

KILROY CAFÉ

Philosophy for the Modern Age

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Too Pretty Too Rich

Yes, it's possible!

By GLENN CAMPBELL

If you had an enemy who you wanted to hurt, what would be the best way to get even with them? You could sue them in court or humiliate them in the press. You could torture them on the rack or draw them over hot coals.

Or, if you really wanted to destroy their life in a slow and excruciating way, you could arrange to have them win the lottery. A few million dollars will do it. They'll probably never recover.

Never underestimate the destructive power of excessive and unwarranted good fortune. It zaps the life from individuals and societies. It detaches people from their roots and from healthy relations with reality. It promotes sloth and discourages growth. It encourages frivolous investments that drag down people's lives in the long run.

Winning the lottery may seem fun at first, but the penalty comes when the money runs out and you've lost the skills to sustain yourself. Then you may end up worse off than you were before.

The same thing happens when you feed the pigeons in a city park. They love the free food, but when you feed them regularly, they lose the ability to forage for themselves. Their numbers expand under your largesse, so the environment can no longer support them naturally. When you stop feeding them, as you inevitably must, the pigeons will be in

dire straits. It won't just be a little misfortune now but mass starvation.

Likewise, when someone experiences some form of good fortune—be it a job promotion, falling in love, sudden wealth, or winning a beauty contest—you want to congratulate them. It is remarkable, however, how quickly good fortune can morph into bad. Success is a disorienting change that many people can't handle and that may set them up for future failure. Something apparently good in the short term may not be best in the whole arc of one's life.

Success tends to freeze people at the developmental level they were in when the blessing occurred. If you suddenly win everything you ever wished for, you have little incentive to move on. If you find fame as a movie star or a football player, you're pretty much trapped in that career. If you hadn't got what you wanted, you might have been forced to evolve, perhaps into a field that is ultimately more meaningful.

Any gift can become a curse. For example, a young woman who has the good fortune of being biologically gorgeous is likely to be drawn down that easy avenue to some career where beauty matters. Unfortunately, this also freezes in place a certain primitive philosophy of life. Beauty naturally leads to a world view where appearance is important and operational skills such as intellect are neglected.

All developmental growth involves some anxiety and risk. It requires that you be hungry enough to leave your comfort zone. By eliminating your hunger and offering safety, success can sometimes trap you in a velvet prison where life is too easy for your own good. There needs to be an edge to fall off, a nearby abyss, before you are really motivated to change.

Think back to your own youth and the things you once wished for. What if they had all come true? Wouldn't you have been trapped in a much smaller world than you're living in today? The same delusions probably apply right now. Maybe the worst thing that could happen to you is to get what you want.

Can you be too rich? It isn't a sin to have money in the bank; the risk comes when you start spending it. Sports cars, vacation homes and other unnecessary luxuries require ongoing maintenance that ultimately sabotages your freedom. Money also lets you buy your way out of tight spots that should have woken you up and forced you to change.

Poverty is no picnic, and you are right to want to remove yourself from it. Wealth, however, is overrated. Once you have enough resources to serve your basic needs, accumulating more doesn't necessarily improve your life. Instead, it often makes you fat and lazy.

Can you be too pretty? This kind of superficial success can easily distract from deeper pursuits. If you were born good looking, maybe you should hide it behind a mask so you know it isn't interfering with your growth. Like money, beauty can allow you to buy your way out of tight spots without developing the appropriate life skills.

Success, like a free buffet, can be a pleasant experience at first, but for your own health and nutrition, you need to limit what you take from it.

—G.C.

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