



The Rainbow of Entitlement

A discussion paper exploring consumerism and what we feel is rightly ours.

Aperture

The concept of entitlement can feel a little ‘middle-class’, even a little ‘precious’. The concern of this paper is to explore how entitlement is a practice of getting and protecting what we feel is ‘rightfully ours’? Have you and I been duped into *chasing rainbows*, duped into thinking that there is pot of gold of comfort, meaning or significance in the next thing we ‘possess’? Is there more to entitlement than simply the excesses of ‘selfish capitalism’? Can entitlement be a measure of the mutual responsibility we have toward others, a measure of what we’re actively sharing in/with others?

Definitions

I deserve better.

I deserve it.

I deserve more.

Now.

Whatever I want.

Whenever I want.

Whoever I want.

“You deserve a break today.”

Advertising slogan from
McDonalds.

Entitlement.

“Stop and think about this for a minute. Is your daily routine like most people’s? Waking up every day to the sound of an annoying alarm clock only to get dressed in clothes you have to buy to go to work. Driving through morning traffic in a car that you’re still paying for in order to get to the dead-end job you need so you can pay for the clothes, pay for the car and pay for the home you have to leave empty all day in order to afford to live in it. Sounds depressing doesn’t it? For most people it’s a reality. Are you ready to start living the lifestyle you really deserve? Doing the things you really want to?”

Advertising slogan from Pay Per Click.

We make demands.

We justify over-indulgence.

We have rights.

We expect pampering; we spoil ‘ourselves’.

We claim special treatment.

We grab for and take what is rightfully ‘ours’.

We’re worth it.

“Because you’re worth it.”

Advertising slogan from
L’Oreal.

Entitlement is a bit of a mixed bag. There is the good - think of the UN which has globalized a form of entitlement in its Universal Charter on Human Rights and enabled the establishment and protection of human rights on a global scale (<http://www.un.org/rights/>). And think of the entitlements we enjoy in our own Aotearoa New Zealand – our consumer rights, free education and free health care, the right to a fair trial, free speech, the freedom of religion, the right to government-sponsored social welfare, and the right to vote. The popularity of *Fair Go* and *Target* on our televisions simply point to how collectively we feel entitled to a “fair deal.” Tom Beaudoin echoes this goodness of entitlement and says: “... there are good reasons – spiritual bases - to feel a certain kind of entitlement. If we are entitled to anything, it is because we are human beings who - by simply being alive - image the incomprehensible God. We thus should have no shame in saying we deserve healthful food, safe quarter, education, provision for a future, fair treatment in work. All of these pertain to the divine enfoldment and vocation of every human life. But it is precisely these goods that are deserved by all human beings, not just Western ones.” The darker history of entitlement emerges when *we forget that everyone is deserving of a “fair go.”* The problem is that: “... many of us have learned unrealistic expectations about what we deserve. These expectations deprive others around the world of what they deserve to be human. These inflated expectations are what we can truly call ‘entitlement.’ Thus, one of the most dangerous and important questions to pose today in the public square is a question both economic and spiritual: Of what are *all* God’s children truly deserving?”

(Tom Beaudoin, 2007, *Consuming Faith*).

Entitlement is a framing narrative. It defines what or who is deserving, what we feel we ‘have to have’, what we feel we’re owed, what is our privilege.

Its framing can be evidenced in how we think of *our citizenship*.

There is with entitlement a greater commitment to the protection of what are *personal rights* than to the collective responsibilities we share.

Its framing can be felt in *our desires*.

There is with entitlement excessive and inflated expectations of what is ‘enough.’ There is a gross exaggeration of what is estimated to be a *necessity*; what are thought to be our *needs*.

Its framing can be detected in how we look at and tread on *our earth*.

There is with entitlement a leaning to objectify and treat the earth like we ‘own’ it, like it is a *private property of ours*. The earth is imagined to be a *resource* that can be drilled, cleared, harvested, mined, polluted, and developed to match our sense of progress. It is *something* that exists solely for its *usefulness to us*. It has a utilitarian value. Its like we’ve forgotten that *our earth* is a God given *gift* and that we share this ‘home of ours’ with 6.77 billion other human inhabitants and literally trillions of other living organisms.

Its framing can be discerned in *our faith*.

There is with entitlement the temptation to *consume* God and church like we’re shopping for a new pair of shoes. We look for what fits our sense of deservingness and our personal sense of identity. The *God of this deserving faith* is imagined to be a kind of Cosmic Santa Clause who, if we’re good enough, promises to sanction and source our inflated expectations. The *God of this faith* is captive, domiciled, in *our favour* and at our disposal. It feels like we have a monopoly on His *favour*, and with enough faith, enough fervent prayer, and a large enough ‘tithes’, we can get *this* God, *our God*, to move in *our favour*. It is *our destiny*. There is a demand in our prayers for ‘heaven now’. And there is a championing of *deserving victory stories* from the platform and pulpit that only exacerbate this sense of entitled providence. Tales of how the ‘favoured and saved’ have gone from rags to riches, or from sickness to wholeness, leave you and me with the deafening (and sometimes defeatist) impression that we can and *should* ‘share’ in the same favorable story.

