

The Growing Gap Between the Rich and the Poor

It is hard not to get caught up in the growing gap between the rich and the poor. When we consider the abject poverty in the world and compare that with the astounding wealth possessed by so few, it is easy to become angry.

To be honest, in my entire life I do not believe I ever envied people with a lot of money. It never mattered to me whether someone had more material possessions than I did, since I always considered what I had sufficient.

Now, before you nominate me for Sainthood ("Saint Soup of Life" is hardly catchy), I must acknowledge my failings. I reserve my envy for people who possess good health, a lot of personal energy, and many rich, fulfilling, personal relationships. Even when I was a young man – which seems like two or three lifetimes ago – I felt that way. I am not saying that any envy is acceptable; it's just that most of us have it.

To the point, I am well aware what money can buy, but I wonder why the comparison is made. Leaders cannot and do not promise to make everyone a millionaire, because that is unrealistic. However, they do promise to make things better over time. From that perspective, most of us fair well.

Rather than compare yourself to a billionaire, how would you fair against generations that preceded you?

It was not so long ago that most homes were heated by burning wood, usually chopped by a family member. The local stream was generally the only source of water. You made your own hot water by combining the two. They had no way to preserve food. A gentle breeze was the source of cooling. Clothes were washed in that same stream. I am not even sure how people entertained themselves before television and radio. However they did it, it was by candlelight once the sun set. Mobility was a challenge, often taking the better part of a day to reach the nearest town by horse – if you were wealthy enough to own a horse.

During the twentieth century, combustion engines replaced horses, electricity powered homes, automobile and air travel became possible for the masses, and indoor plumbing with hot and cold running water became the standard. The light bulb conquered night's darkness. Television, radios, refrigerators, washers and dryers, phones, air conditioning, and electronics became accessible to the common man, and

enhanced our lives. Ironically, solar powered dryers were available back then – they were called “clotheslines.”

When I was a boy, we still had black and white television sets, which consisted of channels two through thirteen. There was no air-conditioning, but we were grateful for fans on a hot summer night. Phone booths preceded cell phones, coffee was percolated, outdoor games were our video games, and encyclopedias predated the internet. From a teenager onward, I was introduced to microwave ovens, VCRs, central air-conditioning, coffee makers, the internet, and the computer and all its capabilities.

This list is hardly all-inclusive, and does not even include the vaccines, antibiotics, and other medical advances we take for granted today. Nor does it include the social changes that allowed greater freedoms for minorities, the increase of life expectancy, public education for the masses, and the incredible mobility available to our society.

I have a roof over my head, hot and cold running water, a bathroom with a tub and shower, a television, a DVD player and recorder, a Pontiac, a computer with access to the internet, a refrigerator and freezer, a gas stove and oven, a microwave oven, a coffee maker, a garbage disposal, and central heat and air-conditioning – all in a one-bedroom apartment. Many Westerners are blessed with most of these amenities, so I am hardly atypical. Compared to previous generations, we are doing quite well today. Sadly, we are doing so well, we take these “necessities” for granted.

It is true that the rich guy has fancier, more luxurious versions of everything I have. He may own a luxury car while I own a Pontiac. But I have the ability to go wherever he goes, and that ability dwarfs the limited mobility of past generations.

Still, I do miss the old 8-Track tapes. Sure, the quality was poor, but the bleed-through allowed me to listen to two songs playing simultaneously. Boy, those were the days.

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