

Kids, Wealth, Religion, Love and Hate

Chuck Shamata

Can the human race realistically hope to exist, one day, in a truly civilized, kinder and gentler society?

According to physicist Stephen Hawking, it won't happen if our kids don't suddenly acquire more wisdom than any generation that's gone before them. Hawking gives us two hundred years before we either escape to another planet or begin to disappear like the dinosaurs.

But any new approach that aims to take us to the next level of human development would be wise to focus first on the messages it sends to its children. Fortunately, newborns have no preconceived notions. Our hope is in their understanding of the necessity to embrace their best human qualities rather than their worst. The question then becomes more specific: can our best qualities prevail within a socio-economic system which is driven by self interest and greed?

Arguments for a more sustainable society have been proposed before, and have taught us that any attempt to supplant the present system will face monumental obstacles. The odds against change are so high they're nearly insurmountable. But, occasionally, through random, transcendent moments, we catch a glimpse of our positive human potential. The world's reaction to the release of Nelson Mandela after decades of imprisonment was one of those moments. Another was the eve of Barack Obama's election as American president. On both occasions, most of the planet seemed united in a heady mixture of hope, surprise and disbelief that sometimes our best instincts actually can prevail.

But if the incentive of greed and self-interest isn't used to drive our society, what would take its place? Attempts to create a new system will probably end with that very question. Otherwise, "class war" would be hard to avoid.

The rich will certainly anticipate a request that they part with portions of their fortunes, and they're not likely to take kindly to the notion. The late economist, John Kenneth Galbraith, put it this way: "The rich would rather fight to the death than relinquish even a small part of their wealth". And he was probably putting it mildly,

And yet we've recently heard that Bill Gates and Warren Buffet, two of the world's richest men (around 40 billion dollars each), have publicly pledged to donate half their fortunes to combat the world's ills (leaving them with a mere \$20 billion each). Furthermore, they've challenged others with great wealth to do the same by joining "The Giving Pledge". So far, at least 30 other billionaires have "taken the pledge"—for a currently projected total sum of 600 billion dollars. And although we must be skeptical (these people are, after all, American capitalist moguls whose team motto is, "What's in it for me?"), this proposal certainly sounds promising. It even dangles the possibility of "game-changer" hovering around it, right?

April Baker thinks otherwise. She wishes the rich would simply be forced to pay their fair share of taxes. As the founder and executive director of a non-profit fundraising organization called Exhale, you'd think she'd be hugely in favour of the Gates-Buffet plan, but you'd be wrong. That's because veteran professional fundraisers, such as April, know the dirty little secrets of philanthropy.

First, the vast majority of money donated to various charities comes not from the rich, but the poor. In fact, the little \$5.00 and \$10.00 contributions add up to an amount that would make Gates and Buffet's \$40 billion seem paltry.

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themselves, *within the United States*, through private philanthropy organizations. This allows them to keep tax money, legally owed to the U.S. government, from being used by the democratically elected officials whose jobs are to use it for the benefit of all American citizens. Specifically, this means that instead of paying a million dollars in taxes, a wealthy philanthropist puts the money into his own, personal foundation where he's legally required to give only a small percentage of his assets to a charity (about 5%) every year. He then keeps the rest within the shelter of his foundation—where he's legally allowed forever to grow his fortune without taxation! Does anyone really think that this is what the framers of the American Constitution had in mind when they tried to create a just and egalitarian society?

But perhaps Gates and Buffet really do have altruistic goals in mind. It's possible. You may have heard about native gift giving rituals in various parts of the world, a method of determining an individual's worth based not on what he possesses, but rather on what he *gives* to others. Such a practice existed among many West Coast native cultures such as the Haida and Coast Salish. In their traditional "potlatch" ceremonies, wealth was redistributed amid singing, dancing and feasting. The custom is still practiced by some peoples, but interestingly, it was banned by both U.S. and Canadian governments during the last quarter of the 19th century, mainly under the pressure from missionaries and government agents who considered it wasteful, unproductive, and contrary to 'civilized' values. If the Gates-Buffet pledge represents a shift to a comparable practice of generosity in Western culture, they should be lauded and celebrated. And, to his credit, Buffet has exhibited an un-

derstanding of the huge-scale inequality in the way Americans are financially rewarded, and recognition of the harm it's doing to his country. If all goes as promised, an immediate burst of 60 billion dollars to the world's poor, sick and hungry would provide miracles of hope and save countless lives.

