal concerns. Much like a physician working in a village where he or she is consistently battling the effects of malaria without doing anything to eradicate the mosquito population, I have finally come to believe that there is a certain irresponsibility on my part in not addressing at least some of the underlying dysfunction at the heart of our culture.

It might help you to know that I am not a particularly confrontive person, that standing before a group of people - most of whom I don't know - and critiquing aspects of our common life as Americans, is not my idea of a good time. And yet, I can see no other way. I firmly believe that we, as a people, have strayed far from a course that is healthy for us, for our children, and for the world.

But then, I am getting ahead of myself. What I'd like to do is begin our time together with two stories, one from my life in 1976 and one from our shared lives in the year 2001.

It is early spring in 1976 - I am the staff psychotherapist on a unit for terminally ill cancer patients at California Hospital in downtown Los Angeles. Over the time I have worked on this unit, every person who has been admitted with cancer has eventually died. As depressing as this may seem, over the months that I have been here, I have come to recognize a sweetness and a mystery in the work that I am privileged to do. In spite of immense pain, experienced moment to moment, by dozens of patients throughout each day there is a sense of goodness and grace that permeates the lives that I am allowed to connect with.

One such life is that of a man I will call Henry. Now in his late 50's Henry had been admitted to the unit with inoperable lung cancer. His condition was grim and his family, or at least those with whom he was willing to speak, felt compelled to join in his denial that anything was wrong. Week after week, Henry would push aside any offering of support that came from his wife and daughter. And he will have nothing to do with his son. His youngest child, Neal, now 25, with long hair and a scraggly beard, was considered undesirable due to his having refused to participate in the Viet Nam war. For the past 4 years, Henry had rebuffed every advance his son had made, calling his boy a failure and a sissy; someone unfit to bear the family name.

As the weeks go by, Henry refuses to admit that the cancer ravaging his body is going to win the battle. This is, of course, something that Henry is not at all used to . . . losing. A fiercely competitive man (Henry had a history of winning at everything, from being captain of his high school baseball team to being one of the most successful businessmen in his community) this man knew how to succeed. And now this. Now unbearable pain in his chest and, as the cancer spreads, in his guts, difficulty breathing, and the prospect after having spoken with his doctor, that everything is only going to get worse.

Neal, hears all of this through reports from his mother and sister, but Henry will still not allow his son to visit. Even so, Neal keeps leaving word that he wants to be with his dad in this time of agony, that he wants to be of any help that his father might require.

It is now six weeks into this horrific battle. Down from a weight of over 200 pounds to slightly more than 140, Henry continues to fight, still hoping against hope that he can win a struggle that he intuitively knows is already lost. Pride and a sense of bravado, the way he has always gotten through, are no longer serving him. "I've never needed anybody's help in my life," sighs Henry, "and I'll be damned if I'm going to ask for it now."

Knowing that his father is getting closer to death each day, Neal can take it no longer and, despite his father's edict to stay away, this young man chooses to sit by his father's bed late at night as Henry lays sleeping. For several nights, Neal comes to be with his father for an hour or two, sitting silently by his side, both afraid and hoping that he will awaken. On the third night, after several hours, Henry begins to stir. His eyes focus at first on his wife's face. Noticing the tears in her eyes, Henry then looks to his side and recognizes his son's saddened face. Neal is actually crying. Henry doesn't know what to do. He seems to despise all that his son has chosen in life - his antiwar politics, his long hair, his decision to drop out of college - but in this brief moment he is suddenly brought face to face with the child he had raised, a boy that had at once always seemed to be a disappointment, but also a child that had admired and loved him. As Henry later told it, seeing the fearful vulnerability and the tender love in his son's eyes, the animosity and disappointment he had held for Neal began to fall away in an instant. Because in that moment Henry could suddenly admit to himself that he too was afraid, that he was neither invincible nor invulnerable, that he was going to lose this fight with cancer and that he was, and had been for quite some time, both frightened and in need of his son's support. Henry, in that moment did something he hadn't done for more than half a century, he broke down and cried.

