

*The Inheritor's Inner Landscape:
How Heirs Feel*

Katherine Gibson

The Inheritance Project

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All names are pseudonyms. To protect anonymity, other identifying details have been changed.

Introduction

Andrea Sparrow's earliest impressions of wealth were formed on summer visits to her grandparents' estate in Pennsylvania. The house was vast. It had an elevator, an enormous playroom with a built-in movie screen, a long dining-room table with a buzzer to summon the maids, thirteen bathrooms and a chauffeur on duty. More important, though, it was a home filled with humanity and intimacy.

Andrea fondly recalls the warm atmosphere her beloved grandmother created in this magical place: 'Gram was a really remarkable woman. She was so kind and nonjudgmental and interested in people. Even when I was a hippie in my long skirts and my turquoise jewelry and would visit her with my first husband, the Berkeley radical—you know, even then I was still her granddaughter. She would never have thought to treat me differently from all her other grandchildren. She had such good manners. Many, many people loved her.'

As a middle-aged wife and mother of two, Andrea still associates wealth with those happy memories. Her own life now reflects the generosity and open-heartedness she appreciated in her grandmother: 'I give a lot of my money away. All the accountants tell me I give a much greater percentage every year than I should. I love being able to do that. And I do a lot of volunteer work for an AIDS agency here in New York. Five years ago I met a guy with AIDS through the agency. He was drinking, he was on the streets, in mental hospitals, on drugs. He has Rastafarian hair and can hardly read or write. But we made a heart connection and have become really good friends. We call each other 'The Odd Couple.' God, he has taught me so much about someone who is not like me!'

Being a wealthy woman has not kept Andrea from making fruitful connections with people of very different backgrounds. Nor has it felt like a burden in any other respect. For Andrea, coming into money has been an unadulterated boon: "For me, there isn't a 'hardest thing' about having wealth; it isn't hard. I sometimes wish I had more money so I could give even more away. I can help people with it, and I can enjoy it myself. I don't have to worry; I can buy more art! The best thing for me is the security and being able to give that to my kids. What could be better?"

In many ways, Andrea's enthusiasm about inherited wealth is easy to understand. Who wouldn't enjoy the opportunities that a fortune brings? A lovely and safe environment in which to live, social connections, an excellent education, plenty of travel and leisure, the chance to be generous and to make a significant difference in the world, the absence of all sorts of daily worries and stresses—why not celebrate?

And yet Andrea's pleasure in her wealth is but one of many experiences that people have when they come into money. Most heirs, in fact, find the blessing quite mixed. This article explores the potential snags and conflicts that occur when wealth comes to people unbidden. Some of the stories here may seem depressing and negative. But as you read along, we encourage you to hold in mind Andrea's experience, for it *is* ultimately possible to use an inheritance as the vehicle for a life of great enjoyment, depth and usefulness. In short, we offer the following vignettes in a spirit not of complaint and despair, but of education and hope.

To generalize about how inherited wealth affects people runs the risk of inaccuracy; each person we interview describes a unique combination of responses to being an heir. Yet over and over we hear about fear, isolation, disempowerment, disconnection and guilt. These are emotional experiences to which many heirs can relate. And from these experiences spring any number of

troublesome habits, ranging from self-deprivation to secrecy. We turn first to the various fears that tend to distress inheritors.

Inheritors' fears: more is less

Less is more, say the Modernists. But for many an inheritor, the opposite is true. Paradoxically, the more financial security they are given, the less emotional security they seem to have. Their external lives may appear solid and well-furnished, but inside, they frequently harbor debilitating concerns about self-worth, failure, responsibility, and ironically, survival.

The classic anxiety has to do with identity: Who would I be without my money? Whatever fulfillment heirs derive from their accomplishments is often diminished by disturbing, back-of-the-mind questions, such as: How can I ever *really* prove myself? Can I truly value myself without letting my money skew the picture? Without the education and privileges my wealth has afforded me, would I be able to make it on my own?

Steven Harrison puts it like this: "You begin to doubt your own ability to think through something when money is part of the equation. You think, 'I am who I am today because of the money.' Maybe that's true, maybe it isn't. The frightening thing is, maybe a lot of things have happened in life that have nothing to do with the money. You start having a hard time seeing what causes what."

When inheritors worry that their self-worth is contingent on their net worth, they often feel a need to stretch themselves in ways that have nothing to do with money. Some undertake intense physical challenges, while others get involved in service programs abroad. Susan Bremmer reminisces, "In the Peace Corps I found that I could handle situations. I discovered self-reliance and self-esteem. And I realized that I could be a leader in any environment, not just in my own hometown where everybody knew my name."

Rebecca Hutchings went to athletic extremes in order to boost her self-confidence. She trained for a year in order to do the Ironman Triathlon in Hawaii. She says, "My decision to do the Triathlon was very much tied to my money. I really needed to prove to myself that I could do something great. Ultimately, it was not my money that got me to finish that race; it was my will and my body."

