

Wise, Healthy and, Yes, Wealthy

BY ADELE AZAR-RUCQUOI

MONEY IS A SUBJECT that has always held endless difficulty and fascination for me. At 20 I entered a convent, embracing a sacred vow of poverty and refusing to have anything to do with owning money. At 38, I left that order and had to face financial reality again. I worked in the service of the church and earned a meager salary. But everything suddenly changed when I received a considerable inheritance from my parents. Now my enlarged bank account really became a challenge.

For some inexplicable reason, money had always been a wrestling partner for me. Somehow, somewhere and by someone, I had been formed to think that money and God could not coexist. Foolish thinking, I now see, but at the time it left me confused and bewildered. This windfall of an inheritance only exacerbated the issue. I prayed in the way my mom had laughingly instructed, "Honey, pray like hell." On my knees, I asked God why this strange new economic position should befuddle me so. Could I live with the guilt at having more than others? Should I give it all away?

It never crossed my mind to see all the money that now flowed through my hands as God's gift. Perhaps I had not shed the mentality that came with my vow of poverty. After all, Jesus' pockets were empty. I struggled to grow smarter, to open new doorways to understand my wealth.

My parish priest suggested I read the Bible. I reread the story of Jesus. I saw how he wrote in the sand, checked out the fruit on a tree, let a woman cover his feet with ointment. I noted how comfortable he was with the phenomena of the ordinary. His gentle gestures toward them awakened something new in me. Jesus did not disdain material creation. On the contrary,



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he was alive to the moment and all that the moment contained.

As for money, he did not run. Maybe his pockets were empty, but reading him deeply, who can say that he was speaking against having money? And as for that fat camel struggling to get through that narrow needle's eye? Remember, my priest advised, that it was bloated selfishness Jesus was warning against, not the wealth itself.

"Got a coin?" Jesus asked friends, knowing full well everyone carried money. He put out his hand, accepted the silver, held it up and pitched his challenge: "Give to God what belongs to God, and [note the conjunction] give to man what is his." It's that simple. He recognized money as a valid and vital stream of human interchange, just as valid as the water that he blessed.

In his book, *Creating Affluence*, Deepak Chopra asserts: "Why not acknowledge that God is the perfect model for abundance. God has surrounded Himself with the most glorious material creation of all: planets, stars, cosmic energies, and forces that defy our wildest supposing."

There it was. God wasn't stingy with himself. Why should I be anything less? But it was my mother's words that helped the most.

Stepping out from behind our grocery's cash register, and from a life so drearily patterned and predictable, she was widowed, but a new woman without my father's direction. With a sizable bank account, she was joyfully directing the course of her life. At the age of 65, Mom was resurrected, spending money in a way I had never seen. Furniture, a car, generous loans to friends, gifts for the elderly! Her monetary freedom gave birth to her spirit: "Honey, use the money, make it liquid, make it flow." Whether she knew it or not, she had bequeathed her richest gift of all. I could accept my own bounty.

And so I came, in my own way, to understand more clearly what it meant to live in God's abundance. It was not about outlandish material wealth, nor about embracing poverty as a general rule. It meant embracing whatever abundance came, no matter the size. It meant imitating Mom's generosity to herself and to others. It meant giving myself permission

to enjoy, to savor and always to thank God.

Recently I visited an old friend in California who lives in a mobile home. I watched Molly press lemons in a juicer for lemonade. I thought back on her life's difficult events. She had been making lemonade out of the many bitter fruits that dropped her way after leaving the convent. She had lost a job but then discovered a better one. She had suffered the agonies of a divorce only to meet and marry her ideal mate. Dissatisfaction with her aging body had led her into a whole new relationship with music and movement; she took up ballet. What was special about Molly? She embraced her abundance, however it came to her.

Like Molly and like Mom, I now celebrate the ordinary gifts sown around me, the chopped parsley on the kitchen counter, my flower-laden monks' table in front of our wide garden window, the technological toys in my office that enable me to write these thoughts, and yes, my bank account. A day does not go by when I don't light candles with thanks to God for showering me so. I am filled with gratitude. ■