Its framing can be felt in *our experience of family*.

There is with entitlement the demanding of the permission to choose *how life starts and when life ends*,¹ and in between, there is the insistence that our families function to pass on what is rightfully ours (a history and family name, opportunity and a good start in life, love, the estate, and a healthy dose of self-esteem).

Its framing can be heard in what we expect of *our health*.

There is with entitlement the expectation that it is possible to enjoy happy, '*fulfilled*', and healthy lives without the inconvenience or interruption of grief, loss, pain, sickness or suffering.

Its framing can be found in *our identity*.

There is with entitlement the attempt to discover our *selves* in and through consuming, getting and '*having*'² ever more. The mantra of *me, myself and mine* dominates how we see ourselves, how we interact with others, and how and where we spend our energy, money and time.

Its framing can be seen in *our politics*.

There is with entitlement the election of governments like we're shopping for a bargain or the '*best deal*', and, with a narrow parochial image of the *common good*, there is then the lobbying of government to ensure it protects our interests, even if it that is at the expense of others.

Its framing can be discerned in how we *see and treat otherness*.

There is with entitlement the tendency toward *commodifying and fearing our connections* to others. We engage with others like they're 'objects'; 'things' to control, 'get', 'have', possess or 'use', and somewhat callously, though never confessed in the open, we only see *real value* in our relationships when they 'work' for us.³ The inflated expectations of entitlement seriously diminish the space and time we have for otherness. Its like we're too 'full of ourselves', too 'stuffed' with things, too tired from trying to 'get' and mollify our own conflicted desires to even think of engaging with others.

Its framing can be detected in *our practice of security*.

There is with entitlement the erection of fences, gated communities, installation of sirens, training of dogs, and the spending of exorbitant money on militarising and policing to protect what we think is rightfully ours. There is a fear of difference and a strong commitment to the myth of 'redemptive violence', to the myth of peace, power and security through the sword.⁴ The escalating expectations of entitlement lock the future into a violent cycle of grabbing, keeping and defending that shuts others 'out'. There is a 'vicious cycle of tension between an anxious global empire of the rich and an angry global terrorist revolution of the poor.'⁵ The global threat of terrorism is in this thinking something that threatens our immutable personal right to live 'our way of life'.⁶ It is something that threatens our right to live how we want to.

¹ See Discussion Papers and Positional Statements of The Salvation Army at <http://www.salvationarmy.org.nz/explore-connect/about-us/position-statements/>, and <http://www.salvationarmy.org.nz/explore-connect/about-us/discussion-documents/>.

² Eric Fromm, 1976, *To Have or To Be*; 1995, *The Essential Fromm: Life between having and being*.

³ James Oliver, *Affluenza* (2007), notes that: "Unless your family members assist your career, you keep them at a distance, going through the motions of family life because convention demands it, or simply having nothing to do with them. In choosing friends you are motivated by their use to you, not a desire to be close, emotionally, and to enjoy shared pursuits for fun rather than competition. Friendship and romantic attachments are so muddled up with professional alliances that they become indistinguishable, as does work and play."

⁴ Redemptive violence is a widespread myth that is simply not working. "... in 2004, for example, global military expenses exceeded \$1 trillion (US), but serious international terrorist attacks rose from 175 to 655." Brian McLaren, 2008, *Everything Must Change*.

⁵ Brian McLaren, 2008, *Everything Must Change*.

⁶ George Bush, 'Justice Will Be Done' - Transcript of President Bush's Speech To Joint Congress After the World Trade Center and Pentagon Bombings, 2001, <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0900159.html>.

Its framing can be felt in *our sexuality*.

There is with entitlement the demanding and ‘taking’ of sex without commitment or intimacy (which, paradoxically, is exactly what we hope for in sex), and without promises of faithfulness in marriage, mutuality, sacrifice, or shared vows.

Its framing can be seen in *our vision of welfare*.

There is with entitlement the insistence of a minimal provision of a safety net of social security that can lessen the casualties of selfish capitalism and give the pretence of guaranteeing the rights of everyone who cannot ‘get’ what they *need* from participating on the *free and open* market.

Its framing can be evidenced in *our work*.

There is with entitlement the feeling that employment is largely to pay off the expenses of what we feel entitled to. The never-ending cycle of identity-conferring consumption and entitlement gets repeated with every pay packet.

Gracelessness

The language and practice of entitlement is misleading. It confuses the means with the ends, consumerism with identity, the hipness of labels with community, money with significance. It fails to differentiate excess from enough, the gift of grace from the grasping of greed, the marketed promises of *better, faster, more and new* from the mutuality of what is really a necessity and what is truly sustainable. It imagines getting, having, possessing and owning to be the holders of prestige, status, and success. It mistakes genuine needs for marketed wants.

