



The Enlightenment



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Contested Celebration

*A Poem by Henry Beissel**

Let the morning launch a song on your lips
to serenade the shadows and the light,
put your dreams on notice and give them wings
as you celebrate the passing of night.
Sing of the river and the dance of waves,
sing with the birds in the trees and the sky,
let your heart sing of lovers and loving,
of longing and loss, but never ask why.

*How can I sing of flowers and birds
when the spring rains have turned acid
and the rivers smell foul and flow toxic
with pesticides, plastics and turds?!*

Don't try to wash the world's dirty laundry:
the fumes will choke your breath and cloud your eyes.
Folly and greed are stains you can't remove:
they'll poison your mind with pretexts and lies.
Unfold the wings of your imagination
and rise above the furor of the times:
life is not life when it demands you scream
and take pleasure in disasters and crimes.

*Imagination makes me feel the pain
in the favelas of famine and disease,
the anguish in the townships of despair
and poverty where children hope in vain.*

Watch instead all day the sun's warm fingers
softly green the leaves in the swaying trees,
listen to the butterflies dance gently
among flowers to the sweet buzz of bees.
Open the windows of your senses wide
and let the world's wonders enter your heart:
they sing of flux, awe, love and compassion
in the magic voices of nature and art.

*What about the millions that are dying
by the hour in the struggle to survive,
their joie de vivre brutally crushed?!
I hear creatures screaming, cursing, crying.*

Scent and sap in the forest are music
to the touch and taste of its chambered light
while sonnet and sonata inspire time
to dance patterns of rapture and delight.
Along the lakeshore ovate pebbles click
and crunch to the hoarse voice of surf and tide
that rock the sleek bodies of pike and perch
deep in water worlds on their weightless ride.

*When the bashas and yahoos of power
bomb, poison, slaughter people left and right
for challenging their vanity and greed,
how can I break into rapture and delight?!*

All the world's a poet's celebration
where what is becomes the best it can be;
words and images play all the instruments
in nature's unfinished symphony.
When night opens the curtains on the stars
let your mind soar into infinite space
and sing of your brief time of ecstasy here
before you leave the stage without a trace.

*How can I celebrate the starry sky
when movie moguls manufacture big
stars by corrupting innocence and beauty?!
'Weinschwein' stands for 'inebriated pig'.*

It's in our embrace of all that lives
and dies that we transcend mortality
and come to know a moment out of time
that bares the secrets of reality.

Sing your heart out, never mind the world's strife,
rejoice at the one improbable chance
to feel, to know, to marvel at and join
the stars at their dizzy galactic dance: miss it

—and you have wasted your entire life.
Without a mind to see and say something,
without a heart to feel and embrace everything
the cosmos is nothing but a hollow sphere,
senseless and absurd, yet it means to be
celebrated now and forever here.

*Henry Beissel is a poet, playwright, essayist, translator, and editor who has written over 30 books. He is a Distinguished Emeritus Professor, Concordia University, Montreal. He lives with his wife, artist Arlette Francière, in Ottawa. Henry is a member of the Ottawa Humanist Association and a former editor of the *Humanist Perspectives* magazine. I thank Henry for permission to print this wonderful poem contrasting the many wonders of nature with the harms humans have inflicted on our planet. It ties in beautifully with the theme of the September Enlightenment, Wonderful Things and Not So Wonderful Things. (DAH).

So, Where Do We Go From Here?

How do we cease and reverse the destructions we have wrought? And how do we reverse the increasing inequality that is occurring? Surely, we must begin by looking at the root causes of our follies. And I believe the first place to look is the way our economies have been mismanaged by the greedy desires of businesses and financial institutions to maximize profits for the short term without considering the long-term effects on people or on the environment. Furthermore, Big Business and Big Money have influenced governments and forced them to reduce taxes for the rich and reduce the regulations necessary to keep businesses and banks in check, particularly in the U.S. To illustrate what is happening in our economy today, Jill Richardson has devised a special rigged version of monopoly. See below. (DAH)>

*Yes, the games the thing,
That tells us how and why the world is floundering.*

Imagine our Economy as a Game of Monopoly

*By Jill Richardson**

If you set up the board game like our actual economy, the poorest players quickly run out of money and the rich run away with the game. It's unfair, boring, and exactly what happens in real life.

As a sociology professor in community college, I have my students play Monopoly. Only, I give them a special, rigged version.

There are five players. The wealthiest begins with \$5,500, all of the railroads, and the two most valuable properties (Boardwalk and Park Place). The least wealthy begins with about \$200 and no property. The remaining three are in between.

Each time the players pass Go, the wealthiest player gets \$500. The poorest gets \$30.

It doesn't take long before the poorest two players run out of money entirely. It's an unfair, boring game.

