

Easy Come, Tough Going

For those who inherit their wealth, life's material pleasures are there for the taking, but happiness may have to be earned the hard way

Mary Rowland

WHEN I WROTE A COLUMN for *The New York Times* several years ago about the problems faced by people who inherit so much money that they need never work, the piece generated a lot of disgruntled mail. I wasn't surprised. So many of us cling to the belief that the only thing separating us from complete happiness is several million dollars. We don't want to hear that the wealthy can suffer from guilt, depression, or lack of purpose and self-esteem or that money does not solve every problem.

In researching that story, I had interviewed Thayer Willis, the niece of Owen Cheatham, founder of Georgia Hardwood Lumber Co., in Augusta, Ga. Her father, Julian Cheatham, played a key role in the growth of the company, which later became Georgia-Pacific Corp. Willis is an inheritor whose road to finding meaning in life turned out to be a long one. She finally became a psychotherapist and now works with inheritors who face problems much like her own. Her recently published book, *Navigating the Dark Side of Wealth: A Life Guide for Inheritors* (New Concord), prompted me to touch base with her again.

Much of what the book offers echoes the advice financial advisers give their clients. Willis suggests, for example, that people would do well to think of money as energy: set



priorities and then use money to implement them. She also includes some great tips, particularly on raising children under the conditions of wealth. But most intriguing about what Willis has to say, both in the book and in conversation, about the problems of inheritors—the suspicion that people are interested in them only because of their money, their difficulty trusting people and the blocks that creates in developing solid relationships, and a pervasive sense of guilt for having been

born rich when so many millions suffer the hardships of poverty—is that these troubles sound like a variation on the feelings that plague the rest of us.

Willis, who lives in suburban Portland, Ore., is candid about her own struggles, first with bulimia in her 20s and then with relationships in her 30s. “I got married three times in six years,” she says. But in her book, she writes that “each of us needs to find our own place in life to create the role that only we can fill.” We probably all agree on that. But the challenge for inheritors, she notes, is that “because they can buy their way into so many places and things, the hardest real-world lessons never get learned.” Willis believes that it's adversity that compels people to change. “We change because we have more pain than we're willing to tolerate.”



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But that point can take a long time to arrive. Inheritors typically face a moral conflict over their worthiness to possess such good fortune, Willis says. Yet the idea of unlimited means becomes part of their identity. Indeed, “part of the inheritor’s persona is the idea that having to consider what things cost somehow makes one less of a person.” When Willis talks with clients, she emphasizes the importance of taking into account their spiritual life, intellectual life, and physical well-being, as well as the emotional issues that prompt most clients to see her. “I work to bring out the truth for each person,” she says. “I’m not judging anyone’s path.” But a therapist can serve to keep someone’s attention on the place that hurts, she says. “I can get them to name the problem and name their hopes and dreams and what stands in the way of them.”

How Willis managed to name her own dream and turn her life around is a fascinating story. Pain helped, of course. She was in so much of it that it became intolerable. Still, how does one chart an escape from such pain? Willis says she focused on a longtime friend whose family had the kind of life she wanted. “The parents were both very genuine, everyone had a good sense of humor, and they laughed all the time,” she recalls. “I would spend the night there, and I saw that it was real.” She wanted to foster “loving relationships full of respect and

caring and laughter. That became my life goal, but I didn’t know how to create it,” she says. “I thought step one was getting married, and so I did that a lot.”

As I listened to Willis describe her journey, I began to see more similarities than differences between her life and mine, even though she lived in a mansion in a cloistered neighborhood in Portland back when my address was a camping trailer in northern Minnesota. The obstacles were different, of course, but we both had trouble getting where we wanted to go. Because Willis had money as a young woman, she was able to play in a rock band, whereas I hitchhiked around the country eating Twinkies. But we shared a similar desperation.

Clearly, the key difference between Willis and the rest of us is that she had the money to spend a lot of time in therapy, working hard at finding her path. She wasn’t forced to cope with the financial struggles that can compound emotional problems. But Willis knew that she needed to be useful in order to feel good about her life. When she completed her therapy, she decided that she wanted to help other young women suffering from eating disorders. She worked nearly 40 hours a week as program director at a YMCA during the day and counseled women with eating disorders most afternoons and evenings.

She was, as it turned out, in exactly the place she needed

to be. One day in the gym of that YMCA, Willis met a man who was trying to give away a stray kitten. He couldn't keep it because he was allergic to cats. Willis, who had just lost her cat, said she would take it. Later, the man asked if he might visit the cat from time to time. Willis agreed, but when he visited the first time she played it safe by inviting a friend over. She was soon turning down his repeated invitations to go out, although they remained friends. But life sometimes insists on having its way, and one day when she needed a ride somewhere, her friend's offer to oblige turned into a first date, and Jon Willis became her husband in 1987.

After they married, Willis went back to school to get a master's degree in social work. She knew already that she wanted to become a psychotherapist and work with inheritors, but she kept it to herself because working with the rich seemed a strange specialty for social work. I called Willis's attention to her pattern of resolving an issue for herself and then helping others do the same thing. Willis says she believes she's been led to the life she was destined to have, one that lets her make the most of the experiences she's had. Ideally, that's pretty much what each of us does, at least those of us who find fulfillment.

With two children, 7 and 11, and her therapy practice, Willis, 54, has her plate full. So why write a book? She says she's had the idea in mind for nearly a dozen years. Then more than two years ago, she got a call from a talk show in Los Angeles, asking her to appear the following Tuesday to talk about the challenges of wealth. She bought a new outfit, and the show sent her tickets to L.A. But on Monday afternoon, a message on her voice mail told her the appearance was canceled. They'd found someone who had not only faced down the challenges of wealth but had also written a book about it. "Obviously I was supposed to write a book," Willis says.

Still, there was the matter of Willis's inheritance. Clearly, financial rewards were not the driving force. "It's very important for me to work and earn my own money," she says. "To have a sense of competence is essential to my well-being and to the example I want to set for my children."

Once she'd completed the book, most publishers she approached were unenthusiastic, believing the market for a book for inheritors would be too small. One house was interested in publishing it but wanted her to add advice for those who had earned their wealth and for those who had become suddenly wealthy from winning the lottery or from a legal settlement. Fortunately, Willis saw the folly in that. "I liked the book the way it was," she says. "So I decided to self-publish it." On the cover is an engraved silver spoon, and that's what it's about.

The book is peppered with the experiences of Willis's clients and her advice to them. There is much about entitlement, selfishness, ungratefulness, and brattiness and much about enslavement to money and the heavy yoke the wealthy often wear when their access to riches depends on someone else.

Sometimes, to make her point, Willis tells folktales. In one, a skinny wolf envies a well-fed dog until the dog tells him he can get the wolf the same deal he has. The dog is tied up all day because he is fierce and his master doesn't want him to bite anyone. But at night, his master brings him bones and lets him run wild as a watchdog. "Pretty nice, isn't it?" says the dog. "Let's get you a job just like it."

The wolf demurs. "It's only keeping your stomach so full that prevents your mind from working," he tells the dog.

The moral of the story? "Freedom is worth whatever price we have to pay for it."

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