

Greed, Fear, and Ignorance

We can have almost everything we want if we want it badly enough--but we have to pay the price

LAST YEAR, in a quiet valley in the Ecuadorian Andes, I visited Vilcabamba, a small village famed for the longevity of its inhabitants. The 1972 census showed a total population of 819 in Vilcabamba, and out of this number, two women and seven men were more than 100 years old. There are fewer than 7,000 centenarians in the United States, but if we produced these oldsters at the same rate as this tiny community, *we would have more than 2,500,000 residents over 100*. A phenomenal difference.

The longevity is impressive, certainly. At least as significant, however, is the condition of these *longevos*. Generally, they see well; their hearing is sharp; their minds remain alert; and they continue working long after their hundredth birthdays. They show little of the physical and mental deterioration that usually accompanies advanced age in the more industrialized areas of the world.

I talked with Miguel Carpio, an elderly gentleman who walks with a cane, speaks easily of the distant past, and just as readily recalls events of recent vintage. Sometimes, he complains of a few aches and pains, but other than that, he's in superb condition for a 127-year-old senior citizen.

Micaela Quezada's baptismal certificate in the local church records lists her birth date as February 19, 1870, making her 103 at the time of my visit. I talked with her and found her an impressive witness to whatever it is in this village that keeps these people youthful. She doesn't wear glasses, and in an arresting demonstration of sharp eyesight, she threaded needle after needle for us, each time on the first try.

Vilcabamba means "sacred valley." It is an ecologist's dream, with sparkling, clean water (provided by two rivers, the Uchima and the Chamba), pure air, and a temperate, even climate. Pollution is unknown, and there's no concern with gas rationing, because no one owns an automobile. There are few radios and no television.

In 1969 and again in 1970, Dr. Miguel Salvador, a cardiologist from Quito, the nation's capital, led medical teams to study these unusual men and women and found no indications of aging in arteries or in circulation. They concluded that the clean air and water, the tranquil atmosphere, the simple diet, and long-lived parents all contributed to the healthy old age of these people. Another factor seems important, too: The elderly in Vilcabamba retain a feeling of usefulness and competence. There's a role for these *longevos*, and they remain valued members of the community.

During my visit, I heard many stories of desperately sick people who came to this isolated village from other sections of Latin America and from the United States. They were suffering from severe heart conditions or arthritis. After several months, they were restored to excellent health. Loja, a town of 60,000, is twenty-five miles from Vilcabamba and serves as a clearinghouse for its small neighbor. Three Loja doctors and several government officials described cases they knew at first hand of dramatic recoveries from critical illnesses simply by living in Vilcabamba for a few months.

The trip to this tiny community in the Andes left me with an acute case of culture shock, created by facts difficult to reconcile with my experience. After talking with many of these oldsters and taking a number of photographs, I took an early-morning plane from Loja to Guayaquil, a

seaport and Ecuador's largest city. Two hours after landing in Guayaquil, I headed for Peru aboard a flight for Lima.

During several days in Lima and then a week in Colombia, I lived with a lingering disquiet precipitated by the time spent visiting with these remarkable men and women in this tiny, isolated village in a tranquil valley. The unease persisted after my return to my home in a Chicago suburb. Was the lesson of this experience simply one of diet, pure water, clean air, physical work, and quiet living? I think not. That's part of it, but only a segment.

The people of Vilcabamba would be called poor by all but the most poverty-stricken inhabitants of the United States. But they have no shortages. They have only a little, but they have enough. They seem totally free from the greed that has driven us into lack of crucial materials through profligate misuse of our resources. And that gets to the real lesson of this extraordinary place: Within limitations, we can have whatever we want if we want it badly enough--but we cannot determine the price. We learn that later, and gradually. . .and that's precisely what's happening to us today.

The well-known ecologist Dr. Barry Commoner lists three laws of ecology: (1) Everything is connected to everything else; (2) everything has to go somewhere; (3) there's no such thing as a free lunch.

These Ecuadorians appear completely devoid of fear and anxiety. They live calmly in the present, without regrets about the past or worries about the future. Partners with nature, in tune with their surroundings, they remain uniquely free from physical ailments and mental breakdowns. Everything *is* connected to everything else: Their phenomenal health is a reflection of freedom from greed, and that freedom keeps their environment pure, their wants simple, and their lives purposeful. Their profound faith in God is demonstrated in their daily lives.

