

Satisfaction in the age of greed

**Our greed has brainwashed us into believing that we have no capacity, that we should never be satisfied, that we should always long for more.**

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I back my car out of the parking lot and I hear a familiar grind, scrape, and thud. I deflate as my teenage daughter laughs. I scoff with her, and then I look to the heavens (but in this case the drooping ceiling of my Honda is in the way). I know the noises well. The bumper fell off again. It gets stuck on the concrete divider and I never realize it until I back out and it pries off the rest of my car. I get out and smile at the woman in the brilliant 2018 BMW SUV beside me. She removes the giant sunglasses that cover half her face. They're the sort of spectacles that movie stars wear so that they can be recognized for not wanting to be recognized. The glasses

shout, “Hey! Look at me! I don’t want you to see me!”

Now that she’s unmasked, I squint to see if she's famous, but then I remember that we’re not on the Upper Eastside of Manhattan. We are in a parking lot in Chattanooga, Tennessee. She gazes in her vanity mirror to check for lipstick on her teeth before replacing the face shield, and I notice how her bumper hovers over the concrete divider, instead of resting on top of it, like mine has the habit of doing. Her undercarriage wouldn’t get caught when she’s backing out.

I take my car key from my pocket and apply enough pressure on to the corner of the bumper so that it fits back under the headlights. Then I try to leverage the rest of the plastic molding back into place, although it will never fit perfectly. Too many parts of it have fallen off over the years. My daughter says that I need to use duct tape, but I don’t know. Driving around with a duct tape car seems like a fate even worse than this.

The fancy lady gets out of her Beemer and averts her eyes from my maneuverings. I am two feet in front of her, so I smile and say, “Sorry if I’m in your way!” She pretends that she did not hear me, and this act of *not looking* seems to take a lot of discipline, like actively ignoring a clown doing gymnastics within an arm’s reach.

I feel a tiny wither of humiliation. *Do we ever grow out of middle school?*

I sigh. *We are equals*, I tell myself, even though I don’t know anything about the woman except that she drives a nice car. She could have won a Nobel Peace Prize last year. But I continue, *I am smart. I am creative. I am productive. I have written books. I teach graduate classes. People pay money to listen to me speak. I just didn’t choose a lucrative profession. I could have. But I don’t care about money. I am SO above money.* And I continue to self-soothe with those words running through my head, like a fourteen-year-old girl who still sucks her thumb while going to sleep.

I hold my chin up as I open the door and slide into the driver’s seat. My daughter is texting. I start to mock the faux movie star, but I stop myself. That move would be too transparent for Calla, she would recognize the taunting as a flimsy layer over my embarrassment, my attempt to feel bigger by making some stranger smaller. I never want her to feel shame for who we are—and who we are just happens to include driving a car that has 250,000 miles on it. I breathe deeply and start the car again, praying that it actually starts, because along with the wayward bumper, there is also something draining the battery and we haven’t been able to figure out what it is.

Even as the engine starts purring, an aching dissatisfaction grows, a vague realization that I should have done something different along the way, but I don't know what. I'm freelancing, so my job is a patchwork of squares in a Depression Era quilt. I love each task—pastoring, adjunct teaching, consulting, and speaking. Yet my income is uneven, so I run a continual spreadsheet in my head, taking our bank account balance and dividing it by the number of days we have left until the next paycheck. I'm looking at my daughter's college expenses and wondering how we're going to afford tuition when we have to budget before buying a spare toothbrush in most months. We're supposed to be ready for the big things at this point in our lives—education and retirement—but we're not. Yet, even during these tumultuous years of church planting, tentmaking, and temporary calls, we've always had enough. Our lives have been full of manna.

I try to identify my dissatisfaction. I love my calling. And it's not the BMW. And it was not my own discontent, for being able to deftly fix my bumper would have been a victorious moment, if I had been alone. I think the dissatisfaction was in the comparison. The fact that life was working for someone else in a way that it was not for me.

I'm also a product of our culture, which has consumed the idea of never-ending growth. Our greed has brainwashed us into believing that we have no capacity, we should never be satisfied, we should always long for more. We think that billionaires should get tax breaks. We think that the market should keep increasing. We never ask, "Do we have enough?" It has left us broken in some core sense.

We drive down the road, over a bridge, and I notice the stunning sunset. That great ball of fire nestling behind the mountains creates a brilliant intensity of color. God doesn't just turn the lights off at the end of the day, not when there's some showing off to be done. Pure joy erupts in me as I remember that I have been created for abundance. Our bodies have been engineered with delight built in with every model. Just in our tongues, in three inches of our body's real estate, we have taste buds that create endless possibilities. We have erogenous zones from the back of our ears to the tips of our toes. Even putting on a sweater can feel like a warm embrace. Our nose has the ability to conjure up sweet memories. And what we can experience with our ears! The endless array of tones and melodies.

Not only is our delight endless, but our bodies *have* been built with an off-switch for when we attain satisfaction. We have a capacity for how much food we can eat. We

have a limit to our intimate relationships. We feel sensory overload and can become panicked when there is too much smell, noise, or visual stimulation. We have a capacity of space, when it comes to material things. Humans typically know when our appetites have been satiated.

As we move into this season of abundance, I'm searching for that off-switch within me—the one that I can always locate with a little attention and a lot gratitude. And I hope and pray that we all find satisfaction.