The need to prove oneself can, of course, become compulsive and frustrating if an inner sense of self-worth is never achieved. But when heirs set out to test their mettle in a context that is separate from family wealth, reputation, or connections, the experience can go a long way toward dispelling the fear that their personal worth is measured only in dollars.

For some heirs, a greater fear is the threat of losing their money. Even the average investor has qualms over the ups and downs of the financial markets. Yet for inheritors, the feeling can run much deeper. Although Kate Shepard has approximately \$5 million to her name, her biggest fear is that there will be some huge stock market crash in which she will lose all her money. "I won't have anything, and I won't know how to support myself. That's my biggest nightmare," she says. "Logically, I know it's a totally unfounded fear because the financial picture in our family office is so diversified and complicated that there is no way we could lose everything. Sometimes I worry that the only way I can really learn the lessons I need to learn—about responsibility and generosity and all that—is if my money is taken away from me. I guess that's the kind of black-and-white thinking that's characteristic of us wealthy people: You're good or you're bad. You're rich or you're not."

Kate's fear of losing her wealth is amplified by her dread that she could not survive without it, and exacerbated by her guilt for not being more self-responsible and generous. She confesses to an underlying stinginess as the result of her fear; she is afraid to give her money away. Maggie Lindsay acknowledges a similar tendency toward tight-fistedness: "I wish there was some way to release the feelings of greed and hoarding I have inside. There's something miserly about the way I don't even want to spend money on myself. I would much rather have my money safely in the bank, in some kind of long-term stocks that I can't just spend on dinner."

Likewise, Fred Hopgood is reluctant to spend his money, especially on himself and his artistic projects. His rationale springs from a tangle of confusion, ignorance and fear: "I don't want to know how much money I have so that I don't have to worry about spending it. I'm paranoid. There were years of my life when I could have done meaningful things artistically, but because of this ignorant foggiess about money, I didn't do them. I didn't know I *could* do them."

Like Fred, many inheritors deal with their anxieties about money by remaining uneducated about what they have. Fear leads to persistent—and often willful—ignorance, which in turn translates into missed opportunities for fulfillment.

Sometimes, however, financial ignorance is anything but willful. Susan Stein gave her best effort to learning about her finances after discovering that her husband had gambled away a substantial portion of her money. She had been raised by a nationally famous businessman never to worry about financial matters, to leave those affairs to the men in her life: "I never balanced a checkbook, never paid a bill, never did anything. It's as if someone had amputated that part of me. I just didn't understand money. It was as if someone had put me in China and they were all speaking Chinese, and there were all these strange smells and strange customs. That's how I felt around money.

"Towards the end of my marriage, I would go to the ATM machine and there would be no money in my account. That wasn't supposed to happen; I was brought up not to worry. I really didn't know where the money was, and I didn't know what to do. The terror was paralyzing.

"After a long search, however, I found a wonderful financial planner who told me how to find out how much money I had, what questions to ask, what documents to get. But even after he explained my trust statements to me, I still couldn't read them. I would look at a trust statement and I couldn't see it. It was a real sickness. I asked lots of people, 'How do I understand this thing called money?' They told me about classes to take and books to read, which I did. And damn, if I still couldn't get it! My brain would just clog up."

Even inheritors with solid financial educations can be prone to the existential fear that their lives, so full of expectation and opportunity, will remain bland. They worry that they will lack the requisite passion to make their dreams happen. Successful in business and lucky in love, Homer Wallace appears to have a full and satisfying life. Yet he admits, "It's important for me that people think, 'Gee, Homer is a really together guy. Despite all the stuff that could have screwed him up, he is a fun and terrific guy.' But it's an illusion. I have a lot of troubles, and one of them is to figure out what is my joy in life? My fear is that someday someone's going to say, 'Homer is such a nice, charming guy, but he's kind of a failure. He's one of those third or fourth generation kind of rich guys. He acted responsibly and all that stuff, but never got on his path of joy.' That's the big fear I'm contending with right now."

When heirs find themselves constrained by any of these fears—losing their money, spending or sharing their money, jeopardizing their "successful" images—they may steer clear of precisely the

risks they need to take. Steven Harrison regrets the habit of safety he has developed. "I am very security-minded," he admits. "I think because of the insulation of money, I started walking down this straight, artificial path as a child. It kept me from experiences and challenges that would have helped me learn for myself. If you insist on doing only the things you know you're going to succeed at, you walk that straight and narrow path. Soon you begin to walk very slowly on it, and before you know it, you stop moving. You're paralyzed; you can't do anything. It's a hard pattern to break."

Isn't money supposed to ward off insecurity? It runs contrary to our logic that wealth could, as these examples illustrate, intensify our vulnerability and anxiety. Perhaps this irony explains why our culture shows so little sympathy for inheritors. Hostile judgments of the rich may be one defense which people erect to avoid acknowledging that wealth is really nothing more than an illusory bulwark against fear.

Inheritors' separateness: splendid isolation

At some point, heirs come to believe that they are different from most people, and they identify their wealth as the source of that feeling. They use a variety of adjectives to describe the feeling—separate, insulated, isolated, alienated, special, weird, unusual, disconnected—but the experience is nearly always painful. It stems from a belief that being rich means not only having more money than others, but also having a different identity and life script from the rest of the world.

