

# The Burden of Blessings

Be grateful when fortune smiles on your grand plans,  
but be careful not to lose touch with the magic of the mundane

Mary Rowland



IT'S LATE AFTERNOON AND I'M AT Vassar College sitting in a lovely lounge with Stickley couches made of jade-green leather, waiting for my daughter, who's doing an art project in the museum. Lots to be grateful for, especially considering that it's September 11 and a year earlier, I was stranded in New York, wandering streets emptied of traffic, with stores and restaurants and offices closed and no way to get over the bridges or through the tunnels. It's been painful to look back on what followed the horror of that day but impossible not to. The sadness: My daughter's school assembly becoming a memorial for a local fireman lost at the World Trade Center. The fear: My 12-year-old son's social studies teacher telling the boys in the class that in six years they'd probably be fighting in Iraq. The determination: Wall Street calling—let's get back to business. "You still hear people saying that we'll never be the same," Rabbi William Horn told *The New York Times*. "The truth is, except for the economic level, things are pretty much the same." That statement gave me more of a chill than the sadness and fear.

Of course we move on. But what are we striving for? To become pretty much the same? I hope not. If we've learned nothing else since that September day, I think we've learned something about values and how many people appear to have lost theirs, including some key people at Enron, Arthur Andersen, Tyco, and WorldCom. But what is it we value? At dinner with a group of advisers not so long ago, the talk turned to the most outrageous things people do with money. One client asked his planner to hire a submarine on which he

could hold a dinner party for 100 people; another wanted to buy a private island he could name after himself. Even Jack Welch, former chief executive of General Electric Co. and one of the most respected business leaders in the country, has seen the fallout from too much of a good thing. According to his divorce filing, Welch had received use of a Manhattan condo, opera tickets, trips on the company jet, and other

niceties to enjoy for the rest of his life. What motivates the need for such excesses? What advice are such people receiving from their financial advisers? Get as much as you can? Is that the business we want to get back to?

There's nothing wrong with acquiring and keeping wealth. In the 1990s when I wrote a column for *The New York Times*, I often focused on arcane inconsistencies in tax- and estate-planning laws that could help those "in the know" save thousands or even millions of dollars. Friends would ask, How can you work to put money in the pockets of the rich? My answer: The rich have as much right to understand their opportunities under the law as anyone else. Whether you have values or not has little to do with whether you have money. Still, values definitely influence decisions about money, and that causes me to wonder how advisers work out their own values and decide which clients they're willing to work with.

Working out values, it seems, is an ongoing job. And summer vacation this year shed some light on how my own work is progressing. Our kids' grandmothers both celebrated their 80th birthdays this year, and we drove 3,000 miles through

## Is it true for all of us that when our time is empty, we feel compelled to fill it with meaning?

the Midwest, stopping in places like Buffalo, N.Y.; Green Bay, Wis.; and Moose Lake, Minn.—the heartland everyone talks about and the national media seldom write about. I grew up in Minnesota, my husband in Cleveland, but we spent the 1980s and most of the 1990s in Manhattan, where we kept moving faster and faster, and I'd almost forgotten about the pace in the heartland. Driving through the Wisconsin Dells, where we stayed at a water park in a room designed to look like a spaceship, shopping at the Mall of America, crossing Lake Michigan on a car ferry and learning about the first person—a woman—to go over Niagara Falls in a barrel reminded me of this different rhythm of life.

I'll spare you any talk about the unsullied values of the golden Midwest. People there are not insulated; they're afraid too, although those I saw didn't seem too concerned about conflicts of interest on Wall Street. They were more concerned about whether it's possible to be older than 50 without a college degree and still have a job.

Yet they were not striving in the same compulsive way that many of my friends and I do here on the East Coast. My husband and I talked about moving to the country, especially after we had a second child, but I was afraid it would be too much like the Midwest. Then in the summer of 1995, a family at the United Nations International School that our kids attended asked us to house-sit their home on the northern tip of Long Island while they visited family in Italy and Greece. I felt like Woody Allen. I didn't want to leave New York. I had created this busy-all-the-time persona that I'd come to count on. I couldn't imagine getting up in the morning and watching a rabbit hop across the lawn or going to a small-town Independence Day parade. My identity rested on being not-from-small-town-Minnesota. Now I was asked to participate in the things that I defined myself by avoiding.