This is the game all Americans are playing.

The wealthiest player's starting assets are proportional to the wealthiest 20 percent of Americans. The poorest player's starting assets are proportional to the poorest fifth of the U.S. population. The remaining three are proportional to the remaining three fifths of the country.

Likewise, the money they receive as they pass Go is linked to the income of each fifth of the U.S. population.

For the richest players in the game, it's probably the best Monopoly game of their lives. For the rest, especially the two poorest, it's a nightmare. I'm sick of playing this game in real life.

Where I live, in California, about one fifth of the population [lives in poverty](#), and another fifth lives just above the poverty line. And the official poverty line doesn't even consider the cost of living.

Since I moved here, nearly 12 years ago, the cost of rent has doubled. Areas that used to be affordable no longer are. You could once find a way to make it work by living far from the beach in an un-trendy neighborhood or suburb. Now you can't.

Some speculate that Airbnb is driving up rental costs, and everyone speaks of an "affordable housing crisis." But nobody's doing anything about it.

For the wealthy, life here is great. We've got beaches, mountains, desert, and year-round good weather. For the people who serve them their food, clean their homes, or landscape their lawns, the cost of rent alone is strangling.

In the U.S. overall, wages haven't kept up with either inflation or productivity over the years. Since 1973, productivity has increased by 77 percent while wages increased by only 12.4 percent. Taking inflation into consideration, wages have remained [stagnant since the 1960s](#), while most of the gains go to the wealthiest.

Average pay keeps up with cost of living better in [some parts of the U.S. than others](#). California isn't even the worst.

I watch my students try to complete a college education while struggling to make ends meet.

The middle-class vision of parents paying for their children's college education and their living expenses isn't a reality for many students. For some families it's the opposite — the child works to put him or herself through school while contributing to the family budget.

Attending school and working at the same time is difficult, and sometimes impossible. Some students attempt it while raising children or caring for sick or elderly family members. In the end, most community college students never get a four-year degree.

We need to make our country fairer than my rigged Monopoly game. In a game, it's just a bummer when the poorest players go broke first. In life, the costs are in human misery.

** Jill Richardson is pursuing a PhD in sociology at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. She lives in San Diego. This article is distributed by OtherWords.org*

Looking for Solutions

Can we look to history to determine the conditions that prevail when a country possesses optimum equality? Yes, we can. The so called “Golden Age” of the 30-year period following WW II gives us a few clues. I admit this period has been dealt with so often in recent Enlightenments that it is almost becoming trite, but nevertheless, it is helpful and worthwhile to highlight the features.

- A prosperous economy with near full employment.
- A social/democratic society with adequate social safety nets.
- A government that is concerned with the well-being of individual citizens as well as with ensuring the protection of freedoms and the rule of law.
- A government that provides conditions for commerce to prosper, but also provides rules and restrictions within reason where necessary.
- A citizenship that is willing to accept the level of taxation necessary to finance infrastructure, government services and safety nets. Businesses must also be willing to pay their share of taxes.
- A government that will promote the best utilization of natural resources in order to create new wealth, while being concerned with preserving the country's natural environment.

These are some of the requisites necessary for the existence of a sizable prosperous middle-class and optimum equality. But as Jill Richardson's rigged monopoly game (above) demonstrates, conditions today are not as rosy as during the Golden Age. Inequality is increasing as the middle-class shrinks and the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. And this is not only a problem in far off places. It is right here at home.