This message often gets conveyed at an early age, in any number of direct and indirect ways. Many heirs, for example, grow up shielded by privacy. Big houses in the country surrounded by acres of manicured lawns, exclusive apartments in the city protected by alarm systems and doormen, trips to exotic settings—all these ingredients of a wealthy child's upbringing implicitly say to the young inheritor, "You are different."

The privacy of the wealthy has a dual purpose: Outside, the secluded and spacious territory fends off unwanted incursions from the world; inside, the ample rooms provide spatial buffers so that family members can, if they choose, live inside personal bubbles. In such environments, young heirs may feel safe and even special, but they are also removed from contact with the real world.

John Munro recalls feeling cut off in his childhood environment. He had the impression of sitting on the inside, looking out: "I've always felt that there was a fence around my world. For several years, I lived with my grandparents. Their mansion had a fence around it, and a gate. The servants were always watching because my grandmother had been shot at. So they weren't about to let any tasty little heirs run around where they might be grabbed. I was not allowed to go anywhere without a servant or a family member in tow.

"On vacations from my private school, I went to the family camp in Wisconsin. It was like a private kingdom. The camp holdings were more than seven thousand acres; it was two and a half miles from the gate to the house. Nobody that didn't belong there could get near it. And for a period of maybe forty years, I don't think the local people even knew that the camp was there because we took no part in the community. We were in the middle of nowhere."

For other children, being rich feels like being on the outside, looking in. Steven Harrison longed for what seemed to him like the cozy friendliness of an imaginary "Leave it to Beaver" middle-class world: "As a child, I had an ideal vision of what it would mean to grow up in a neighborhood where you had other houses on the street, you had friends down the road, and you walked to and from school. We were living in this suburban mansion with no neighbors, and I was

eight miles from school. My parents didn't have family friends who would come over to the house with their kids. I was very isolated."

Even the perks of being wealthy, such as feeling special, are often double-edged. The specialness that Kate Shepard perceived at her grandmother's elegant Japanese-style home rubbed off on her. So much so, in fact, that when she would visit her non-wealthy relatives at their modest, small-town farm, she thought of herself as the "special visitor from the city— really hot shit." Nevertheless, the down side of this outsider's stance has lasted well into her adulthood: "The single most important way wealth has affected me is that I've always felt like I'm on the periphery, watching life happen to other people, watching them include their souls in some way that I find nearly impossible to do. There's this weird double bind that I feel. On the one hand, I want to be special—who doesn't? But on the other hand, I feel like I'm different, and it feels wretched."

If heirs grow up hearing elitist attitudes, their sense of being different can become all the more intense. Camille Littlefield recalls her nanny's messages. "There was a certain snobbish quality in Nanny; she was pleased about our family's wealth. When my sisters and I were in Newport, we would go to birthday parties several times a week. We would dress up in organdy dresses with gold barrettes in our hair, and little pearls and gold charm bracelets. We'd be all dressed up, ready to go, and she'd line us up at the door and say, 'Now be good, and never forget you're a Littlefield.'"

An imperative like that can make ordinariness, just plain fitting in with the rest of the kids, seem painfully out of reach. The version of *noblesse oblige* which David Bowman heard from his parents was subtle but isolating nevertheless. "The explicit message my parents taught me," he explains, "was that we were just like everyone else: 'We're not rich, we're not flashy, and we're not ostentatious.' But there was another, really subtle message—that we *were* better. It was never talked about, but it feels to me like something that the wealthy class understands: that it's the responsibility of the wealthy to take care of other people. We are sitting on top of the pile, but we're there because we're the smartest and the most moral and the most capable of judging what needs to be done, and we'll take care of all you lesser beings. That subterranean message was part of my upbringing."

Whether heirs are set apart inside a mansion, out in the country, apart from neighborhood life, or atop a pile of "lesser beings," the effect is the same: it feels lonely. They wind up feeling stuck behind an invisible wall, bumping their noses as they try to reach out toward the rest of the world. And even when they do manage to break through the barrier, they often feel ill-at-ease engaging in the spontaneity and earthiness of everyday life. Such isolation is anything but splendid.

Delayed maturity: dependency and disempowerment

The insularity and overprotection that many heirs experience as children can keep them from growing up. As a result, inheritors sometimes have to contend with the consequences of delayed maturity. It may be easy to criticize—even perhaps to loathe—manifestations of childishness in ourselves or in others, and yet the following stories make clear the frustration heirs feel when they are not encouraged to become fully responsible and autonomous adults.

Few would argue that rich children can all too easily become snobs. Yet sometimes young heirs behave snobbishly in awkward efforts to make sense of the social discrepancies they see around them. In fact, their displays of arrogance or entitlement often stem less from malice than from the innocent, albeit faulty, logic of childhood. It can be confusing for children to understand racial and

class differences between themselves and the people who work for their families. Sophie Carlson describes such an experience: "There were always at least four people working for us, but Nanny was the only white person. When I was very small, I thought that when you got older, you turned black. I remember asking my grandmother, 'When are you going to turn black?'"