But Buffet has also said that his specific plans are to donate 4% of his holdings per year, and to give away most of his fortune before his death. Well, 4% of 40 billion is a sizeable, and much appreciated chunk of money to be sure, but it seems to be somewhat short of the 20 billion dollar lump sum first promised, and may, in fact, be the kind of tax-evasion scam described by April Baker. That may not come as a major surprise, but it would be very unfortu-

nate indeed and very disappointing. Because somewhere inside most of us—restrained by chains and cobwebs, in a tiny, unlit corner of our dubious souls—generosity of spirit may actually exist, and it might have been awakened, nourished and encouraged to grow as a result of The Giving Pledge's shining example.

In our survival-of-the-fittest world, we've always tacitly accepted that "alpha" personalities will get to "run the show". The rest of us usually don't object strenuously to this reality, or that the Alphas claim a little extra of the best that life has to offer. After all, like the leader of a pride of lions, a C.E.O. or other Top Banana, must display superiority over the pack. He or she does so through power, cunning, and totems of superior status, such as expensive toys and surroundings, social position and, certainly not least, the most desirable sex partners. We've seen countless examples of this scenario throughout history. As Henry Kissinger once said, "Power is the best aphrodisiac". Napoleon doubtlessly felt

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the same. They both understood that the fundamental “bottom line” isn’t wealth or power per se, but the sexual magnetism it provides which is the big prize. Unfortunately, abuse of power and corruption almost always follow closely behind the acquisition of power and the human race has been paying the price since we began walking upright. But what if wealth and power were replaced as “sexy qualities” by generosity and compassion? What if we somehow began to be attracted to those who were least selfish and had the most moral courage? And what if the battle for the biggest bank account morphed into the race to contribute most to establish peace in our time? These questions could, of course, be dismissed as Pollyanna pipe dreams, but if “spin” and advertising virtuosity could elect George Bush (*twice!!*), anything’s possible. And there’s the reality that almost everyone, everywhere (certainly the non-alphas anyway) really do want peace. Our most powerful instinct is for survival, and most people just want to survive without the fear that they and their children will go hungry.

As I write this, hundreds of thousands of people in Pakistan have been tragically devastated by a huge natural disaster—this time a flood. The suffering is indescribable. Many, including thousands of children, have died. And diseases, such as cholera are on the rise. And yet, it could be argued that many of the survivors’ lives were almost as bad before the flood. Most of them are farmers and families who still work for wealthy landowners under a medieval feudal system. They’re paid a pittance. Hunger, malnutrition, disease and death, are a way of life. Can any of us claim to live in a civilized society if we allow any of us to live this way? Warren Buffet, are you paying attention? Your 30 billion dollars

could have transformed such a region—assured basic infrastructures, health services, provided access to clean water, decent food and shelter and a chance at a better life to people who feed an entire family on less than 30 dollars a month.

There are people and regions everywhere that need such humanitarian compassion. If the rich, or the Catholic Church, or Islam truly have the will to help rather than to exploit their less fortunate brothers and sisters, there’s no lack of places to begin.

But the point here is not to accuse, blame or vilify the rich and powerful for the ills caused by greed. It would be easy, but unfair. No-one can be blamed for simply being equipped to survive in a “survival of the fittest” environment. Who wouldn’t

insure their own and their children’s security by using any and all weapons in their arsenal? In the jungle, the lion uses his power to slay the zebra because the zebra represents the lion’s survival. It’s nothing personal against zebras. Just business. Very much like Mr. Green and Mr. Gray.

Mr. Green operated a struggling, third-generation family farm. Mr. Gray was a land speculator who learned from an acquaintance on the county council that a large area was about to be rezoned from agricultural to residential. With this knowledge, Mr. Gray offered to purchase the Green’s farm. Despite serious misgivings, the Greens accepted what appeared to be a good offer and sold.

Two years later, Mr. Gray sold the Green’s re-zoned farm (along with several others he’d acquired) for a new suburban housing tract. He was paid an amount that immediately made him a multi-millionaire. The city praised Mr. Gray as a “visionary entrepreneur”.

Mr. Green watched it unfold. What he saw

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was the decades of hard work the farm had extracted from three generations of his family, wasted. He was ashamed of his decision to sell. He wondered if he'd committed some unknown sin for which he was now being punished. He'd tried to be a good Christian and a good citizen. Why had God and the system abandoned him?

There's no moral to this story and no one in it is "good" or "bad". Mr. Gray heard opportunity knocking and simply opened the door. He dealt with Mr. Green in a perfectly legal and appropriate manner. Nothing personal. Just business. Although we must recognize that a world that's completely fair to everyone is impossible, it's quite reasonable to question the long-term wisdom of poking someone in the eye, since, sooner or later, they'll probably poke you back. Then that poke will have to be avenged, and so on and so on, until everyone's blind.