Entitlement confuses the major with the minor. Take Joel Osteen who preaches something of a gospel of entitlement. The ‘smiling evangelist’ interprets a minor incident to be a major supernatural move of God. A clerk at the airport tells Osteen that he has to check in a large camera with his luggage. It couldn't be carried onto the plane. He gets into a conflict, gets nowhere, when a pilot, who overhears the dispute, placates Osteen by offering to stow the camera in the cockpit. Osteen writes:
“The woman behind the counter glared at me and shook her head, clearly aggravated. I just smiled and said, ‘Sorry, ma'am; it's the favour of God’...” (Joel Osteen, 2004, *Your Best Life Now: Seven Steps to Living at Your Full Potential*).

The legacy of this entitlement is *gracelessness*.

The kind of gracelessness that contributes to *deep anxiety*.

The constant and everyday barrage of marketing ensures that what we ‘get’ or ‘have’ is never enough, that there is always something ‘more’ we deserve, something else we ‘have to have’, something *new* to fuel our sense of worthiness.⁷ The cynics claim that this dis-ease, this manufactured disquiet, is what fuels the prized profiteering of selfish capitalism:

“... to fill the emptiness and loneliness, and to replace our need for authentic, intimate relationships, we resort to the consumption that is essential for economic growth and profits. The more anxious or depressed we are, the more we must consume, and the more we consume, the more disturbed we become. Consumption holds out the false promise that an internal lack can be fixed by an external means... We medicate our misery through buying things; its purveyors have never pretended otherwise.”⁸ Have you and I fallen into this trap of *chasing rainbows*, fooled into thinking that in the next *thing* we ‘own’, at the end of the next rainbow there will be *everything* we've ever desired or wanted?⁹

⁷ John Naish comments: “We are bombarded with up to 3, 500 sales shots each day, or one every 15 seconds of our waking lives. In 2004, companies worldwide spent more than \$600 billion (NZ) on advertising. In the past decade, the number of British advertising spots has jumped from four to 123.” John Naish, 2008, *Enough – Breaking free from The World of Excess*.

⁸ Oliver James, 2007, *Affluenza*.

⁹ Thomas Pyszczynski claims somewhat coldly that the ‘retail therapy’ of shopping is “a shield designed to control the potential for terror that results from awareness of the horrifying possibility that we humans are merely transient animals groping to survive in a meaningless universe, destined only to die and decay.” Cited in John Naish, 2008, *Enough – Breaking free from The World of Excess*.

The kind of gracelessness that cultivates a *hyper-competitiveness*.

There is with the increase in mass media a correlating increase in how we compare ourselves to others. There is a continual enticement to spend more and more time and money on coveting and trying to imitate what others 'have'. The hyping of these enticements festers and feeds off a dividing of others into *haves*, *have-nots* and *have-mores*.

The kind of gracelessness that exacerbates *excessiveness and over-consumption*.

The cheapness and ease of *fast food* has caused something of a global epidemic of obesity. For the first time in history the global population of obese over-eaters (1.1 billion) now equals the number of people on our planet who suffer from malnutrition and under-feeding (1.1 billion).¹⁰ A form of this *globesity* is on the rise in New Zealand. The World Health Organization has noted that our levels of obesity increased from 9% (males) and 11% (females) in 1977 to 20% and 22% respectively in 2003. The 2006/07 New Zealand Health Survey found that one in three adults were overweight (36.3%) and one in four were obese (26.5%); one in five children aged 2 to 14 years were overweight (20.9%) and one in twelve was obese (8.3%).¹¹ The Ministry for the Environment in New Zealand has shown that the level of household consumption has 'increased 39 per cent over the last decade, compared to a population increase of 11 per cent and GDP growth of 30 per cent. The level of consumption has increased per person – every New Zealander spent 26 per cent more in 2006 than they did a decade before. Housing, transport, and food and beverages were the top three consumption categories in New Zealand.'¹² The 'fantastic plastic', the ease with which we can get access to credit and spend credit has contributed to a national credit card debt of 5 billion New Zealand dollars.¹³ It'd be interesting to get closer to the human stories inside these statistics and explore whether or not this increasing debt is from the inflated expectations of entitlement, or, with the current economic crisis, is it from having to find a means of putting food on the table, a matter of survival? There is no doubt that the inflated expectations of entitlement and the 'ease' of credit or Higher Purchase deals has helped to 'create a world where we have so many gadgets, novelties and general ephemera around us that our ability to relate to it all gets swamped. We just call it 'stuff'. The lower priced stuff often promises to solve some of our little niggles, though often these items only temporarily sate a nagging need to purchase *something*' bigger, better or brighter.¹⁴ A *Big Mac* simply isn't *big enough*; in fact, with the excessiveness of our inflated expectations and instant gratifications, enough now never feels like *enough*.

The kind of gracelessness that fosters a *closed, diminished, inward-looking sense of self*.