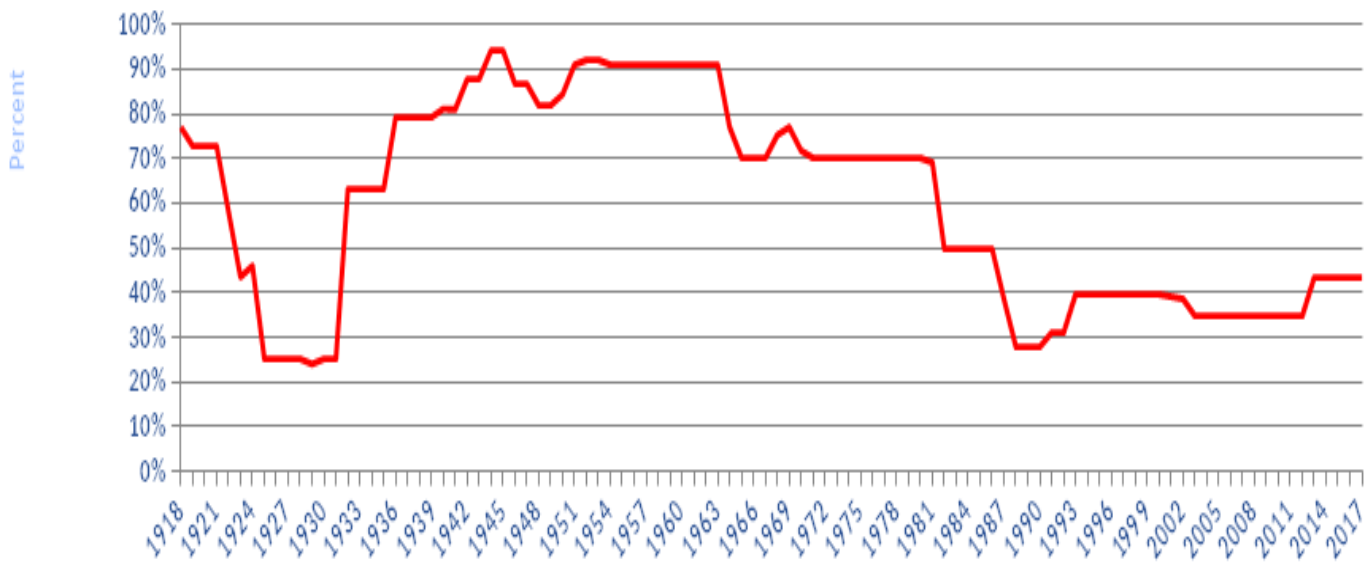
In the London Free Press of July 27, 2018, there was an article entitled “Worsening poverty traps more in pessimism,” by Glen Pearson, codirector of the London Food Bank. Glen quotes an Angus Reid survey stating that a quarter of all Canadians are facing financial hardship. Of respondents, 21% say they can't afford dental care and a slightly higher number say they recently had to borrow money to pay for groceries. The article goes on to state, “It is neither acceptable or right, yet Canadians tolerate it because of the lack of political and economic leadership and the unwillingness to press for change. For all the wealth moving in and through this country, there is little solace to offer those seeking better economic opportunities.”

So, what are the causes of this pessimism? Looking at our immediate area, I believe a significant cause of increasing poverty is that southwestern Ontario has become a rust belt. On August 31, 2018, the Economist magazine published an article on the weakness of Canadian manufacturing with emphasis on southwestern Ontario. The factory closings are well-know. A few are: GM Diesel (Caterpillar) and Kellogg's in London, Ford and Sterling Trucks in St. Thomas, Siemens (wind turbines) in Tillsonburg, Navistar (trucks) in Chatham, Heinz in Leamington, and GM in Windsor. With shutdowns of this magnitude and the resulting unemployment, it is inevitable that many families are going to experience difficulties as inequality increases.

Why are these shutdowns happening? I submit a major cause is corporate greed. Profits can be increased by moving factories to areas with lower worker wages whether it be to the U.S., Mexico, or off-shore. Higher profits generate greater bonuses for executives and greater dividends for shareholders. Employees be damned! They are often left with no severance or pensions. When many years ago steel magnate Andrew Carnegie was asked, which of customers, employees or shareholders in a company is the most important, he is reputed to have said, "which is the most important leg on a three-legged stool?" In other words, they are all of equal importance. But this is not the case today. For many companies, only the shareholders matter and often shareholders are financiers or venture capitalists who have no interest in the business except the short-term profits they generate. They couldn't care less about the hardship they cause in a community when they leave the town or city that provided them with the essential services they needed to operate, nor do they care that factory closures can cause increasing inequality.

Yes, increasing inequality! Can it be stopped and reversed, or is it here to stay? Perhaps looking at conditions that prevailed during the 1945 – 1980 period when the middle class was thriving will give us a clue. A condition that stands out is the top federal tax rates. The graph below shows that these rates in the U.S. were at their highest levels during this 35-year period and then began to fall. The lower tax rates and the relaxing of financial regulations since 1980, along with sub-prime mortgages, sadly resulted in the financial Collapse of 2008, causing greater inequality as the 1% grew wealthier.

Top Federal Tax Rates



Along with the lowering of top tax rates there is another problem. Money that should be going into national coffers to finance infrastructure and social safety nets is going into foreign tax havens, allowing the wealthy to get wealthier. It is estimated that globally, between 190 and 225 billion dollars ends up in tax havens each year. In total, the amount of global money stashed in tax havens is estimated to be between 21 and 32 trillion dollars. It is sometimes stated as 10% of world GDP.

Since inequality was low when the top federal tax rate was high, would raising these rates reduce inequality? There are those that think so. Chris Hughes, one of the co founders of Facebook has stated the wealthy 1% should be taxed at a higher rate in order to pay for a basic guaranteed annual income to those who have lost jobs due to automation. In England, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby is part of a commission entitled, "Prosperity and Justice: A Plan for the New Economy," that is advocating higher taxes for the rich among other things. A few years ago, billionaire Warren Buffett, chairman of Berkshire-Hathaway holding company, discovered his secretary was, on a percentage basis, paying taxes at a higher rate than he was. He said this was not right and stated the system should be changed so the wealthy pay more. In France, former president François Hollande attempted to raise taxes for the rich, but there was so much opposition he backed down.

