

## The Issue of Fifty Dollars

by Caitlin Palmer

Injustice doesn't always look how you think it would: ugly, rearing, an evil or unkindness asking to be faced.

Sometimes it merely looks unpractical, baffling. Just how things are.

I remember the most recent time, when I slipped into a dark funk for days, over the issue of \$50. Being fifty dollars withdrawn in my bank account. Because, when budgeting, I hadn't taken into account the summer months of an automatic payment for my cell phone. I was getting ready to start school. I couldn't buy groceries, a notebook. I felt crushed by this failure, at this stage of my life. I was doing it all wrong. And in a country where what you have, how easily you can move about - I suppose that's why any excess of assets is called *liquid* - I felt unworthwhile. Like I was a fatal flaw in the system that didn't deserve to ask for, want anything. It eats at you, doubt, times of poverty like this. Even when you know intellectually, it's the system that is flawed.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was not shot after campaigning for civil rights. Hated, yes. Jailed, yes. He was silenced when beginning to campaign for economic rights.

People get very heated when you start talking about money. If you replace the word's use with the word *value*, underlying assumptions become clear. Poor people don't have ~~money~~ *value*. Rich people have the most ~~money~~ *value*. Those struggling in the ever-diminishing middle class, can never be sure of their ~~money~~ *value*.

Contemporary conversations often make it sound like the poor are incompetent, inferior, while in reality, the rich have much, much more than what is needed - as the title of an article in *The Independent* says, "Just nine of the world's richest men have more combined wealth than the poorest 4 billion" (2018). The question is not, then, is there enough to go around? It is instead, can the rich be parted with it, this *enough*?

The saying: the rich get richer while the poor get poorer. I didn't understand how true this was, until I read a sidestory in a book about characters investing money in schemes that would pay dividends back, on the odds of a risk paying off or not paying off, in the future. Something that hadn't even happened, couldn't be held, measured - in other words, imaginary. Because some people can pay their bills, have extra after paying their bills. As poet Cameron McGill wrote in a scribbled-in poem on a tax form, "withdrawal of savings requires saving" (<https://queenmobs.com/2017/09/misfit-doc-return/>).

If wealth were truly democratic, investment would be taught in public schools.

Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote in his final book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* that “We have come a long way in our understanding of human motivation and of the blind operation of our economic system. Now we realize [] dislocations in the market operation of our economy and the prevalence of discrimination.” No one *asks* not to have any value. No one *asks*, even, where to be born, or to be born at all. Yet so much depends on opportunities given at the start. As another poem goes (William Carlos Williams), “so much depends/ upon/ a red wheel/ barrow,” that is, what you can haul. What you can trade for, with your body.

And this “blind operation” of economics King spoke of - how capitalism is often referred to as *laissez faire*. While used to describe a “free market,” the actual translation is *let it/us do, let go*. This usually means the idea for a government to not interfere, let goods cost what they will, let people pay what they make - that is, an invisible hand would guide the market. Yet in early uses, *Justice Part IV of Ethics* described it as the “miserable *laissez-faire* which calmly looks on while men ruin themselves in trying to enforce by law their equitable claims” (1892). When tax cuts are made for the rich, when a legal minimum wage is not livable, when healthcare is not affordable, it seems there are many “invisible hands” interfering... and they are not ours.

But we can, maybe, all of us interfere: it’s what King thought. That an appeal, actual consideration by the wider population, could lead to a guaranteed national income. That is, the promise that anyone, despite their jobs/ abilities/ opportunities/ families/ health, could have ~~money~~ *value*.

There is so much else to demand, as citizens, at this time, but what if ~~money~~ *value* were related to other social causes? What if speaking to our lawmakers on this, could affect other dreams?

Because, of course it’s not just dollar bills - it’s a question of who gets a say, who matters. I just wonder what it will take to move people to be concerned about wealth disparity. Hurricanes, destroyed neighborhoods in New Orleans has not done it. Water poisoning in Flint has not done it. Veterans of America’s vested interests, begging on the streets has not done it. When did it become so radical to *care*?

I suppose it has been this radical, at least, since April 4, 1968, when Martin Luther King, Jr. was in the midst of organizing a “Poor People’s March,” to bring caravans of impoverished citizen’s to Washington’s door step, and was shot two months before it could happen.

Reasons for addressing these issues in an essay are myriad in my mind. When I think of income inequality - of all the things I will never, ever be able to do, with many worse off than me - I become by turns angry, heartbroken, resolute. When given the chance, I have to speak about this issue. But the truth is also that there is a prize for the selected essay, and I could use the money.