"Nanny left the summer I turned five. I could almost cry now because it was so horrible for me. She wasn't my mother, but she was all mine. Nobody else could command Nanny's attention and time. All the other kids had to relinquish her to me. When she left, I lost a whole reference point. I had always looked for her when I came into the house. Who was I going to look for now? It was really bad for me.

"It wasn't just that she left, it was that suddenly I realized that all those people who spent more time with me than anyone else could leave because we paid them. And if we didn't pay them, they would go. I concluded that they could be fired if they didn't do what I liked. So if they did something I didn't like, I would run around screaming that I was going to fire them. Can you imagine how insulting that was to have a little child screaming, 'You're fired!'"

Heirs raised in households with servants see at close range the chasm that wealth can create between people. Beloved caregivers are ultimately sealed off from the young heir's world by the wages they earn, the back entrances they use, and the days off they take. When the help return to their *own* homes, with their *real* children, the heir feels left out and frequently winds up suffering more than ever from loneliness. While it is not behavior to condone, the kind of acting out we see in Sophie's example is nevertheless an understandable reaction to the pain of isolation.

Another pitfall for inheritors is a tendency toward acting excessively and impulsively. In the face of seemingly unlimited resources, young heirs sometimes have a hard time setting boundaries for themselves or appreciating the benefits of self-control. On top of that, if they are not taught how to handle money, they become likely travelers down any number of self-destructive paths.

Edward Moreno had no mentors and only poor models for coping gracefully and productively with wealth. When, in his mid-twenties, he learned that he was going to inherit many thousands of dollars in the near future, he felt "completely discombobulated." He recalls his reckless responses to the disorientation he experienced: "I had been protected from the issues of wealth, and all of a sudden, I caught affluenza. I caught a kind of cold that wasn't contagious; only relatives got it. None of my hippie friends got it; they were immune. The sickness for me, like many, I imagine, involved foolish financial ventures and drug abuse. Both of those would have been possible without having this inheritance flu, but they were certainly enabled by it."

One common cause of the "affluenza" Edward describes is when parents do not encourage, or in fact block, the development of financial independence and accountability in their children. Without parental encouragement to learn the nuts and bolts of keeping track of their money—simple skills such as checkbook-balancing—heirs not only miss out on the self-confidence that comes with financial competence, but they also frequently become vulnerable to the kind of manipulation which Maggie Lindsay describes. "When I was in college, Mom controlled my checking account. I had a checkbook and she had a checkbook. She made sure there was money in my account. My credit card bills would be sent home, and she would pay them. I think she paid them out of my checking account.

"I remember trying to go over it with her and have the account be mine. It was a big deal. It was my third year of college, and we were in the dining room. I didn't understand much of what was going on. I just remember Mom being furious and telling me that she had paid for such-and-such for me, and I owed her that money. And these were little amounts, like ten dollars. Mom

controlled the purse strings, and she was using the money as a weapon. In our family, money is affection and weapons."

The young Maggie's financial dependence on her mother has made it hard for the adult Maggie to take command not only of her own money but also of her own life. Likewise, Sophie Carlson feels adrift and disoriented: "I have a supreme lack of self-confidence and no discipline, which have made it impossible for me to actually do anything. I don't know what it is about money that does that. It doesn't do it to everybody, but it's done it to me. And it has done it even more to my sister. For years, she just lived on rich people's welfare and did her little whatever, without being able to stick it out, mix it up, connect the dots. It's almost like some kind of paralysis—not being able to do the thing, write the book, or stand up and say, 'Yeah, I'm an artist, or a baseball player, or a fisherman.'"

Fleeting inspiration, dilettantism, wastefulness—all are potential liabilities for inheritors who are not taught enough positive motivation, skills and autonomy from their parents. By the same token, when wealthy parents raise their children to have self-esteem and clear boundaries, they provide them with real wealth. And when affluent parents model the practical steps of manifesting a dream—assembling the lemonade stand, filling out the job application, or simply plodding ahead during the rough spots—they give their children the chance to live truly fulfilling lives.

Inheritors' disconnectedness

Abundant wealth has a way of separating heirs from the grist of life. Many complain of feeling out of touch with authenticity and passion, never mind with the mundane realities of money. They long for a deeper engagement with life, a more solid footing in the world, but are often at a loss about how to attain these goals.

Without the need for a clear plan or purpose in life, some heirs drift like rudderless boats from one thing to another. This lack of direction can manifest as a tendency to make life decisions with little or no genuine consideration. Deborah Frank recalls the randomness of her college decisions: "I grew up in such comfort, economic security and ignorance that I was twenty-one before I ever thought about preparing myself for life in the real world. I went to Wellesley College, partly because my mother had gone there, and partly because it looks like an English estate—lake and all. I fell in love with the elegance.