North Americans today would probably consider it too "bleeding heart" if their government decided to guarantee all of its citizens a basic right to food, shelter, education and medical. But the Dutch don't. They're already implementing such a policy. Why? Because they're more compassionate? Maybe so, but mainly because they think it makes economic sense. And ironically, this "socialistic" concept comes from a successfully capitalist country. A guarantee of at least minimum-level security from cradle to the grave isn't just humane in the Dutch view, they've seen it reduce crime and provide all citizens with the means to improve their lives and become contributing members of society.

The contrary and "conservative" view is

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that individuals would cease to be productive if they're given a "free ride". Then why not simply guarantee everyone a livable-wage job? Why denigrate the unemployed worker? Why not put the blame where it belongs, on industry and government, for their failure to provide employment? Automation may have made the commercial "bottom line" much more lucrative when it replaced people with machines, but at what price? The huge profits certainly weren't passed on to the working and lower middle class - particularly those who lost their jobs and watched the social fabric of their nation decay. The problem with "progress" to this point is that technological, military and economic progress continues to steadily advance, while human development and compassion fade.

In the 1970s, "Yuppies" or "Boomers" (aka The Me Generation), described themselves as "upwardly mobile" and sought the paradox of wealth and comfort, while remaining "regular folks". They adored their kids, and believed they'd be far better parents than their own had been. They wanted to be more loving, more committed, better-connected and more supportive. They fought for (and paid for) "the best schools", tutors, technological aids and extra-curricular activities and opportunities - all with an eye to the future. Some observers of the time felt the Boomers were on the right track to achieve a kinder, gentler world—just as many had said of the Hippies before them.

It didn't work. Thirty-five years passed, and the Yuppie's future is now our present. The world's battlefields and marketplaces aren't kinder, gentler places. On the contrary, they're meaner and more ruthless. There are many rea-

sons for this, of course, but the phrase, “upwardly mobile” deserves scrutiny. It sounds progressive, but actually represents the same time-worn divisive displays of power and obeisance that went before. To have been other than upwardly mobile defined one as a societal fringe player. Oddly, we still accept ancient divisions, definitions, limitations and unwritten codes of rank as a matter of course—“the cost of doing business” so to speak.

But not kids. As stated earlier, kids come into the world unformed by expectations. They learn first from their parents, but are also affected early on by experience with their peers—some of whom live in houses, are driven in cars, play with toys, have entertainments, travel, and other luxuries that are unavailable to their playmates. Children in the “have” category gain a sense of being “special”. Children who are “have-nots”—especially those without the benefit of involved parents—acquire formative feelings of inferiority. It’s a simple equation: “Your family has a shitload of money and much nicer things than me, therefore they must be smarter, better, and more deserving than me”. These kids are already playing a desperate “catch-up” game in the human race.

The Boomer’s sincere hopes of making their children’s future better were defeated by the same hypocritical and contradictory systems on which we still base our children’s futures.

But humans are nothing if not contradictory—especially when it comes to organized religion. Christians are taught to revere the teachings of Christ, yet exalt “the moneychangers in the temple” whom Jesus reviled. They teach their children The Golden Rule—to share their toys and be generous to others—while flaunting their own proprietary acquisitiveness. They

preach “love thy neighbour as thyself” to their kids, then show them how to hate and fear the “other”. Orthodox Jews believe themselves to be “the chosen people”. (That’s a little problematic isn’t it? The Nazi Aryans said pretty much the same thing as “The Master Race”.) If you happen to be Catholic, you carry the certainty of knowing that God will choose you first at the entrance to heaven—you’re fully se-

ecure in the belief that all other faiths will have to battle it out for the number two spot. Muslims feel the same way, as do Baptists, etc. etc. Deep down, each believe they’re “most special in God’s eyes”.

Should we be surprised then, that our kids grow up to have so little respect for the honesty and credibility of their elders? By the time an intelligent kid reaches the age of fifteen, he or she has probably already

figured out that at least half of what they’ve been told so far is a lie. Unfortunately they aren’t sure which half. So they use observation and logic and see that the law of the jungle still rules, and that they must adapt to it or perish. And so the cycle continues.

Which brings us back to the original question: Do we have reasonable hope of a more enlightened, equitable, compassionate and humane society in our future?

It’s improbable. But improbable isn’t the same as impossible.

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