



Adele Azar-Rucquoi

money as sacrament

finding the sacred in money

A Book for Women

An Arab-American Barry alumna who spent nearly two decades with the Sisters of St. Joseph in Florida, Adele Azar-Rucquoi now writes from her home in Central Florida. Her first book, *Money as Sacrament: Finding the Sacred in Money*, explores her disconcerting and often mystical relationship with money. The book is the culmination of a period of self-discovery she undertook after inheriting \$400,000 from her mother.

"I have been deeply shaped, conditioned, and blessed by a unique relationship with money. Many life-defining experiences emerged as central pieces in my spiritual puzzle: those years working the register in my father's grocery store, as a nun living a vow of poverty followed by lean seasons of church service as a laywoman, then falling into my parents' ample inheritance and living off it. Looking back I am amazed by how my confusion at each juncture has served to shape my authority on the subject of money. My greatest joy is finally seeing money through spiritual eyes and accepting it as part of God's overflowing abundance."

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By Jean Patteson
Orlando Sentinel Staff

Barry alumna learns life lessons after she inherits wealth

You inherit a half-million dollars. Then what? Splurge? Save? Give it to charity? Adele Azar-Rucquoi '72 went into shock.

When she received an unexpected inheritance of \$400,000 after her mother's death in 1983, "I had enough money to throw my attitude toward life, toward friends, and toward God into orbit," recalls Azar-Rucquoi, 69, who lives in Maitland. "And that's exactly what happened." She wrestled with feelings of confusion, fear and guilt. Did she deserve this windfall? How should she use it? What if she should lose it?

A decade later, having resolved many of her questions, she started to

write a book, *Money as Sacrament: Finding the Sacred in Money* (Ten Speed Press, \$12.95). It took almost another decade to complete the work, which was published last December.

The book examines her concept of money as something sacred. It is a novel concept, she admits, and some might find it profane. But after years of thought, study, discussion and prayer, she concludes that money can be considered a gift from God, a means to grace.

"I can't separate God and money," she says. "Money gives power to do good. In that sense, it's a sacrament."

Her book also tells her life story and her ever-changing relationship with money, starting as a little Arab-American girl, proud to be trusted with operating the cash register in her parents' Orlando grocery store. Next, as a nun entering a convent and swearing a vow of poverty. And 16 years later, in 1970, troubled by a sense of emotional and intellectual impoverishment, leaving the convent and working three jobs to make ends meet.

The book describes how she is able, after much soul-searching, to view her inheritance as "God's outstretched hand." And finally, how she meets and marries a homeless man in her 60th year, precipitating a final reckoning with money and its meaning in her life.

As Azar-Rucquoi wrestled with her anxieties about money, she wondered whether others had similar concerns. To find out, she interviewed more than 50 women from various cultural and financial backgrounds.

Throughout her book, their views on how money has affected their relationships, confidence and inner peace are interspersed with her own story of self-discovery.

A CELEBRATION OF LABORS

The scent of orange blossoms drifts into the screened porch of the ranch-style home where Adele Azar-Rucquoi sits with her mug of hot tea. Beyond the screens, a small swimming pool glints in the morning sun. A red cardinal dips over the blue water, then flits into the dark oaks that cloister the backyard.

"It took me nine years to write the book," she says, "and all that time I was looking for the right title."

She was sitting at her computer one day, she recalls.

"My candle was lit. My little monk statue was at my side. The book was

almost done. All of a sudden, the word 'sacrament' came to me.

"I was elated. Then I thought: This is radical. How can I call money a sacrament? That's taboo."

Wasn't money supposed to be the root of all evil? she wondered. Wasn't it the substance that made it harder for a man to enter heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle?

But, as she writes in the introduction to her book, she took heart when she thought of her father, "the dark, once-destitute Syrian, slamming the full register shut and joyfully crying in Arabic, 'Nuschur Allah!' " (Thanks be to God!)

And she felt emboldened when she recalled her parents, clearing the table every Sunday evening after dinner, to count the week's take from Azar's Market.

It was not a greedy reckoning, she says. It was a celebration that their labors were being rewarded.

"It would not be exaggerating to call it a sacred ritual," she writes in her book.

CHANGES IN ATTITUDES

A lanky figure in khaki pants, gray sweatshirt and canvas sun hat appears at the porch's screen door. He has a gray beard, blue eyes, and hands caked with drying mud.

He is Jim Rucquoi, Adele's husband of 10 years. "I write poetry when the inspiration strikes. The rest of the time," he says, holding up his muddied hands, "I potter about in the garden."

While it was her inheritance that spurred Adele to start examining her relationship with money, it was her marriage to Jim that shattered – and then reshaped – her attitudes toward its purpose and use.

Jim was raised in affluence, held a corporate job, and raised a family before experiencing what Adele calls "an emotional crash" that left him penniless and living on the streets.

In her book, she is brutally honest about how difficult it was initially to accept this man into her life: "I revolted at the idea – like any woman of my culture – of marrying a homeless, jobless man, no matter how many fine credentials he possessed. It just wasn't done. And I simply wasn't going to be the one to do such an unspeakable thing."

She says she was like Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*: On the one hand, she could hear her father yelling, "Get rid of the bum!" On the other hand, her heart was whispering, "He's compassionate, he's

smart, he makes you laugh. If you pass him up, you may spend the rest of your life regretting it."

They were married on Dec. 10, 1993, the feast day of their mutual hero, the religious writer Thomas Merton.

She soon found herself warring with her husband over finances. She resented his free spending of her money, especially as he wasn't working. And she battled with the "gender issue."

"I kept stuffing bills into Jim's pocket so he could pay the bills when we were out," she writes – while at the same time realizing that she was playing into the cultural bias that suggests it's somehow unseemly for a woman to be in charge of the family finances.

Over time, and with the guidance of counselors and friends, the couple learned to resolve their conflicts.

The key, Adele says, is talking openly about money and the emotions it provokes. Such discussion will result in better relationships, both financial and personal.

BUYING HAPPINESS

A fluffy gray cat alights on the sofa cushions next to Adele, who draws the creature close.

Two cats, two bicycles, a piano, dozens of books and CDs, a greenhouse filled with orchids and a little red Volkswagen Cabrio – these are the possessions that bring Adele great pleasure.

So do evenings spent square dancing, or weekends conducting workshops on prejudice reduction or conflict resolution.

"And now I can add book-signings to the list," she says.

Outgoing and talkative, Adele turns these signings into animated discussion groups. Two questions that inevitably arise are how to give money away and whether money can buy happiness.

"I give where I see a need. I don't have a formal foundation set up," says Adele. "The homeless are a special warm spot for me, as you can imagine."

And money certainly can buy happiness, she says. "Because when you do good with your money, you're happy."

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