

Perspectives on Virtue and Power; Race and Society

#14 We Are Not Thriving; We Are Not Content

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At one time we had a biblical understanding of prosperity to include not only economic bounty, but the flourishing of the soul under God. Together these are called thriving. The Apostle John wrote to his friend, “I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers.” (3 John 2). This tells us that multiple facets of life (health, life situation, and soul well-being) are important to God and people.

Long ago when the world could only prosper by man’s struggles on the land and sea, poverty was the norm. A few elites typically conquered, inherited, or stole the land or its fruits. All people had a poverty mentality. Nature appeared stingy and hostile because it was.

Inspired by the Reformation and the discovery of the New World, Europeans gave birth to science and the western confidence in what even ordinary people could do. The early steps toward the promised progress resulted in the doubling of the global population from 500 million in 1500 to one billion in 1800.

A new prosperity mentality was born. Jonathan Edwards saw this bounty from God’s hand in the context of liberty in the new world. In Europe Francis Bacon spoke of the wonders that would come from unleashing nature for the benefit of people. Farewell to the curse. The Enlightenment picked up this idea and made an ideal of the human mind apart from God. The elites regarded God as the obsolete and even as the cruel author of stinginess and poverty.

What wonders man would make with the plow and thresher for farming, for better sails, and then rails for transport. What wonders man would create for medicine and health, for jobs and opportunity, for the end to peasantry, serfdom and worse. What wonders and even comforts for ordinary people would come from cotton clothes, cleanliness, heated homes, and even water that was hot, fresh and clean.

In the mixture of these two visions: Edwards’ appreciation for the bounty of God and Bacon’s enthusiasm for human progress, America was born, and Europe found a new path forward. There were many obstacles to overcome, many relics of the past to live down, and seemingly infinite problems to solve, but the will and opportunity to thrive was born. And we did thrive; we added and fed seven billion more people on earth.

We have arrived at a place where we have achieved dramatically more than Bacon or Edwards imagined. However, as D’Souza wrote, just at the moment when all but one billion of the nearly eight billion people on earth are more prosperous than in 1800, we have hit an impasse. Our souls are not thriving.

“Amazingly, the dream of mass affluence has become a social reality, but a snake in the grass...will eliminate...our opportunity to make good on the promise of wealth and undo the American experiment at the very moment of its supreme triumph.” (*Virtue of Prosperity*. 2000. 229).

What is that ‘snake’? We are not content. We see no purpose. We are guilty, even angry that so many are so much richer than others. We are astounded that our excellent health care is not perfect. We own everything, but we borrow trillions for even more. Few challenges and fewer occupations satisfy. Our souls do not thrive.

Solzhenitsyn said, “The rest of the world longs for the freedoms of the West but is astounded by the use that westerners make of them.” We have all the tech imaginable with more on the way, and we use it for thoughtless amusement and for unspeakably idiotic and uncivil social media conversations that ignorantly trivialize what is important. Politics is the impotent epicenter of this discontent as we see today. Solzhenitsyn was scorned by both the left and right as way off base. Like true prophets he has been proven right. We are not thriving.

Body and Soul: Today our lives are comfortable, even affluent, but our souls are shriveled, even starving. We are discovering that the good physical life does not produce the good life of the soul. Even denying the life of the soul does not ease our pain or make the soul disappear. Anxiety, fear, riots, despair, opioid addiction, and suicide are not evidence of the fulfillment of Bacon’s or Edward’s dreams. In fact, we run the risk of going back to the 1400s with tyrants and misery as the norm. At least we’ll have our cell phones. God help us.