The inflated expectations of entitlement, and its mate, over-consumption, leave people literally *fill of themselves*. We're literally left with only ourselves to hold on to, with only what we can hold and hoard within ourselves. We're left with a sense of self that is stuffed to the hilt *with things*. *There is no room left for others, no space left for otherness*. We're immune to the suffering of others: 'I got what I deserve and they got exactly what they deserve.'¹⁵ We're numb. We fail to notice others. We simply can't see past ourselves. There is literally too much stuff in the way.

The kind of gracelessness that fuels a *growing impatience with everyone and everything that cannot be customized to fit the deservingness of our preferences or our timing*.

The fumings of *parking rage*, *road rage*, *shopping rage*, the criminal activities of burglary, car conversion, shoplifting, and fraud, and the escalating incidences of date rape and teenage pregnancy, testify to something of a growing impatience with whatever or whoever frustrates our confected desires, with whatever or whoever denies what we think we're rightly entitled to. Now.

¹⁰ World Watch Institute, 2000, Chronic Hunger and the Obesity Epidemic: Eroding Global Progress.

¹¹ See <http://www.socialreport.msd.govt.nz/health/obesity.html>; www.moh.govt.nz/obesity.

¹² For more information on the levels of household consumption and for the impact of our consumption on the environment go to [Environment New Zealand 2007](http://www.environment.govt.nz/publications/ser/enz07-dec07/chapter-3.pdf) at www.mfe.govt.nz, <http://www.mfe.govt.nz/publications/ser/enz07-dec07/chapter-3.pdf>.

¹³ <http://www.rbnz.govt.nz/statistics/monfin/>, February 2009.

¹⁴ John Naish, 2008, Enough – Breaking free from The World of Excess.

¹⁵ Rob Bell, 2008, Jesus Wants To Save Christians.

The kind of gracelessness that leaves only *the fear of scarcity and the ever-present threat of explosive violence*.

There is a close and frightening connection between the fear of *being left out, the fear of not getting enough* and the omnipresent ticking time bomb of violence. Jim Wallis cautions: "By creating the desire for affluence, then blocking its satisfaction, we are fueling a combustion engine of frustration and anger. We can no longer exclude whole communities from the economic mainstream, relegate them to the peripheries, tell them in a thousand ways that their labour and their lives are not needed, abandon their social context to disintegration and anarchy, and then be surprised when those communities erupt... They know they've been left behind. *They know there's no room for them*. Many feel little investment or stake in the future. And they are enraged."¹⁶ Similarly, Wendell Berry comments: "We must recognise that the standards of the industrial economy lead inevitably to war against humans just as they lead inevitably to war against nature. We must learn to prefer quality over quantity, service over profit, neighbourliness over competition, people and other creatures over machines, health over wealth, a democratic prosperity over centralised wealth and power, economic health over 'economic growth'... If we want to be at peace, we will have to waste less, spend less, use less, want less, need less. The most alarming sign of the state of our society now is that our leaders have the courage to sacrifice the lives of our young people at war, but have not the courage to tell us that we must be less greedy and less wasteful."¹⁷

The kind of gracelessness that produces *a throw-away culture of wastage*.

The excessive over-consumption of entitlement and the manufacturing process that produces what we feel is rightly ours dumps close to 3.4 million tonnes of solid waste into New Zealand landfills every 12 months. Some 93% of the materials we use in the manufacturing of our 'needs' never end up in saleable products; they're simply discarded during the production. Shockingly, close to 80% of what we produce is replaced or thrown-away after only a single use.¹⁸

These graceless legacies of entitlement cannot be *sustained*.¹⁹

The 'F' Words: the fatal, fleeting and forgetful foolishness of entitlement

The Gospel of Luke (Luke 12.1-48) contains a fatal clash of entitlement with the countering economics of God. It is a head-on collision of *gracelessness* and *gracefulness*. A crash of the ego of excess and the generosity of neighbourliness.

The context of the encounter.

Jesus is working the crowds. He is smack in the middle of delivering a counter-cultural discourse on what or who is to be truly feared (Luke 12.1-12) when a man interjects:

"Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."
(Luke 12.13)

It's the language of entitlement, isn't it?
See it?

¹⁶ Jim Wallis, 1994, *The Soul of Politics – A Practical and Prophetic Vision for Change*, *emphasis mine*.

¹⁷ Wendell Berry, 1990, 'What We Learned from the Gulf War', *Progressive* 55, no.11 (November 1991:26, cited in Jim Wallis, 1994, *The Soul of Politics – a practical and prophetic vision for change*.

¹⁸ For more information on the impact of our consumption on the environment see [Environment New Zealand 2007](http://www.mfe.govt.nz) at www.mfe.govt.nz.

