

## Charles Eisenstein Living in the Gift

### Part 3:1 Greed and Artificial Scarcity

Hello everybody,

I'd like to start this session by talking about greed. To call someone greedy is tantamount to calling them evil. It is term of derision, blame, and contempt. It is a common diagnosis for the ills of our society: whether it is poverty, war, or environmental ruin, people name greed as the culprit.

The greed of the wealthy, the greed of the corporations, the greed of the politicians, and so on. Ah if only we could overcome the greedy people, if only we could kick them out, show them up, and call them out, then the world would be a better place. And while I'm at it I'd better keep it a secret that I too am greedy. I'd better keep it a secret from others and even from myself, lest I be included in that circle of shame. So I'll make sure I can justify everything. I need these things. I need the security. I deserve the yacht. And besides, my private jet is a lot smaller than so-and-so's private jet.

Pretty much everybody has a story where they are not the greedy ones, in which other people are the greedy ones. Really all of the conversation about whose greedy and who's not, who's justified and whose not obscures actually what is actually the important question which is: Where does greed come from? If we do not understand that, if in fact greed is a symptom of something else or a response to some deeper conditions, then we can never eliminate it by fighting it. We will only engage in an endless war against the symptoms, leaving the causes untouched.

So let me propose something as the root cause of greed which is simply scarcity both the reality of scarcity and the perception of scarcity. If you are in a lived experience of abundance, then greed is stupid. If say like we are all living in an apple orchard and the trees are groaning with fruit, and we all love to eat apples but there are more than we could possibly eat, then no one is going to be guarding their personal pile of apples and making sure they have more than somebody else because there is so much abundance. Why would you do that?

The ironic thing is that, we do live in a world that is, figuratively speaking, groaning with fruit. The potential abundance of this planet is unimaginable. The reason we often experience it otherwise is that our society maintains artificial scarcity of nearly everything that makes life rich. In many cases, this artificial scarcity is hard to see because it stands alongside obscene overabundance.

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The common new ages answer for why do we experience scarcity is all about your beliefs, your perceptions, your mentality, your scarcity thinking and what I am saying here is that it is not just that. Our scarcity thinking is part of a larger complex that includes social conditions of scarcity. Let me give some examples. We live in a society where nearly 50% of all food goes uneaten, wasted at some level of production or sale and at the same time with all of this excess at the same time something like one in five children in America experiences hunger sometime every year. We live in a society where residential floor space per capita has approximately doubled over the last century – and at the same time half a million people are homeless. Again those figures are for the United States but the trend is universal on earth.

So I would like to now list some other forms of artificial scarcity that contribute to an experience of insecurity and an experience of poverty that no amount of money can assuage. I offer these not just as an exercise in social critique, but as an invitation to compassion for ourselves and each other. If you find yourself deficient in gratitude, if you find yourself greedy, or petty, or grasping or controlling, this list will help you understand why. Seeing these forms of artificial scarcity then we can then begin to address them on the level of community and society. And we can also address their inner reflection. All of them, like so many of the obstacles in life, when they become conscious they begin to lose their power and we begin to become aware of ways to meet these forms of poverty and to live in a richer life and to build a richer life not only for ourselves but for people around us. We have to recognise what's missing first.

So I already mentioned artificial scarcity of food and housing. So let me add to that :

The artificial scarcity of time.

Of beauty,  
of money,  
of intimacy,  
of love,  
of land,  
of water,  
of community,  
of connection to nature,  
of leisure,  
of meaningful labor,  
of health,  
of medicine,  
of energy,  
of play,  
of security,  
of quiet,  
and of darkness,

Ok, that's twenty kinds of artificial scarcity. I could list more but that's enough for now. I'm not saying that in a perfect world, we wouldn't sometimes experience scarcity of some of these things. It is just that we have vastly added to whatever scarcity that would naturally be there.

Maybe I'll make comment on a few of those things in the list starting with beauty. I think that the human being finds nourishment in aesthetic sights and sounds. And I consider the modern built environment to be almost uniformly ugly -- talking about the strip malls and the big box stores, the parking lots and the auto dealerships, the office buildings, the housing developments, each building in these a model of cost-efficiency. You know I drive down the road you know and I'm like my god after five thousand years of architectural development, we've ended up with this? We are supposed to be a rich society, yet we can't even afford the same level of aesthetic nourishment that medieval villager had or indigenous farmer. Christopher Alexander, the architect, documents this compellingly in his books that contrast older buildings with modern ones and he notes in the latter an absence of any quality of life or soul. Adding Roman columns to your house onto your front porch doesn't solve the problem. It is not about tacking on superficial decorations onto something that is fundamentally unaesthetic. That is not beauty that is a substitute for beauty.