I was overruled. We rented a van and moved a load of stuff to Long Island. It was as I expected. When I had free time in the afternoon, I panicked. But I found a book called *Plain and Simple: A Woman's Journey to the Amish* (HarperSanFrancisco) by an artist named Sue Bender. Bender had fallen in love with an Amish quilt she saw in an antiques store because it made her feel restful, at peace. The quilt led her to the Amish people, who live without cars or telephones or electricity or television sets. She wanted to understand what their life was about and she spent five summers with them. To them everything is sacred. And everything is ordinary. Washing a cup deserves the same special care as making a quilt. It was the opposite of what I did,

begrudging the time it took to fold laundry and buy groceries, looking at my watch every three minutes until I could get back to my computer and crank out more words, for which I'd be paid as much as \$5 apiece. How could I spend 30 minutes ironing a tablecloth when I might be able to write 500 words instead? And those were the values I was passing on to my children, whether I chose to or not.

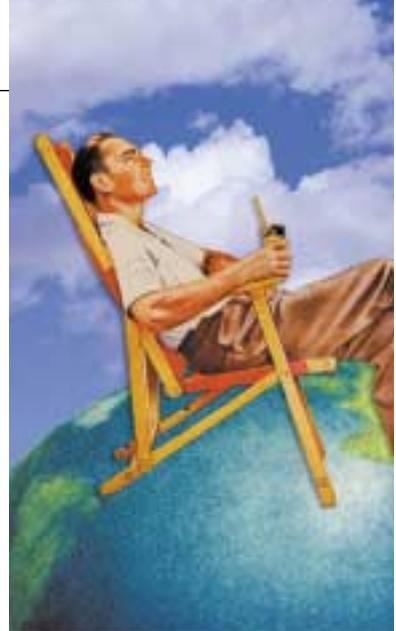
I don't know if that summer was sacred. But it was ordinary. We went to the parade and the county fair. We hauled garbage to the town dump, where there was a special section of resale items. When *The New York Times* reviewed a local drive-in with carhops on roller skates, we decided to try it for dinner. There was only one carhop on roller skates, and she was making out with her boyfriend in his pickup truck and didn't notice us. So much for local flavor. Still, when I started to accept the ordinary, some gear that had been in overdrive for 15 years shifted down. Competition had fueled me, but I decided it would be okay to drop back a lap, stop writing for *The New York Times*, maybe make sourdough starters and bake bread, take a whole day to bike or go on a hike.

We moved to the country five years ago and I felt like I'd actually begun to live a bit like the Amish, turning away much of the journalism work that came in so I could spend time studying fiction writing and working on a novel. I tutored English as a second language and enjoyed spending a Saturday at the church rummage sale.

But our trip to the Midwest showed me how little I've changed. The sense of timelessness has given way to lists and charts and graphs. I got involved in many of the things I'd promised myself to avoid when we moved, acquiring two cats, a second dog, tadpoles that kept dying off because they were too cold, and a large vegetable garden. Housesitting is not the same as owning a house.

I still see too many things in terms of goals and achievements. I don't take the same loving care in sweeping the dog hair out of the basement as I do in writing a book. I haven't been successful in leaving my striving self behind. My life is crowded again. I expected to have more time for spirituality in the country, but I see that even that has taken the form of a list: Take a course on Saint Paul. Go to a Zen retreat. Study Islam. Join the Institute of Advanced Theology.

Is it true for all of us that when our time is empty, we feel





compelled to fill it with meaning, with collecting Fiestaware, or improving our running time in the marathon, planning a dinner party on a submarine? We can't accept that emptiness can have its own meaning.

I won't complain. I have a wonderful life. But when we first moved, I was able to be spontaneous. If it snowed overnight, I took out my cross-country skis and headed into the woods with the dogs. I didn't have a 12-item list of things that needed to be done that day. But the focus can slip away. Maintaining it takes vigilance. I've met financial advisers who know how to help keep a client's eyes on the prize.

Of course, it's not realistic for an adviser to decide he'll take only clients who are spontaneous or who follow their inner child or whatever the insight of the week might be. And many advisers probably don't even want to. But is it really too much for an adviser to expect clients to have a dream that isn't defined in dollars, to look at the tragedy of September 11 and pull something good out of it? The great 20th-century American photographer Edward Weston said that he simplified his life so that he didn't need to make much money and he could use most of the hours of light making photographs. I suspect the reason so few of us do that is that we don't know what it is we want to spend the hours of light doing. So we make money instead.

---

*Mary Rowland is the author of Best Practices for Financial Advisors (Bloomberg Press). She speaks regularly to financial advisers about practice-management issues.*