Henry and Neal didn't have much time together before Henry died. The pain continued to ravage his body, he lost an additional 25 pounds, and sleep would be increasingly difficult to experience. But Neal stayed by his father's side throughout. They talked, told jokes, watched television, reminisced about what had been and wondered about what might have been. The deeper Henry moved into physical agony, the more he reached out to those of us who surrounded him, especially his wife, his son and his daughter. The only word I can use to describe the feeling that emanated from his room during that time is "radiance." It's as though a glow and a kind of warmth lived in that hospital room, a genuine affection and sense of gratitude, that was now openly shared with any who came near. Henry was a vastly different man than the one who had entered the Oncology Unit two months before. His final request to me, with a mix of yearning and delight in his face, was that I go for a walk for him in the foothills near his home, since he knew he would never again be fortunate enough to put foot on that earth he so loved.

Henry died several hours later, with his son, his daughter and his wife surrounding him and holding him in their arms.

It is now twenty-five years later. September 12, 2001. A young man, by the name of Michael Daisy, living in New York City is writing an e-mail to a close friend. Here are his words.

"I am writing this from my home in Brooklyn after leaving Manhattan. I have signed up for a time slot to give blood later this evening and have a few hours available before then.

[Throughout yesterday morning I had been caught in the turmoil of the chaos that surrounded me.] Bizarrely, I was able to catch a taxi cross-town. I was standing at a corner, I'm not even certain where, and a taxi was sitting there. A very pushy woman, whom I will always be thankful for, barged her way into the cab. In a moment, without thinking, I climbed in too. The driver, a Pakistani guy who had a gentle and improbable smile, immediately took off.

The ash blocks out the sun downtown--it's like driving in an impossible midnight, and even more impossible that I'm in a cab, with this woman who won't stop trying her cell phone and another man, my age, who looks like he's been crying. I don't even know where the driver is going.

God bless that taxi driver--we never paid him. He let us all off, and I think he got out as well, near the Brooklyn Bridge. There are cops everywhere, people are herding themselves quite calmly, mutely, onto the bridge. We all walk across the bridge, which is unbelievably beautiful, the wires and stone of the bridge surrounding us and the bright sun ahead, passing out of darkness.

No one is talking to each other, but there is a sense of warmth. Everyone has their cell phones out, fishing for a clear signal. Those who catch them talk hurriedly to families, friends, people in other cities, children in their homes. It is comforting to hear their voices, telling how they are okay, "shhh, it's okay, I'm okay."

As we walk out into the sunlight, I am so happy to be in this company, the company of people who are alright, those who walked out.

I was in the city today to turn in some of my book, I had stayed up all night writing and I was so worried--is it ready, have I done my work? Those questions seem small today--not unimportant, but smaller, in a new proportion. I kept thinking of how much I have left to do in my life, so many

things that are undone, people I haven't spoken to in years. It's overwhelming to feel everyone around me thinking the same thing, the restless thoughts trickling over this bridge as we come back to Brooklyn.

From the Promenade I stand with hundreds of others, listening to radios, watching the plumes of smoke and the empty holes in the skyline. People stand there for a long time, talk to one another in hushed tones. Someone hands out a flier for a vigil this evening, which I will go to after I give blood.

What can be said? Just this: we will emphasize the horror and the evil, and that is all true. It is not the entire story. I saw an old man with breathing problems and two black kids in baggy pants and ghetto gear rubbing his back, talking to him. No one was rioting or looting. People helped each other in small and tremendous ways all day long. A family was giving away sandwiches at the Promenade. Everyone I talked to agreed to go give blood. If a draft had been held to train people to be firefighters there would have been fights to see who got to volunteer.

No matter how wide and intricate this act of evil may be it pales in comparison to the quiet dignity and strength of regular people. I have never been more proud of my country."