"I majored in French because I was good at it and because I had a crush on my French professor in my freshman year. Then when senior year rolled around, I realized, 'Oh, my God, I'm not going to be here next year! What am I going to do?' I went to the college placement officer and asked her, 'What can I do with a major in French?' She said, 'Since you're interested in languages, you can look at these brochures.' And she handed me some brochures from an organization called the CIA, which would train you in exotic languages, like Swahili. I was so ignorant that I didn't even know what the CIA was!"

When heirs are not taught how to visualize realistic goals, they can spin their wheels in the realm of fantasy. Now in his early forties, John Munro describes the inner world of his teenage years: "I developed an overactive imagination. I created an imaginary world that was perfect, and it was more attractive to me than I think was healthy. It has taken until now for me to get my feet on the ground about what is a realistic game plan for my adult life.

"Not one of the family elders ever attempted to help me make an acceptable, practical plan—ever. I had always been fascinated by architecture, so I obsessively read the classified ads for the sale of fancy houses in different parts of the world. I imagined that I would inherit enough money to buy one of these houses. But I had no idea what it took to run such a house because no one had ever let me in on the gag with that kind of thing, either in terms of work or money."

Many inheritors confess to a similar disorientation when faced with the pragmatics of money. Some experience money as an invisible, mysterious force in their lives, an abstraction that only contributes to their sense of ungroundedness. It took Edward Moreno twenty-odd years to start connecting the figures on his balance sheet to the realities of his life: "I first learned my net worth probably twenty years ago. But I was in denial for such a long time that I didn't grok it. It was a number on a piece of paper, but it had no connection to me. For some time after I inherited the money, I would practice in my mind trying to convince myself that it was real. Walking down the street, I'd think to myself, 'I've got more money than that person.' But I didn't really believe it, because all I had was just this stuff on paper."

Sometimes the financial ignorance and disorientation which Edward describes can lead to acute embarrassment and anxiety when inheritors are questioned directly about numbers and costs. Kate Shepard breaks out in a light sweat whenever someone asks her to report her insurance rates, her mortgage payments, or the principal of her trust—not because the figures are so unusual, but because she feels so nervous in the world of finance.

Anna Ferguson describes the same discomfort: "I can remember when I was at Vasaar in the late '50s, I had a boyfriend who had a new car that was very cheap, a Metropolitan. He said to me, 'What do you think that cost?' And I looked at it and thought, 'If I can only make a guess that won't sound too crazy.' I knew it was more than a hundred, and I knew it was less than ten thousand, but that was about all I knew. So I really had to concentrate, and then I put out some number which he guffawed about. I had no idea what things cost."

Some heirs tell amazing tales of growing up with so many mixed messages about their money that, as children, they literally do not know whether they are rich or poor. John Munro's father inherited capital assets worth far more than John's extremely wealthy grandparents had ever had. And yet, he recalls, his father cried poor: "I grew up in this aura of unreality in which we couldn't have the ceiling repainted in the living room when there were cracks in it because 'we couldn't afford it.' My stepmother once bought several ragged, hard-to-ride bicycles at a garage sale, painted them a bilious green, and expected me to ride one of them to school. I went to an expensive private school where the students rode expensive new bicycles. My classmates laughed so hard that they just about fell down when I tried to tell them that we couldn't afford a new bicycle, because they knew damn well that we were one of the richest families in town."

Sometimes contradictory messages result when an heir's family is land-rich but cash-poor. Yet more often there is little or no logical explanation for the radically conflicting perceptions of their wealth which young inheritors hear from parents or grandparents. In such cases, wealthy children end up not only disoriented, but also embarrassed about their confusion.

Antidote to disconnectedness: the value of commitment

As we have seen, a vague sense of alienation can assume many forms in the lives of inheritors. Heirs can, however, bridge the gaps and remedy the ungroundedness. Although there is no single

cure for this malaise, the inheritors who do succeed in getting both feet on the ground always mention commitment as essential to their growth.

When you know you are going to inherit enough money to render work unnecessary, put possessions within easy reach, and make external struggles largely avoidable, it can be tough to find the incentive to commit to anything—especially when that commitment requires sacrifice and perseverance. Yet a life without commitment promotes the very ungroundedness we have been exploring. Without it, heirs have no way to focus their energies and interests.

Kate Shepard's privileged upbringing never required her to stick with anything, so she has had to find inner motivations for commitment. She says, "I definitely got the message growing up that I could do anything I wanted, that it was good to go out and have a lot of experiences. What was missing was a sense that these were not just exercises to go through, but that the heart really needs to come along. Commitment was the thing that was always missing; I never had to be committed to anything.

"I'm thirty-four and I just got married last year. It's not that I hadn't had relationships before, but I was never willing to risk something that I could really fail at, something like marriage, which would stretch me beyond my comfortable boundaries. I was one of those typical wealthy girls who was competent enough to be good at most of the things I did, and I never really took up anything that I wasn't good at. Taking on this life-long commitment to my husband has been the best medicine I could imagine."

