



# Too Much Is Never Enough

Can wealthy individuals resist the temptations that lead to excess?



*Thayer Willis, pictured at age 21, admits she led a spoiled life as a young adult. Now, with a teen of her own, she advises against excess.*

“The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.”

—William Blake, from the “Proverbs of Hell” in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

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*Born into the founding family of the multibillion-dollar Georgia-Pacific company, Willis has an insider's perspective on the privileges and the difficulties that wealthy families have to deal with on a regular basis. Each month in WORTH, she will examine the special issues that affluent families face, offering her insights into these challenges.*

**L**ONG BEFORE I became a professional licensed clinical social worker helping my clients achieve freedom beyond wealth, my own relationship with affluence delved into excess at times. I cringe as I remember one drunken night in my mid-20s with a group of friends, calling the head pilot of the Georgia-Pacific corporate jet fleet at his home at 2 a.m. and announcing that we wanted him to fly us to San Francisco—right then. I can only imagine how thrilled he must have been to receive that call to fly a wild, partying gaggle of twentysomethings, only one of whom he even knew.

What is excess? It is a sense of entitlement to life's perks. It is often, too, a lack of empathy for others. Excess often goes hand in hand with wealth, and if left unaddressed, it can destroy relationships, undermine trust and erode personal and professional potential.

William Blake tells us that the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom. Think about those travel directions. Tempting to hit the

road, isn't it? We can buy the Italian sports car, the jet, the eight vacation houses, the exquisite wine cellar, and we arrive at the palace of wisdom. How does this work? Or does it work?

We all have desires. It is human nature to try to experience what we want. We also manage our power in order to realize those experiences. How our desires and power join forces within us determines our presentation to the world. Our choices regarding these forces make us who we are.

One convenient choice is to ignore the consequences and decide it doesn't matter. We can pursue excess, because after all, we think, who will know? We say to ourselves, "I can afford it" or "I've earned it." However, if we take a bit more responsibility, we realize that there are all kinds of consequences to our actions. First, there is our own journey and our own experience of life. Many of us willingly strive to take the high road in life. We know we have been given this golden opportunity to show our mettle. Second, we are examples to others. The wealthy live in more of a spotlight than many other people, simply because in our society financial wealth magnifies everything that we say and do.

Despite my conversion to the bright side of life in later years and all of my professional training, my recent experience trying to avoid excess has made me wonder if I ever will arrive at Blake's palace of wisdom. In an effort to motivate our 16-year-old, newly minted driver to save money for something she wants, my husband and I passed down his mother's retired car to our daughter. Granted, it was an old, dorky car, but still, we assumed that 16-year-olds are supposed to be grateful for any wheels at all. According to this teenager, we are living in the past. We were met with such ingratitude from a kid who has many otherwise lovely traits that we were shocked. To her credit, she did have the good sense to drop her attitude and accept the car, though it was a thin acceptance. Her tension seeped out at times, enough to serve as a constant reminder that she was merely being compliant. Alas, Grandma's car proved unreliable, so we designated my car as her "new" primary means of transport. It, too, is old, though not as old as Grandma's, and it was fascinating to see how thrilled she was to have the use of an 11-year-old car. Did we do the right thing? Only time will tell.

#### RESISTING EXCESS

*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is satire, and in fact the "Proverbs of Hell" are not proverbs in a constructive sense.

They are enticing and fun to think about because part of each of us wants them to be right. But the road of excess does not lead to the palace of wisdom. That is folly. It is the discipline and courage needed to make good decisions that keep us focused.

Keep in mind that it is not only harmless to enjoy life's pleasures at times—in fact it is good for us. But the challenge is finding the balance among life's many choices, and harnessing our desires and the power we have to act on them. The best way to meet that challenge is to be cognizant of the examples we set. Right or wrong, many in our society look to wealthy individuals for pointers on how to behave. Take that responsibility to heart.

When we choose excess, no matter how eloquently we justify it, we become self-centered and selfish. Entitlement is the driver, and it provides an unconscious assumption that we qualify for the material items we want and access to the places we want to go. It becomes important not to think about how these attitudes and behaviors affect those around us. Empathy has no place in the world of the entitled person. The dawn of taking charge of our lives is the introduction of humility and the acceptance of all circumstances with grace, kindness and gratitude. These are the attitudes that allow us to love and to be free.

Ironically, it is resisting excess that leads to the highest quality of life. If that sounds confining, perhaps you need a little more excess first in order to understand this twist on mainstream desires. Commit to taking the next opportunity you have to indulge in excess, and gather the courage for a new approach. Imagine saying yes to it, and then what happens next, and next, and so on. Think it through as far as you can.

After that, imagine saying no to it. Think it through the same way. The discipline of this exercise in itself will be uncomfortable, but interrupting your pattern of familiar behavior will

give you insight. Your accomplishment will be twofold:

- 1) You will have taken a big step toward being the best person you can be, with all of its associated rewards; and
- 2) You will be setting examples in everything you do. Many people will be observing your actions; it is good to turn over a new leaf.

While it is fun to explore Blake's "Proverbs of Hell" because they are so extremely thought-provoking, the constructive version of this one is "The road of courage and discipline leads to the sweet delights of wisdom." How do we learn this? Through experience. ▣

**MANY IN OUR SOCIETY LOOK TO WEALTHY INDIVIDUALS FOR POINTERS ON HOW TO BEHAVE. TAKE THAT RESPONSIBILITY TO HEART.**