How is it that human tragedy and deep suffering seem to liberate us, to introduce us to what Abraham Lincoln described as "the better angels of our nature?" Why is it that pain and misfortune beyond our capacity to comprehend, have the ability to awaken us to the deepest truths of human existence? In the midst of unspeakable terror for all of us on September 11, 2001 and the horrific experience of Henry's unbearable pain throughout the spring of 1976, a grace clearly emerged that transcends both terror and grief. And by grace I mean something very specific, I am talking about a new sense of identity, a "quiet dignity and strength," that comes forward in the form of genuine belonging, heartfelt gratitude, boundless compassion, and a profound generosity - a generosity as we have seen exemplified in the NYC firefighters and police, a willingness to serve, indeed a readiness to sacrifice when necessary.

As many are now saying, we are a different nation, a different world, a different people than we were on September 10. It's as though we have leaped to a higher level, entered a much larger context beyond our petty obsessions; to some degree our trivial concerns have fallen away, and we are suddenly face to face with that which is most essential about our lives. Patients, colleagues and friends alike tell me that what they most want to prioritize now is time with family and friends, finding ways to give back to the community, nation, and world - clarifying again and again that they are now infused with a new sense of purpose - a decision to stop wasting their time on low-priority desires and instead placing their energy in places where they can support the precious human community of which we are all an essential part.

If you remember but one thing from what I will be saying today, I hope it will be this: suffering - while always difficult, often beyond measure - always brings with it a hidden message and an unambiguous requirement - "If we are to be able to bear the presence of suffering, we cannot do it alone. To carry the weight of suffering's burden, we must reach out and find connection, we must admit our need for the support of others." Indeed, in my thirty years as a psychotherapist working with human anguish in myriad forms - in prisons, in hospitals, with the homeless on the streets of Los Angeles, with street teenagers in Spokane, and with psychotherapy patients in the consulting room - I have never seen a person adequately deal with suffering without finding a way to deepen their capacity for relationship - a sense of connection that always openly admits: "The meaning of my life is intimately connected to my need for others." Parenthetically I can say that in many cases the people I have known would also include their need for God.

We are, as attachment researchers have now known for more than thirty years, hard wired to be in relationship. We can run, but ultimately we can't deny the deepest truth of human existence: that to find genuine meaning and authentic contentment in this life, we will be unable to do so outside of a context of community, one in which we are called to offer compassionate service, and within which we will come to know gratitude.

The renowned psychologist Abraham Maslow once said that when it comes to living beings, there are only two options, "either we're growing or we're rotting."

I want to say that, in many ways our society, that is America as we had known it prior to September 11, was a culture that was rotting, not growing. Which brings us to my second point for today, a theme that will reappear throughout the next several minutes: we had, prior to September 11, been living in a society that had already been hijacked, it's just that it had been a subtle and hidden hijacking, happening so consistently before our very eyes that we had barely taken notice. Just like the proverbial frog described by anthropologist Gregory Bateson, the frog placed in a pan of water where the temperature is turned up only one degree at a time so that it is literally cooked alive before it notices it is time to leap out of the now boiling water, we had been cooking in a water that had and continues to surround us, a world of shallow self-absorption and distorted priorities, life styles focused upon narrow self-interest and the deliberate eradication of anything unpleasant.

In the Middle East, there is a wisdom figure in many stories known as Nasrudin. Much like the figure Coyote in Native American story telling, Nasrudin is something of a trickster, designing intriguing plans and acting them out in order to teach a particular lesson. So, one day, Nasrudin shows up with a heavily laden donkey at the border between his country of Persia and that of a neighboring kingdom. The border guards all know Nasrudin and as they see him approaching they know immediately that he has some plan to trick them, most probably by seeking to smuggle something across their border.

"OK Nasrudin, what are you smuggling this time," the head officer exclaims.

"What, me smuggle, what would I possibly want to be smuggling?" responds Nasrudin.

Unwilling to trust this man, the guards begin to go through every container, every suitcase, every pot and pan that hangs from the donkey traveling with Nasrudin. Hours go by and finally after a completely thorough search they allow Nasrudin to pass.

The next day Nasrudin is there at the border again, donkey by his side loaded with more bags and boxes and boxes inside of boxes. And once again the guards take most of the morning going through everything in his possession. Finding no contraband, our merry trickster is allowed to move across the board one more time.