For Wendy Johnson, being an inheritor has created so many discrepancies and conflicts in her life that she now says, "I feel like I've made myself up because I'm so disconnected from where I started." She may well feel a loss for having drifted so far from her roots, and yet the projects she has committed herself to—forging her own purpose, making her own identity, creating her own connections with the world—have been Wendy's direct routes out of an unhappy past into a rewarding present.

Inheritors' guilt and shame: causes and consequences

Heirs often feel ashamed and guilty about their unearned fortunes. They have what others do not have, what many desperately need, and they have done nothing special to deserve it. Wendy Johnson describes it as "the feeling of having stolen something that didn't belong to me." Add to that our culture's passion for guilt, our ambivalence about money, "filthy lucre," and you have a recipe for guilt, and shame too, in people who, by chance, come into large sums of money.

Dennis Pearne, Ed.D, a wealth counselor, explains the difference between money-guilt and money-shame: "Money-guilt is a sense of being wrong about something specific, such as spending too much or hoarding too much. Money-shame is a more global sense of being defective for having, but not deserving, so much money." Shame begins when a child grows up in an environment in which money is not discussed: "Oh," a child reasons, "There's something we're not talking about; it must be bad. I have it; therefore, I must be bad." Both money-guilt and money-shame are hard to deal with, but of the two, money-shame is the more deep-seated and paralyzing.

Some heirs attribute their guilt and shame to family fortunes that were made in unscrupulous ways. Francesca Da Silva recalls, "I used to go around talking about blood money. I had this fantasy that a long way back my family's money was made off of a slave farm somewhere." Given that

many tycoon-era fortunes were made off the riches of the land and on the backs of exploited labor, Francesca's feelings are quite common, particularly among inheritors of old money.

Wendy Johnson's inheritance has a mixed emotional legacy, which she has had to sort through: "It mattered to me whom the money came from. When I bought land, I bought it with money I had gotten from my paternal grandfather, who had invested in seeds. That held a certain pleasure for me because the money went from a seed company to land. It wasn't part of my grandmother's way of getting money, which was to marry very glamorous men, divorce them, get large chunks of money from them, and invest it well. I felt all the money I got from her was tainted."

David Bowman has an uneasy conscience due to the environmental pollution caused by his family's paper company, "traditionally a very dirty industry." His guilt is compounded by his sensitivity to exploitation: "It's simple: a thousand people are working for about forty of us, who own substantial amounts of stock in the company. For each of us, there's a whole lot more than enough to live on. I make this speech about people exploiting each other for their own gain, and then I turn around and look at my own situation. I'm getting \$65,000 a year in the mail."

Inheritors frequently learn guilt from parents who themselves feel uncomfortable with wealth. By the time she was an adult, Wendy Johnson had internalized her father's shaming; guilt had become a habit for her: "My father would yell at me, saying, 'You don't know how lucky you are! You're so spoiled! I'm going to drive you through Harlem to show what life is really like!' I subsequently worked in Harlem. All the things he threatened to do to me, I did to myself."

Young heirs can feel even more confused if their parents demonstrate conflicting attitudes towards wealth. This is often most dramatically the case when one spouse comes from wealth and the other doesn't. If a woman, for instance, has grown up embarrassed by her inherited wealth, but her husband openly enjoys the money he has married into, their children will likely inhabit a kind of ambivalent middle ground, uncertain whether or not to feel both guilt and shame about their wealth.

In response to guilt, inheritors are apt to compensate in any number of ways. They often work hard to hide or deserve or apologize for their wealth—or all three. Such efforts can last well into adulthood, constricting heirs' freedom of self-expression or compelling them to prove themselves worthy of their good fortune.

Deborah Frank recalls how the shame she felt led her to attempt to keep her inheritance secret. In the heyday of the '60s, she and her husband were living in the San Francisco Bay Area. "I tried to bury the money," she says. "We lived in a small, funky flat. I guess we were trying to keep up with the Joneses. Our friends were hippies who avoided work. They lived on food stamps, smoked dope, and furnished their shabby flats with Indian bedspreads and orange crates. We were spending maybe one quarter of my income, our only income. I just left the rest in a checking account and refused to think about it."

Deborah's efforts to live below her means and hide her identity as a wealthy person are repeated again and again in the stories heirs tell. Guilt and shame often make it difficult for inheritors to treat themselves to small luxuries or even necessary items. Francesca Da Silva describes her discomfort at purchasing a sprayer for the greenhouse she shares with her friend Aline: "I was standing there agonizing over spending thirty dollars on myself for this sprayer, which we really needed. I was coming up with list A and list B, all the rationalizations, all the pros and cons—an in-depth analysis over a sprayer! When I guiltily dragged it up to the counter, I suddenly thought, 'Oh, I can give it to Aline for her birthday!' That thought completely relieved me of all my anxiety about spending thirty dollars."

At its most extreme, this pattern of self-deprivation manifests as a kind of poverty mentality. Fred Hopgood came from a very wealthy family in the Midwest; he moved to New York City, in part to escape an intense power struggle with his father. Fred's anger, combined with his sense of unworthiness, created a painful period of what he calls "degradation." He had no job and was drawing a mere \$300 a month from his trust account at the family office. "There was a huge truggle between my father and me: I was *not* going to work, no matter what! He would have had to cut me off in order to make me work, but he never did. So I just existed on what he gave me.