¹⁹ It's been estimated that we'd need 4 earths if everyone on our planet were to 'get' the escalating and inflated expectations of entitlement we enjoy in the West. "The ecological unsustainability of current consumption patterns is now well documented ([Vitousek et al., 1986, 1997](#); [Meadows et al., 1992](#); [World Wide Fund for Nature, 1999](#); [Wilson, 2002](#)). According to ecological footprint analysis, the world passed the point of sustainability in 1978 ([Wackernagel et al., 2002](#)). Direct measures of the state of global planetary resources, such as the comprehensive ecosystem assessment done by WRI, the World Bank, the UNDP and the UNEP find that ecosystems are in decline virtually everywhere ([World Resources Institute et al., 2000](#))." Juliet B. Schor, 2005, *Prices and Quantities: Unsustainable Consumption and the Global Economy*, *Ecological Economics* 55 (2005) 309-320. The classic maxim is true now more than ever: "live simply so that others may simply live."

*I deserve what is due to me.
I'm entitled to it.
It is mine.
I'm owed my share of the family loot.
Instant gratification.
Now.
It is my privilege. It is my right. I want it. I'm worthy.
See that?*

The interruption echoes of a long history of entitlement in Scripture. Think of the grasping and taking of: Adam and Eve. Cain. The Tower of Babel. Abraham and Lot. Eliezer. Sarah. Isaac. Jacob and Esau. The Brothers of Joseph. Pharaoh. The community of Israel and how they violently forced nations off land. Joshua. Caleb. Judah. Saul and David. Nabal. Amnon and Tamar. Solomon. The monarchs of Israel. Ezekiel. Ezra. Haman. Ezekiel...

Today, if you listen carefully, you can hear this same destructive entitlement reenacted wherever there is economic inequality, ethnic friction and religious strife. Think of: Afghanistan. Bosnia. Palestine. China. America. Northern Ireland. South Africa. Australia. Darfur. Kosovo. Tibet. England. Burma. Rwanda. Pakistan. Chechnya. India. Thailand. Iraq. Fiji. New Zealand...

The encounter continues.
Jesus dodges the disruptive claim of entitlement, *how can I get what I deserve?*, and with a clever change in direction hones in on what matters most: *how to be human and how to be human together?*

The dodging:
"Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?"

The honing in on what is at stake:
"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed: life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."
(Luke 12.14-15)

The getting and grasping of entitlement is *not* what it means to be human; what we 'have', 'get', own or possess is *not* a measure of our significance; there is more to the *good life, there is more to you and me*, than the incessant chasing and collecting of 'things'.

Jesus pauses.
The crowds look flabbergasted, and the frown on the face of the man who interrupted says everything. It's not what they expected. It's not even close to what the inflated expectations of entitlement left them expecting, is it?

*What?
What of my share?*

Jesus breaks the silence with a parable. It's a clever piece of street theatre.²⁰ It's a gifting of space and time. The escalating anxiety of entitlement and its insistence on *gratification now* can make it difficult to engage in honest self-critique. The telling of the parable lets people slow down long enough to process what is going on.

The parable starts with a line that everybody gets.

"The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest."
(Luke 12.16)

²⁰ Walter Brueggemann, 2006, *The Word that Re-Describes the World*.

The line evokes the cultural memory of Job²¹ and the commonly-held image of *how God and life* seem to favour the rich. It's a hook that helps everyone enter the parable.

Everyone can name *the beautiful*...
Everyone can name *the celebrities*...
Everyone can name *the labels*...
Everyone can name *the nice suburbs*...
Everyone can name *the rich*...

And everyone spends far too much energy, money and time *comparing* what we 'have' with the 'lot' of others. It's what fuels our anxiety, it's what inflates our expectations of entitlement, and it's what drives the excesses of our over-consumption and our hoarding of surplus.²²

The Scriptures call it *coveting*.²³

Jesus goes on to say that the man of the parable had a decision to make.

"He thought to himself, 'What shall I do?'"
(Luke 12.17)

It's a decisive moment.
What can I do?

The man of the parable *could have* donated the extra crops to the local Food Bank. He *could have* cashed in the crops at the market and given bonuses to the employees who had laboured long days in the fields. He *could have* organised a community party and invited the neighbourhood to feast on what looks like the *favour of God*. Imagine the power of that witness. He *could have* gone to the local schools, and while the kids dined on the freshly-harvested carrots, corn, figs and oats, the man could have passed on something of the 'how to of effective gardening', inspiring and teaching a new generation to dream and live generously. He *could have* even got creative, donned some kind of superhero-cape, and in the secret of the night dropped food parcels on the doorsteps of people who had *less than enough*.

He could have.
He didn't.

Sadly, though it is somewhat expected, the man of the parable decides a future from within the framing of entitlement.

He accumulated.
He built on bigger, better, brighter.
He expected 'ever-more'.
He *gave in* to greed.
He hoarded.
He owned.
He decided *to feed* the inflated expectations of entitlement and *to not* feed others.
He is indifferent.

The mantra of this man is *I, myself and what is mine*. There is in the excesses of entitlement little room left for others. There is no energy, space or time left for neighbourliness.²⁴

The pace of the parable slows.