This process repeats itself for two weeks, until one day Nasrudin shows up at the boarder unaccompanied by a donkey loaded to the sky with freight.

"OK Nasrudin, what's up" the guards ask.

"Nothing," he responds, "I'm done."

"Done with what?" they inquire.

"Done smuggling."

"But Nasrudin, we looked through every box, every suitcase, every bag, every container. We found nothing. What could you have possibly been smuggling?"

A huge smile crosses Nasrudin's face as he gives his answer. "I was, dear friends, smuggling donkey's."

The topic of today's talk is "Capitalism on Steroids: Modern Media, Human Longing, and the Search for the Sacred." I chose these provocative words not because I am here to pick a fight with capitalism. As a clinician in private practice, I am very much a practitioner of capitalism. Indeed, in matters of commerce I favor the independence and creativity inherent in human scale enterprises, and reject the centralized bureaucratic structures inherent in both socialism and communism. To paraphrase John Cobb, one of my professors in graduate school, "People who want to abolish the category of profit and at the same time foster participation in economic life have not thought very clearly about their proposal."

At the same time, I am categorically opposed to a specific form of capitalism as it is increasingly being practiced in our world today, what I am choosing to call "capitalism on steroids." Again, I want to be very specific. Because I believe that what we are now experiencing in the 21st Century is the dangerous impact of the profit motive as the only bottom line for those major corporations that produce modern media, mega corporations that are in no way asking what is best for the heart and soul of the people who spend their lives earning a living in order to consume the products these corporations seek to sell. I believe that when you add together: first, the powerful tools of the modern advertising industry, second the increasingly sophisticated delivery system now available through modern media, and third the unbridled profit motive (where the only goal is increased quarterly earnings and neither vision for or service to those being impacted) you have created an unholy alliance that is both dangerous for and destructive to the human spirit and hence the spirit of America.

Lets step back for a moment to Nasrudin and his donkeys. What is it in our time that is so "right there in front of our eyes" that we can't even see it? What is it that is literally so "hidden in plain sight" that we can't recognize the all-pervasive influence it is having upon us?

Imagine, for a moment, that it is fifty years ago. Someone from another planet has landed and is telling us that they can provide us with a tiny box giving off light that is to be placed in every home - to become a kind of family altar. We are told that 95% of the families in America will enjoy looking into this box for an average of six to eight hours a day, and that this tiny box will be using the most advanced tools available to instruct and guide us regarding that which we will consider to be most significant in life. Given the choice, do you think you would have considered this a particularly wise suggestion to follow?

It is now 50 years later and the most popular programs on that little box in the past two years have been titled "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" and "Survivor." Here we are, the wealthiest nation on earth many times over, finding ourselves hungry for and obsessed with gaining an increased level of wealth. Here we are, the most pampered population in human history seeking out vicarious hardship from the comfort of our living rooms,

watching something that we dare to call "reality TV." In light of the stark and gracious reality we have been living within since September 11, the contrast is both embarrassing and sad.

The modern advertising industry is currently paying some of the brightest minds of our time, with the most sophisticated means of influence known in history to do one thing: seduce the buying public, that is you, me, and every child in this nation. Last year, corporations in the United States spent over \$160 Billion for advertising, a figure larger than our total expenditure that year for higher education. Each day, the average American - man, woman, and child - is exposed (through television, radio, bill boards, magazines, newspapers, etc.) to over 3000 advertisements. What is the focus of all that advertising? More importantly, what is the underlying message, the all pervasive paradigm or worldview that this advertising brings?

Here, from my perspective, is where we find Nasrudin's hidden donkies. And here is where what I am about to say would have been much less clear had this message been shared prior to September 11. The veiled seduction, the all pervasive learning that we are being asked to buy into thousands of times each day might well be described as a "Cult of Superficiality;" a kind of pseudo-religion focused primarily upon material consumption, a context where non-essentials are presented as indispensable requirements for fulfillment with an all-encompassing underlying hypnotic mantra: "Too much is never enough."