"I had no idea how much I could ask for. Three hundred dollars in New York would run out in two weeks, and I would be walking past Balducci's in Greenwich Village, just drooling. I'd buy two bunches of asparagus and eat them for dinner in my cold loft. I was depriving myself of what I had because my father had power over me. I didn't want to ask him for more money. But I realize now that I was also trying to cover up the fact that I had money. I was guilty and I just didn't want to give myself pleasure. I didn't feel I had any right to the money."

It is not uncommon for guilt-ridden inheritors to consider getting rid of their money altogether as a way of easing their consciences. Some actually do, although this strategy is not apt to relieve guilt completely, unless the heir is motivated by inspiration rather than avoidance. For Francesca Da Silva, the discomfort of being wealthy was like a persistent ghost: "I would think, 'Well, if I can just get rid of my money.' I had a sense that if I could just spread the money around, it wouldn't be so haunting. But I discovered that the more I try to get rid of the money, the more it haunts me."

Some heirs—men in particular—respond to their uneasy feelings by becoming workaholics. They drive themselves hard, trying futilely to measure up to self-imposed standards of perfection. After years of exhausting work for social change, David Bowman is finally beginning to understand how destructive his relentless work habits have been: "I felt like I had to save the world. I had to do good deeds. It came out of having these hard-working, Protestant, altruistic values and a serious sense of guilt and responsibility. I was not able to figure out what kind of work would fulfill all my responsibilities and expectations. I was spinning my wheels trying to be this person that I never was and never could be—Jesus Christ and Ghandi and John F. Kennedy all wrapped into one. It's twisted, but that's what I was expecting of myself.

"For ten years I worked myself into the ground, and I was chronically exhausted. Once I worked seventy hours a week at a theater company for nine months. Then I crashed and never really got strong again. I was a mess, and in that state I was still trying to figure out how to be Superman."

Overwhelmingly great expectations are sometimes part and parcel of an inheritance; they are handed down, along with the money and the guilt, from parents and grandparents. John Munro vividly recalls the messages he absorbed. "The expectation laid on me and my cousins was that we had to rule the world. It was just that simple. That our ancestors had achieved such success starting with relatively modest means meant that we, starting with what they had accumulated, should be able to do just about anything.

"The message was: there are enough problems in the world and enough talents within us that we are supposed to address those problems in a significant way. This will lend glory to the family name and repay our debt to society for the privilege and opportunities that we have been offered."

Regardless of whether high standards are imposed from within or without, what most heirs eventually discover is that nothing—no martyrdom, no award, no prestigious career—ever completely eliminates the guilt they feel for being handed so much more than others by Lady Luck.

For many heirs, then, the fundamental dilemma becomes how to atone for the “crime” they never committed.

In addition to the distressing habits of self-deprivation, workaholism and perfectionism, inheritors sometimes resort to compulsive expressions of gratitude, apology or self-deprecation. Sophie Carlson still finds herself trying to make up to the hired help who worked for her family. “I’ve always felt guilty, probably because of all the servants who worked for us when I was little. I loved them so much. They couldn’t have the life I had, even though they made that life possible for me. Maybe that’s why I’m always running around trying to prove that I’m no better than anybody else.

“When I go to a restaurant, I invariably tell the waitress that I have been a waitress too. I want her to think that I know what it’s like, that I understand her. But actually, I’ve never waited tables. I just washed dishes.” Like Sophie, some inheritors feel locked in a psychological debtor’s prison, half-consciously hoping that enough Thank You’s or I’m Sorry’s will win their release from guilt and indebtedness.

Going beyond guilt and shame

The key to freedom comes not from being forgiven by someone “out there”—parents or friends or society at large—but from within. Heirs who are able to heal the wounds of guilt and shame do so through a hard-won self-acceptance. Although the methods for attaining this inner acceptance vary, they always involve shifts of attitude rather than simple changes of behavior.

Learning to see unearned wealth as an unexpected stroke of luck, as a gift from God, as an opportunity to fulfill dreams, even as energy circulating in the universe—all these perspectives can help. Francesca Da Silva’s father advised her to lighten her load of guilt by regarding her inheritance dispassionately. He told her, “You don’t have to take it all so seriously. Treat it like you were handed this little pot of gold, and then there’s no personal emotion about it. You’re just suddenly fortunate. It’s like winning the lottery. Treat it like it just arrived in the mail one day, and now you can do all the things you’ve ever wanted to do.”

Other heirs find it useful to work with their discomfort in a spiritual context. Michael Warner, for instance, has found considerable peace through meditation. “In sitting practice, you come up against the feeling of poverty or worthlessness or depression. You just sit with it, and if you sit with it long enough, you can actually get in touch with your own basic goodness and wisdom, which transcends all the rest of the stuff. For me as a rich person, this experience has particular power.”