²¹ See Job 21.7-13.

²² There is a fascinating Internet site (<http://www.globalrichlist.com/>) that lets you discover how you *compare* with the wealthiest in the world. I discovered that I'm the 734,285,882 richest person on the planet. Visit the site to see how you would you rate.

²³ See Exodus 20.17; Romans 13.9.

²⁴ See Isaiah 5.8-10; Walter Brueggemann, *ibid*.

“I have no place to store my crops... This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’”
(Luke 12.17-19)

We’re not that different, are we? We haven’t learnt much, have we? A cheeky atheistic marketing campaign in London carried this same sentiment:

“*There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.*”

The excessive and inflated expectations of entitlement cause *forgetfulness*. There is a forgetting of *God*. There is a forgetting of how *life is a gift*. The excesses and luxuries we enjoy start to look a lot like ‘musts’, necessities that we *ourselves* have made possible. There is a forgetting of how we’re *interdependent on others* for most of what we ‘have’, for most of what we name ‘ours’, for most of what we possess and think we ‘own’.

Martin Luther King Jr., commenting on this same parable in 1967, contended:

“Maybe you haven’t ever thought of it, but you can’t leave home in the morning without being dependent on most of the world. You get up in the morning, and you go to the bathroom and you reach over for a sponge, and that’s even given to you by a Pacific Islander. You reach over for a towel, and that’s given to you by a Turk. You reach down to pick up your soap, and that’s given to you by a Frenchman. Then after dressing (*and today, your clothes might be given to you by Vietnamese factory workers*) you rush to the kitchen and you decide this morning you want to drink a little coffee; that’s poured in your cup by a South American. Or maybe this morning you prefer tea; that’s poured in your cup by a Chinese. Or maybe you want cocoa this morning; that’s poured in your cup by a West African. Then you reach over to get your toast, and that’s given to you at the hands of an English-speaking farmer, not to mention the baker. Before you finish eating breakfast in the morning you are dependant on more than half of the world.”²⁵

Similarly, though from a different starting place in Scripture, Rob Bell says in 2008:

“Moses spoke of the need to constantly tell the Exodus story, the one about rescue from slavery, ‘otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will *forget* the Lord Your God, who brought you out of Egypt.”

He goes on:

“Moses can see the days of abundance and blessing coming. Someday they will not only have enough, they will have more than enough. And he knows that this blessing is going to bring with it the tremendous temptation to forget the God who provided it. How does a person forget God? The answer we’ve seen again and again in Scriptures is that you forget God when you forget the people God cares about. Over and over God speaks of the widow, the orphan and the refugee. This is how you remember God: you bless those who need it the most in the same way that God blessed you when you needed it most.”²⁶

It’s the same story, isn’t it?

Moses. The man who interrupted Jesus. The man in the parable. Martin Luther King. Rob Bell. The atheistic marketing campaign in London.

You. Me.

It is one long history of *forgetfulness*.

Jesus is solemn.

The man *who had everything* and felt entitled to the excesses of everything is *happily* sitting on the sofa, drink in hand, eating some crisps and listening to some tunes, when suddenly everything goes pitch black. There’s a creaking noise. Is that a door opening?

Enter God.

²⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., 1967, ‘Why Jesus Called a Man a Fool’, Sermon delivered at Mount Pisgah Missionary Baptist Church, Chicago Illinois, 27 August, cited in Claiborne Carson and Peter Holloran, 1998, A Knock at Midnight – Inspiration from the greatest Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.

²⁶ Rob Bell, 2008, Jesus Wants to Save Christians. See Proverbs 30.8-9.

The dogs, the locked gates and the security that is installed to preserve and protect what is ‘ours’ can’t keep God from interrupting. The man who isn’t called by a name in the parable is finally *named*.

“You Fool!”
(Luke 12.20, emphasis mine)

The name ‘*fool*’ evokes this time the memory of Nabal²⁷, a foolish man whose name literally meant ‘fool’. A man who insisted on getting without giving, hoarding without neighbourliness, increase without generosity, profiteering without sharing. He died trying to hold onto stuff.

The man in the parable who shares this name and these traits now shares the same fate.

“You Fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you.”
(Luke 12.20)

It’s not a happy Hollywood ending. It’s not meant to be. The ‘chasing and collecting’ of entitlements is *fleeting*, *foolish* and inevitably *fatal* (for ourselves, others and for the planet we share). The inflated expectations and excessive consumption of entitlement can never fully frame *what is essential*; they can never fully satisfy what you really *need*; and they can never fully tell you or me what is our *place*, what is our *significance*. There is a name for *that framing story*; we call it the *Salvation Story* or the *Story of God*.

The ‘R’ Word: the practice of countering entitlement

Jesus leaves the crowds to contemplate the parable and is now speaking directly to the disciples. The direction of the conversation shifts from *what is it to be human* to a lesson on *how to counter the culturally dominant framing of entitlement with the Story of God*.