On the surface being invited to buy things doesn't appear to be a problem, that's just the way commerce works. But, what we haven't been standing back and recognizing is the full-scale impact of having a materialistic definition of human fulfillment become the dominant message within our cultural consciousness. The question I am asking you to consider today has to do with assessing the impact of being told, thousands of times each day that we are each isolated individuals who cannot be truly happy until we possess a particular product. What is the impact of being invited, again and again and again each day, to assess our sense of security, happiness, and well-being in primarily economic and material terms? Advertising by its very nature has one fundamental goal: to remind us of our underlying discontent and then to promise a means of fulfilling it. And the answer to our discontent is always some-thing that can be purchased or possessed. We as a people, by definition, begin to shift in the direction of becoming human havings, rather than human beings.

A recent study by Jonathan Freedman, a social economist, concluded: "Once some minimal income is attained, the amount of money you have matters little in terms of bringing happiness. Above the poverty level, the relationship between income and happiness is remarkably small."

In 1979 Mother Teresa visited a small group that I was working with on Skid Row in Los Angeles. While she was there she made the comment that the greatest poverty she had ever seen was not among the poorest of the poor in either Calcutta or Skid Row, but among the general populace throughout the United States. The greatest poverty, she said, is the poverty of Spirit among the affluent.

As a psychotherapist it has become a necessity to be able to adequately work with the issue of narcissism. At this point, 30 years into my profession, I can give you a quick recipe for the creation of narcissism in a young child:

1. Do not address the core needs for belonging - for love and responsibility in a child's upbringing;
2. In place of these genuine needs, indulge the child in non-essentials, external possessions and performance-oriented attention (vs. attention merely for the pleasure of being with the child); and
3. Continue this indulgence until both possessions and attention feel like requirements for happiness, i.e. until indulgence becomes something of an addiction, feeling like a genuine entitlement.

Have we become accustomed to affluence to the degree that we now consider it our entitled right? Most definitely. Do we consider convenience and the freedom to endlessly increase our possession of material goods to be essential for our happiness? Certainly. Have we then become a narcissistic culture? You bet we have. Because focusing on narrow and illusory answers to our deeper needs is at the heart of all narcissism, personal and cultural.

Is there hope for narcissism? Absolutely. But the cure for narcissism always has to do with admitting vulnerability and a willingness to embrace rather than avoid the emotional pain of doing without that which we consider essential. Which is to say that it requires a significant shift in priorities, a shift in the direction of openly recognizing an indisputable need for others. Just as my friend Henry, as he lay dying of cancer, was forced to finally recognize his need for every member of his family and his need to finally give up control over that which was beyond his control, we as a nation have, since September 11, quite suddenly been asked to reconsider our priorities. No matter what some of us may try to tell ourselves, no matter how angry we may be that our vulnerability has been exposed, we are indeed at risk and we must now recognize that we need each other at a level previously unknown to most of us. In light of the recent concern and increasing anxiety about Anthrax and other forms of biological and chemical warfare, I dare suggest that we are going to need to turn to each other for support in ways as yet unimaginable to us.

In 1947, a young Catholic monk by the name of Thomas Merton, wrote a book titled: Seven Storey Mountain. It is, in part, a book about his decision, after a life of vast wandering and a certain decadence, to join a monastery. At the end of his tale he uses these words: "And so Brother Andrew locked the gate behind me and I was enclosed in the four walls of my new freedom." I am, of course, not suggesting that the answer to our current dilemma is that we all find our way into the austerity of a monastic life. But I am intrigued with the wisdom that came from this particular man as he spent many years discovering the freedom hidden within the paradox of giving up a very particular kind of freedom that we have come to consider our birthright - the freedom to do whatever we want within a materialistic context, the so called freedom of material entitlement.

For Merton, within the context of prayer, of staying very still and listening to the hidden rhythms of nature, of human community, of God - there was found an opportunity to gain deep perspective concerning human priorities: about that which is most essential and that which is not really essential at all. It is from this vantage point that he makes a very bold statement, and given the fact that it was written more than 50 years ago, one that, from my perspective, appears considerably prophetic:

"We live in a society whose whole policy is to excite every nerve in the human body and keep it at the highest pitch of artificial tension, to strain every human desire to the limit and to create as many new desires and synthetic passions as possible, in order to cater to them with the products of our factories and printing presses and movie studios and all the rest.