They have a keen awareness of what's *really* important, and this apparently keeps them from duplicating the basic errors that have created the highly educated confusion in our culture. Greed is a primary manifestation of the ego's screaming battle for its own way and inevitably leads to fear and ignorance. We see glaring evidence of it today in our poisoned environment, wasted wealth, ailing population, and affluent uncertainty. It turns out that too much is never enough.

Gerald Heard, Aldous Huxley, and others have said that reducing greed is the first step in breaking loose from the ego's choking bonds and moving toward sanity. We're generally reluctant to try this, because greed, at least in its early stages, is pleasant. Unchecked, however, it gradually smothers us. The more we get the "things" we think we want, the less we are able to experience the conscious contact with God we *really* want and must have to live.

Greed's three facets are love of things, love of fame, and love of pleasure. They can be attacked directly with three tools: frugality, anonymity, and moderation. The gradual reduction (if greed will be translated into stepped-up vitality, diminished self-centeredness, and a clearer awareness of our real identity. Working with all of the Twelve Steps as a lifetime commitment provides a disciplined basis for liberation from greed's tentacles. Steps Three and Eleven blend in bringing increased awareness of God's will throughout the day and a growing ability to carry it out. Steps Four and Five will provide sharp, continuing looks at greed and its connection with other character defects. Steps Six and Seven offer a daily discipline in finding willingness to unload these defects and then seeking God's help in their removal. Every Step in the AA program combines to keep this process moving.

If I consciously try to simplify my life, I effectively weaken my dependence on possessions and on other people's opinions. Then my identity is no longer created by the attitudes of others, but, to some degree at least, stems from a clearer understanding of the truth reflected from work with the Twelve Steps. This can sharply decrease the fear generated by ignorance of who I really

am. Such a result, however, is achieved only through continuing efforts with all of the Steps leading to freedom from the wants and dependencies that would inevitably block this kind of growing understanding.

Simplicity extends into the realm of ideas and knowledge. Here, too, greed creates ignorance that makes it difficult, perhaps impossible, to comprehend and appreciate the transforming power in the simple truths of our Twelve Steps. Certainly, I heard countless references to Dr. Bob's injunction "Keep it simple," but obviously failed to understand what it meant. Doggedly, *greedily*, I pursued the many inviting "advanced approaches," only to find that more knowledge often meant less understanding.

What really changes us is persistent effort in tailoring ourselves to the demands of the program, and this begins with rigorous honesty. There *are*, I find, many musts in AA. Nowhere does the Big Book suggest the beguiling fallacy that this is "an individual program" for each of us to adjust to his own particular whims.

"Keep it simple" does *not* mean "Keep it superficial." To me, it means recognizing the unique opportunity for continuing change possible through steady work with all of the Twelve Steps. This does not require special therapy groups, but simply a recognition of where my help really lies.

Dr. Hobart Mowrer, research professor of psychology at the University of Illinois, has extensive clinical experience with alcoholics. He says, "If the alcoholic works the Twelve Steps and develops the fellowship available through the program, this will be far more effective than any form of psychotherapy I know of."

Dr. Mowrer sums up precisely what nearly four decades of our Fellowship's successful experience graphically demonstrates: (1) The AA program enables drunks to stay sober; (2) the program is specifically designed to deal with those problems the individual finds within himself after he quits drinking; (3) it does this far more effectively than anything else on the scene today.

In evaluating the benefits of counseling or therapy, it's useful for me to remember that Alcoholics Anonymous is where clergymen come to find God's help to stay sober, and it's the place psychiatrists and psychologists come to find the kind of group therapy that will enable them to stay away from the first drink and bring sanity to their lives.

The AA program is a process of evolving and developing. It will speak to my condition wherever I am in sobriety. It will strip away false ideas and spurious goals through my persistent, continuing work with every one of the Twelve Steps. As this process moves along, I'll start to find freedom from the fear and the ignorance that are inextricably woven into the package of greed; I'll gradually know increasing vitality, growing sanity, greater health, and vastly expanded usefulness. As the ego's shrill struggle for possessions, pleasure, and recognition subsides, the voice of God grows more distinct, and the concept of His guidance moves from abstraction to daily experience.

I can profit from the vision the *longevos* of Vilcabamba hold out of simplicity and peace created by freedom from needless, heedless striving. Too much can never be enough, whether it's too much of things, knowledge, or others' recognition. A conscious, direct attack on these false dependencies through the healing power of our Twelve Step program will weaken my craving for temporal trivia as it strengthens my dependence on God. Gradually, slowly but certainly, it will give me those things I really want and must have to become what I should be. It's all here.

Paul M.
Riverside, Illinois