It's not just buildings. The entire made environment that is geared toward efficiency, not beauty. It's geared towards quality, not quantity. It's geared more towards the measurable and not the sacred. Most of us can feel the void underneath the made environment. Can you feel the longing to be immersed in nature, where we would have our fill of beauty. To be immersed in objects that was created with love and care. We can bring the beauty of nature, the uniqueness, the organic nourishment of nature into the made environment as well if we make that a priority. But instead we have a society geared around the quantifiable, around more, around efficiency. More and more and more of more. And this is not meant as a condemnation of any person, I'm just highlighting what the system brings to us. This is the water in which we swim.

Let's see, how about scarcity of land? For many people in modern society, your freedom to roam extends only to whatever property you happen to own, plus public parks. In some places there's more public land than others but in most places no trespassing signs keeps you out of the beautiful landscape that you can see. Squirrels and deer have more territory than you do. This is an artifact of our legal system and of our system of property rights. It doesn't have to be this way. For example in Scandinavia and Britain, and some other countries they still have property rights but property rights do not extend to prohibiting hikers from walking your land. In those places the whole landscape is in some sense yours and in that regard everyone is immeasurably richer. Those people, in a sense, own more land than the biggest rancher in Texas.

I'll say something also about the scarcity of time. Isn't it ironic that even with all our labor-saving gadgets, we experience less leisure than hunter-gatherers? If you

go to a less developed country you'll notice that people seem to be less busy there. You would think they would be more busy there because they do not have labour saving devices, they are more primitive there but no. They have much more of a feeling of an abundance of time. As the saying goes, in Mexico anything can wait till manana. In India, things happen on India time. Whereas in Germany everyone is punctual. They are much more efficient with time. But then why is it that people so much more relaxed in Greece or Cameroon than they are in industrialised countries that are on the clock.

I mentioned before that many forms of artificial scarcity accompany a related kind of overabundance. So we have lack of community alongside endless social media. We have droughts alongside floods. We have poverty alongside record numbers of billionaires. We have sexual isolation in a sea of pornography. We have lack of meaningful work alongside an abundance of degrading jobs. We have a lack of nutritious food, and empty calories everywhere.

I want to say that I have been talking about greed but it is not only greed that is a response to conditions and perceptions of scarcity. All the forms of scarcity that I listed correspond to human needs that our society fails to consistently meet. Instead, we are often offered substitutes for what we really need. Because the substitutes don't really meet the need, the appetite for the substitutes is endless. So greed is actually a form of addiction. It is no more a moral failing than alcoholism is. Because really what is an addiction? An addiction is the futile attempt to meet a need using something that fundamentally does not meet the need. Right, no amount of pornography is going to meet your need for intimacy. No amount of food is going to assuage your loneliness. No amount of alcohol is going to change the conditions of life that make it hurt just to be alive.

Yeah, I hope that this perspective, that greed is really a kind of addiction based on an unmet need I hope that invites a bit of compassion for ourselves and for the people that we would like to label and dismiss as greedy.

I've deliberately in my discussion left out the most important form of artificial scarcity, or at least the most obvious form in modern society which is of course the scarcity of money. This is not merely a product of your beliefs and perceptions; it is systemically created and enforced. The reason we are not talking about that now is that I am going to devote an entire segment to the artificial scarcity of money. We will go into that more later.

Right now I'd just like you to note, with compassion, the lay of the land. Maybe you feel some indignation about the depths of poverty we have collectively created. This isn't only the First World poverty of aesthetic, emotional, and spiritual malnourishment. All these kinds of scarcity are part of a continuum that includes hunger and that includes homelessness that even includes war and other forms of violence. This will become even more apparent when we look at money. So yes, feel that indignation, maybe let's go into preparation for our seed mantra here so close your eyes and feel that indignation at the poverty of our

world. That so much of what can make life rich is systematically denied us. Come to that feeling, that outrage: “it is not supposed to be this way.” And stay with that for a minute. “It’s not supposed to be that way.” And notice how maybe you feel oppression, a persecution, an unfairness. “It is not supposed to be this way.” and underneath that there is something else which is , “It doesn’t have to be this way.” This is the feeling that another world is possible. Maybe we have had a glimpse of this other world through experiences of generosity. Another world is possible. The transition to gift on a personal level is part of a collective transition into this other world. By doing it on a small level, we invite it to happen for everyone. We enter the timeline toward that world. it is a rich world, it is an abundant world, it is a world of sharing and generosity and we can feel its possibility underneath “it’s not supposed to be this way”. It can be different ***And so let us let this be our seed sentence*** that you can say to yourself any time you come face to face with the scarcity, the poverty, the depletion of our world today: ***An abundant world is possible.*** And right now touch the place inside yourself where that is true. ***An abundant world is possible.*** Know it to be true. And each time repeat this to yourself, touch again the place where it is true. ***An abundant world is possible.*** It doesn't matter if a big part of your brain says that this is irrational, naive, over privileged, those critiques can coexist with the knowledge that a more beautiful world is possible. ***That an abundant world is possible.*** That this is something we can create. ***An abundant world is possible.***