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens... Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon²⁸ in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will He clothe you – you of little faith. And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek first His kingdom and these things will be given to you as well.”
(Luke 12.22-31)

Jesus is helping His disciples to imagine a new form of *creation economics*, a practice of economics that is not dependent on the anxious grabbing of entitlement. The insistence to *not* ‘worry’ and to ‘consider the ravens and the wild flowers’ is intentional. The anxiety of scarcity, the worry that *there is not enough*, is exactly what continues to fuel our fearful grasping and hoarding, our self-centered sense of entitlement. The images of the ‘ravens and the flowers’ evoke the deepest memories of a Creator God who has *faithfully and generously* endowed creation with *enough*.

Walter Brueggemann comments on the intent of this creation economics:

“The disciples are drawn back to rethink and recommit to creation, to the conviction that ‘this is our Father’s world’, the Father who knows we need all these things. The disciples are meant to rethink and re-embrace the mothering of this God who births and feeds and nurtures the world that is never designed for autonomy.

²⁷ See 1 Samuel 25. Walter Brueggemann, *ibid*.

²⁸ The intentional name-dropping of Solomon is deeply significant and holds even more cautions and clues to the countering of entitlement. Walter Brueggemann observes: “Did you notice the wondrous exegetical marker Jesus has inserted into this affirmation. ‘Not even Solomon!’ Solomon is the master sales rep., the Donald Trump of his time. He believes in free trade and all the rest. He is the master technological enthusiast, the great broker, the Pharaoh of God’s chosen people. He is the best and the most and the great pride of Israel, the missile programme, the skyscraper, the media event, massive capital gains, nearly unutterable in his acquisitiveness. And he did not get it! Perhaps the man in the parable who died too soon will turn out to be Solomon who was rich toward himself with his exhibitionism; but here is nothing in the tradition about Solomon and the poor, nothing about Solomon and Jubilee, nothing about Solomon and the year of release. His house of extravagant cards, moreover, tumbled in a labour dispute that even his vats military apparatus could not overcome.” See also Rob Bell, 2008, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, for more on the importance of Solomon.

The birds and the flowers powerfully attest – in the teaching of Jesus – that all the agenda of self-sufficiency and self-security, all the fantasies of the ‘End of History’ and the self-congratulations of the ‘New World Order’ (*and we might add, all that the G20 can promise*) based on the new technologies (*and new economic stimulus packages*) are never more than penultimate; because ultimately the world lives by gift that can only be matched by trustful gratitude that gives back gladly via the neighbour.”²⁹

The confidence that comes from *remembering* that God ‘*your Father knows*’ (Luke 12.30) is critical to the *counter-economics* of Jesus. It functions to *remind* the disciples that:

“At the center of our confession is the affirmation that the faithful generous Giver counters the cold, flat judgement that there is no agency left that will rescue the earth from its deathliness.”³⁰

The false and inflated claims of entitlement get countered, and a different practice of economics is now possible with this *remembering*.

We remember *God*.

We remember that *God is faithful and gift-giving*.

We remember that *everyone and everything in life is a gift*.

We remember that *everyone deserves a “fair deal” and a “fair go”*.

We remember that *everyone is entitled to enough*.

We remember our *connection* to and *interdependency* on others.

We remember to *practice generosity*.

We remember to *make space and time for neighbourliness*.

We remember *the poor*.

We remember that we *share this planet with other living organisms*.

We remember that *we don’t have to fear scarcity*.

We remember that *we don’t need to hoard stuff*.

We remember to *resist reducing life to the possession of things*.

We remember *not to needlessly waste*.

We remember to *seek what God values*.

We remember to *trust*.

There is a lot more at stake in *remembering* than lazily daydreaming in the sun. Mike Riddell cautions that *remembering* with Scripture is incredibly dangerous and can in fact be politically subversive: “One of the most important and revolutionary functions of the Bible is to *remind* people who they are. Over the droning voices of indoctrination which label human beings as peasants, serfs, beggars, outcasts, foreigners, slaves, inmates, patients, consumers or subjects, Scripture asserts that in essence, people are the children of God. There is the ringing affirmation which the apostle Peter writes to a bunch of slaves: “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people” (1 Peter 2.10). Paul declares: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God” (Romans 8.14). The effect of these words is to provide an unshakeable sense of belonging and inalienable dignity. Assurance of identity is a powerful force. It may not be too much of a simplification to say that many of the problems that humanity encounters are born of lapse in memory – we momentarily forget who we are. It is possible to believe the lies which are foisted upon us, and accept limitations which are uncalled for. In order to maintain a resistance against such distortions, we need to *remind* ourselves again and again who we are and what we are about. When we know that, we are empowered to live and die out of an inner sense of freedom and security. It is a dangerous and liberating memory” (Mike Riddell, 1998, *God’s Home Page*).