For others, time itself alters attitudes and assuages guilt and shame. Simply growing older helps many heirs to assess more realistically their strengths and their limitations, what they can and cannot do, what is and is not worth worrying about. In the words of one forty-year-old heir, “I see now that life is too short to be constantly beating myself over the head with things that aren’t real. I let go of my guilt when I realized I could waste my whole life feeling shameful about my wealth.”

It can also help simply to remember that being born into a wealthy family is not itself a culpable act; it involves no act of greed or malicious intent. On the other hand, when heirs act arrogantly, when they wield their resources to exploit others, or when they deliberately blind themselves to the larger social implications of their wealth, remorse is an appropriate response. Heirs can therefore benefit from discriminating between unfounded guilt and shame, on the one

hand, and a justifiably bad conscience, on the other. Guilt and shame can be dismissed as a waste of energy, and the pangs of a bad conscience can serve as an important wake-up call, a spur to make necessary changes.

As in all transformations, the first step in ridding ourselves of guilt and shame is to acknowledge the depth of the feeling and to become fully aware of its negative consequences in our lives. Then begins the process of accepting that to stumble into inherited wealth is not a crime. Finally, compassion and freedom emerge as we gradually learn to use inherited wealth in ways that nourish the soul and benefit others.

Conclusion: a letter from Wendy Johnson

Wendy Johnson told us that being interviewed about her experience as an inheritor was "like an intense psychoanalytic session." It afforded her the pleasure of discovery; she found new connections and fresh perspectives in her continuing effort to achieve a harmonious relationship with her wealth. After the interview, her thoughts and emotions just kept coming, like ripples on a pond. So she wrote us a follow-up letter which eloquently weaves together many of the themes in this article.

Like plenty of other heirs, Wendy is now overcoming the conflicts she inherited along with her fortune. She is earnestly exploring her feelings and doing the footwork to become empowered. For that reason, her letter offers encouragement and hope, just the medicine for other inheritors who may find themselves disoriented and stuck as they reflect on the role of inherited wealth in their lives.

Wendy writes:

Money had come to represent for me some bad, illicit part of myself that I had to hide from other people. It was also something that set me apart and made me different. Sometimes this difference propped up a sense of myself as special and entitled, but more often it made me feel less valid, as if my work didn't count as much as other people's because I didn't have to do it. Furthermore, the money infantilized me and made me feel that I needed it in order to survive.

While having money gave me the patina of independence, it tied me to my grandmother and mother in a hostile ambivalence that kept me stuck for years. I had to work through lots of conflicts before I could have even a moderately realistic view of money. It took time, psychoanalysis and real-life changes, like getting a Ph.D., which made me financially independent of my trust, and becoming a mother, which helped me feel more entitled to use the money.

Now that some of the mystification has cleared, I see the money simply as something I was born with, like red hair or being female and a WASP. Of course, it has created its own set of advantages and problems, but it doesn't by fiat make me any more special or less valid than anyone else. In a culture that both prizes and despises money as much as ours, it's hard to be even-handed about it and not see yourself in terms of the impact it has on other people. Essentially, I think money is a lightning rod for unconscious fantasies, envy, the enactment of family conflicts, and all kinds of crazy ideas.

If you don't have to worry about basic survival, you are different from others. You are protected and isolated from a whole realm of human concerns that bond people

together and leave you out. You're not one of the gang, so to speak. And if all your friends have money, you're isolated in another way. If money and survival are not hooked together, you are supposedly free 'to do what you want.' Only people who have this freedom understand just how hard knowing what you want can be.

There is a lot to be said for learning what you want by doing what you have to do to pay the rent. It is easier to succumb to your insecurities, indulge your anxieties and spin your fantasies if you don't have to engage in daily work. I latched onto working, often at mediocre jobs, to separate myself from my parents' world. While this pursuit was necessary for my psychic survival, it meant that I couldn't use the money to develop the more creative aspects of myself. In retrospect, I wasted a lot of time denying the existence of an inheritance while also trying to make myself worthy of it.

The blind innocence that inherited money engenders is in part induced by the families who prefer their children docile and dependent. It is also self-induced to avoid conflicts and manage guilt, confusion and the potential for greed. However, a great deal of damage is done when you keep an area of yourself dumb and uninformed. All areas of your life can be infected by avoiding questions and being unable to take hold of adult responsibilities.

As Wendy Johnson suggests, coming to terms with ourselves as inheritors of wealth involves a kind of double-mindedness. It requires, on the one hand, acknowledging the specific ways in which wealth has kept us from wholeness. To that end, it means finding nonjudgmental contexts in which to vent our anger, express our grief, and attend to the under-educated parts of ourselves. In short, it means taking our pain seriously.

On the other hand, true resolution of our conflicts comes about only when we become more interested in the potential of the present and future than in the inadequacies of the past. As with any other inner healing, it means moving out of blame and dependency into self-responsibility and empowerment. And for those inheritors who seem most at peace with their situation, it has meant developing a larger, more spiritual perspective through which to understand wealth and all that it implies.