On Materialism
Ken Olson

Materialism was a core tenet of 20th century communism, maintaining that "everything is just matter in motion." That was the root of the utter brutality that came to hold sway in the Soviet Union and Communist China for decades. Such dogma (actually, another sort of fundamentalism) denied the existence of anything higher than the physical; there were no official moral values to hold dictators accountable. Thus, John Lennon's naïve praise-song of the 60s, the warm and fuzzy "Imagine No Religion," turned out to be a horrific illusion, as people were regarded as little more than meat and cannon fodder for the state. Written long before, Dostoyevsky's penetrating words in Notes from Underground proved true: "Without God, anything is permitted."

I join others in saying that capitalism has countless advantages, and there is much to celebrate in our nation. However, there are self-described capitalists who are, at bottom, nearly as materialistic as any communist, including many who are now pinning that scare-word on others. In this, Donald Trump truly is Exhibit A. For personal advantage, he and his enablers have destroyed trust and friendship with European allies forged over eight decades to curry favor with Russia's Putin. About that, Thom Friedman writes, "He simply does not cherish democracy. He cherishes money. And he has no problem selling out the first for the second. …When he uses the American presidency to make a buck, it is our collective shame. There is simply no core American value Trump will not sell out." Remember, too, that the Founders reserved their strongest scorn for anyone using public service for self-enrichment.

All the big questions are philosophical, i.e. they deal with our presuppositions. Those have to do with our assumptions, the lens through which we look at the world. A bit of candid self-examination in this 250th year would reveal that a strongly perverted and selfish motif in recent American culture has been to define "the good life" in terms of possessing wealth and material things. It wasn't supposed to be this way.

The problem is everywhere. O, we have those clichés about "following the American dream" and "being all you can be," etc., but the dominant cultural motif is that luxuries and dollar signs are what receive admiration and envy. (Artists, scholars, and humanitarians need not apply.) Thus, a truly compassionate conservatism is a rare bird, and it is a perverted dog-eat-dog covetous capitalism that is all too common. Advertising on TV continually drums the materialistic message, stoking desire and greed for upgraded and more expensive products. In fact, the economy depends upon it. (Commercials about "Christmas" will soon be coming.) It is the "thingification" of values.

Contrary to their origins, even admission to the best colleges is often touted, not as providing a substantive education about the best and deepest values life has to offer, but as a doorway to 1% type-wealth and beyond: new renditions of Wall Street tycoons of the sort pictured in the old Monopoly game.

It is not only poverty that is characterized by a pointless whirlpool in which work is for food and stuff, so that one can have energy to work for more food and more stuff. After all, no one ever said on his/her deathbed, "I wish I had spent more time at the office." Again, materialism leaves out those higher sensibilities of the human spirit, and that omission is in so many ways self-destructive. Ernest Hemingway's short story, A Clean Well-Lighted Place, has one waiter say to another, "Last night, the boss tried to commit suicide." When asked why, he said, "It was nothing." Then, "How do you know it was nothing?" Answer: "He has plenty of money." One

thinks of so many of our fellow citizens who are imbibing drugs, booze, smokes, vapes, and weed, self-medicating to ward off pains of many sorts, including the emptiness of trying to live with ideals that never rise above basement level. As Thoreau observed, “The majority of men lead lives of quiet desperation.”

So, Bill Clinton’s statement, “It’s the economy, Stupid” could simply be a practical recognition of a key factor in election turnout, but it’s often more: the crass mantra of the simple-minded whose unspoken outlook is that life centers on material things –this, instead of the morally good, the transcendent truth, and the profoundly beautiful.

Congregations used to expect their pastors to give messages against materialism. Now, not so much. There are even TV “evangelists” whose obscene message is “Pray and grow rich.” So, to those many who claim the Christian Faith, this reminder: Jesus told parables saying that only fools confuse security with bigger and better barns, and His teachings in the Gospels are replete with admonitions about not laying up for oneself “treasures of earth, where moth and rust consume and thieves can break in and steal.” (After hearing Him describe discipleship, the rich young ruler turned away, “for he had many possessions.”) Thus, “We do not live by bread alone” but by caring, compassion, and the highest of aspirations. Those values need to be embraced, affirmed, and reflected in all sorts of ways --including in how we vote.

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