All who live only according to their five senses, and seek nothing beyond the gratification of their natural appetites for pleasure and reputation and power, cut themselves off from that charity which is the principle of all spiritual vitality and happiness, because it alone saves us from the barren wilderness of our own . . . selfishness."

Do I have answers to this huge dilemma we face regarding the apparent unending seduction aimed at the "barren wilderness of our own selfishness?" Not really. I have a few hunches and a few suggestions and then I think we ought to dialogue together for the few minutes that remain.

First, I don't for a minute think that we will any time soon be able to change the policies of the media conglomerates regarding this underlying message of materialism. I believe an answer, if there is to be one, will have to come from people like you and me, a people willing to admit that there is something wrong with the marriage of the advertising industry, modern media, and the quest for the maximization of profit. I believe an answer, if there is to be one, will have to come from people like you and me, who are willing to admit that we are consistently being asked to turn our lives, and the lives of our children, over to those who do not have our best interests at heart.

Second, I think we need to recognize the truth of the "Cult of Superficiality and Triviality" that surrounds us, to call a spade a spade, and stop colluding with the myth that fulfillment can be found within consumerism and materialism. More specifically, I think it would be significant if everyone hearing this message would take the next seven days and pay very close attention to how all pervasive the message of materialism actually is. Listen for the hidden donkies in the thousands of ads coming at you each day, the way that "happiness through self-centered consumption" will be the common denominator in what you hear. And then ask yourself, "Where, in the midst of this barrage of seduction, do I hear a call to human community, to generosity, to the importance of service, of volunteering, and of sacrifice for a world in need?"

Third, I think we need to find ways to create in our own lives an antidote to the poison of this consistent pull toward selfishness. Interestingly, one of the most significant points of convergence between psychology and religion, a place where they share common agreement is the recognition that at the heart of both emotional and spiritual health is the need to experience at least three things: 1. authentic connection with others, 2. genuine gratitude for what one has, and 3. an actual purpose for being alive, primarily in the context of serving others. I believe that these three priorities need to become something of a North Star for our nation and our culture, and thus become an antidote to the poison of rampant materialism.

Diana Fosha, a friend and colleague who lives in New York City sent me the following words several days after the disaster of September 11:

"At one end of the island, the smoke still billows and there is devastation and destruction, and yet otherwise the sky sparkles, the architecture of New York shimmers in the golden sun. Maybe it shimmers even more than ordinary because of all of the dust and ash particles in the air. But maybe it shimmers more than normal because as people grieve and rage and are afraid, they are also going all out to help, to volunteer, to mourn, and to support."

A native American grandfather was talking to his grandson about how he felt. He said "I feel as if I have two wolves fighting in my heart. One wolf is the vengeful, angry, violent one. The other wolf is the loving,

compassionate one." The grandson asked him, "Which wolf will win the fight in your heart?" The grandfather answered: "The one I feed."

The question for us, whether it be in our search for vengeance or our search for meaning in life, has to do with which aspect of our nature we choose to feed. I really know of no one who does not have within them deeply selfish traits, aspects of their personality capable of seeking their own pleasure over the common good of others. Likewise, I know of no one I have ever met who did not also have within them a deep longing to find true fulfillment, true belonging, true community. The question for us today and everyday has to do with this fundamental issue of choice. Pulled, as we are in this culture, on a minute by minute basis, in the direction of seeing the meaning of life through the lens of our selfish wants and desires - having, in the words of Thomas Merton an industry "whose whole policy is to excite every nerve in the human body and keep it at the highest pitch of artificial tension" - is not in our best interest as a people. Something is terribly wrong here and I believe that, since September 11, we have a rare window of opportunity to see just how far a field we have wandered.

Given the opportunity to be called to honor the "better angels of our nature" - that is, in the words of Diana Fosha: "to go all out to help, to volunteer, and to support," the stark contrast of our options is quite suddenly and dramatically before us. It's all a matter of which option we choose to feed.

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