And that is the problem, the rich have so much influence on governments that increasing their taxes is almost an impossibility. In fact, in the U.S., taxes for the rich were recently lowered, adding to the national debt. But surely it is patently obvious. If higher taxes for the wealthy result in switching money from tax havens into national treasuries, then there is more money available for needed government expenditures.

A look at the graph shown above reveals an interesting story. At the start of the Great Depression in 1929, top tax rates for the rich were as low as 25%. When Franklin Roosevelt became president in 1933, he began to raise taxes for the rich as he began to instigate his so-called New Deal. The New Deal was a series of work projects that put people to work as well as financial reforms and regulations including the Glass-Steagall act that limited commercial bank securities activities and affiliations between commercial banks and securities firms to regulate speculation. It also established the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) which insured deposits for up to \$2,500, ending the risk of runs on banks. Top tax rates were gradually increased and after the U.S. entered WW II, reached close to 95%. They dropped to 80% after the war for a brief period and rose to 90% until 1963, dropping to 70% until 1981 when deregulation began during the Reagan era. Thus, during the period when a large middle class was thriving, top tax rates were relatively high. Surely this tells us something. The Glass-Steagall act gradually became toothless and now top tax rates are around 35%. Unfortunately, the relaxation of financial regulations, the advent of derivatives, and low interest sub-prime mortgages led to the financial collapse and recession of 2008.

So, what is to be learned from this history? It seems that only drastic situations like a serious depression or a major war can trigger drastic action. And when drastic actions are required, only exceptionally strong leaders can undo the mess.

We are now living in uncertain times. The Digital Revolution is upon us and the long-term effects are unknown. The job market is changing as old jobs disappear and new jobs require special training. Populism is on the increase and religious conflicts are still occurring. Global warming is beginning to cause food shortages and storms appear to be getting more intense. In some countries big money is adversely influencing governments and political parties are refusing to compromise. Under these conditions, inequality is increasing and prompts the question: Will things get so bad that revolutions are in the offing?

It seems to me that the only hope is for super-qualified strong leaders to come forward that will be able and willing to take the actions necessary to establish a world with as much equality as is reasonably possible. This will certainly involve making the 1% pay their fair share of taxes. Can this happen without a serious world depression or a revolution? Let's hope so, but at present, few capable leaders appear to be on the horizon. Nevertheless, I hope things will turn out okay for my descendants and all others. (DAH).

**By secular standards, the Catholic Church is a corrupt organization:
So says Neil Macdonald of CBC News (August 26, 2018)**

“Imagine for a moment that a big, admired multinational corporation, one selling a beloved product, was employing large numbers of male pedophiles and rapists, operating in rings all over the world, and that their crimes had been uncovered in Australia, Ireland, Canada, the Philippines, Belgium, France, Austria, New Zealand, Argentina, Chile, Britain, Germany, and the United States, and, further, that senior executives had systematically covered up and suppressed evidence, transferring and enabling hundreds of predators, betraying thousands of victims. What would happen to the company is not terribly difficult to imagine. At a minimum, the U.S. government would likely use its Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) law to go after not only the rapists and molesters, but also the company's executives, up to and including its CEO if possible, seizing the company's assets and seeking the harshest possible prison terms. That's the sort of thing RICO was invented for. The company would almost certainly collapse. But of course, no company warrants everlasting life, and no company maintains that their CEO is chosen by God.”

Wow! Macdonald’s business metaphor is right on the money. And one would hope that the recent revelations from Pennsylvania and Ireland on child abuse will give added ammunition to OPEN (One Public Education Now) that is organizing and financing a court case in Ontario to end public financing of Catholic schools in the province. To date they have raised almost \$70,000.

“We cannot undo the damage to children around the world. But we can abolish the separate school boards in Ontario and save a lot of money in the process.” So says Patrick Esmond-White in a letter to the Ottawa Citizen on August 23, 2018.

A Great Quote from Gautama Buddha

The Buddha spoke gently, "Once a person is caught by belief in a doctrine, one loses all one's freedom. When one becomes dogmatic, that person believes his or her doctrine is the only truth and that all other doctrines are heresy. Disputes and conflicts all arise from narrow views. They can extend endlessly, wasting precious time and sometimes even leading to war. Attachment to views is the greatest impediment to the spiritual path. Bound to narrow views, one becomes so entangled that it is no longer possible to let the door of truth open."

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