These everyday acts of *remembering* enable you and me to disentangle and distant ourselves from the dominant cultural framings of entitlement. We no longer have to ‘buy into’ or consume its inflated expectations and we no longer have to fear not ‘getting’ what we think is our share. We’re free to be more generous and ‘open’ with what we call our ‘own’: our energy, money, and time. We’re free to embrace otherness without fear. We’re *reminded* to share a mutual responsibility toward/with others. The practice of *remembering* (re)places you and me within a different framing story. *Remembering* returns us to the more trustworthy Story of God.³¹

²⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *ibid*.

³⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *ibid*.

³¹ See *Appendix 2* for a discussion on entitlement and the covenant of Soldership.

Starting to Remember

1. Do you feel entitled? What do you feel entitled to? Has your sense of entitlement ever numbed you to the needs of others?
2. The Scriptures of Philippians 2.1-17 imagine Jesus emptying Himself of entitlement and privilege. Read the Scripture in a group. What is this text saying to you?
3. Is the simple practice of drinking Fair Trade coffee/hot chocolate something that could counter our sense of self-centered entitlement? Visit micahclothing.co.nz. What do you think of fair trade? Is it something that could become part of your own story? How?
4. What do you think of the practice of remembering? Do you see how this practice could (re)connect you with the Story of God and with the stories of others?
5. How do you see Soldership in The Salvation Army? Have you ever considered it to be a counter-cultural practice of neighbourliness? If so, how? If not, why not? What does the covenant of Soldership mean to you?
6. Is the practice of Self-Denial (also referred to as OWSOMS, 'One Week's Salary on Missionary Service', The Salvation Army's International practice of Relational Tithing, something that could counter our sense of self-centered entitlement?
7. Is there a culture of entitlement within The Salvation Army? Where? What could we do to counter our own excessiveness and organizational self-centeredness?
8. Watch "Corners", 2009, a Nooma DVD from Rob Bell, and in a group discuss its take on entitlement.

Appendix 1: Entitlement Personality Test

Do you feel entitled?

Do you agree with any of the following statements?

(yes/no)

- I insist on getting respect.
- I like to be complimented.
- I expect a great deal from other people.
- I get frustrated with the seeming slowness of the computer, the Internet, the post, and the traffic.
- I love spoiling or treating myself.
- I have to have what is mine.
- I have to get my share.
- I expect to be a success.
- I prefer to be a leader.
- I compare myself to others.
- I like to be the centre of attention.
- I expect God to *bless me with His favour. Now.*
- I place a high priority on good health.
- I rarely share my stuff.
- I'm impatient.
- I'm happiest when I have the best or the latest.

Scoring

If you answered 'yes' to any one of these statements, then entitlement could be framing part of your life. The more you answered 'yes', the more the framing of entitlement has gripped your imagination, and the more likely it is that you'll feel *ripped off* when you don't get what you want.

Appendix 2: The 'S' Word - Soldership in The Salvation Army

The Salvation Army's covenant of Soldership contains the beliefs, commitments, practices and principles of what we call the *Salvation Story*. Learning to inhabit this counter-cultural framing of *how to live* makes the countering of entitlement a real everyday possibility. Look at these excerpts from the Soldier's covenant:

*I will be **responsive** to the Holy Spirit's work and obedient to His leading in my life, growing in grace through worship, prayer, service and the reading of the Bible. I will make the values of the Kingdom of God and not the values of the world the standard for my life.*

*I will uphold Christian **integrity** in every area of my life, allowing nothing in thought, word or deed that is unworthy, unclean, untrue, profane, dishonest or immoral.*

*I will maintain Christian ideals in all my **relationships** with others; my family and neighbours, my colleagues and fellow Salvationists, those to whom and for whom I am responsible, and the wider community.*

*I will uphold the sanctity of marriage and of family life. I will be a faithful **steward** of my time and gifts, my money and possessions, my body, my mind and my spirit, knowing that I am accountable to God.*

*I will **abstain** from alcoholic drink, tobacco, the non-medical use of addictive drugs, gambling, pornography, the occult and all else that could enslave the body or spirit.*

*I will be faithful to the purposes for which God raised up The Salvation Army, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, endeavouring to win others to Him, and in His name **caring for the needy and the disadvantaged**.*

*I will be **actively involved**, as I am able, in the life, work, worship and witness of the corps, giving as large a proportion of my income as possible to support its ministries and the worldwide work of the Army.*

*I will be true to the principles and practices of The Salvation Army, loyal to its leaders, and I will show the spirit of Salvationism whether **in times of popularity or persecution**...*

See how these beliefs and daily commitments could help foster a countering of entitlement?

See how this covenant with God and with community could help fuel a counter-cultural move away from self-centered grasping *and* toward a more other-centered practice of neighbourliness?

Responsive to God.

Integrity.

Relational.

The mutual responsibility of stewardship.

Restraint.

Protective of and open to the needs of others.

Involved in activism.

Not scared of persecution or unpopularity.

Imagine the difference if we were to rediscover these practices of the Salvation Story.

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