

What Do You Do When a Million Isn't Enough?

by Ken Hekman ~ May 2001



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Who wants to be a millionaire?

The rhetorical question has ignited the entrepreneurial spirit for centuries and spawned one of America's hottest TV shows of the past decade. For the majority of Americans a million bucks is considered a small fortune, but a fortune nonetheless. It fuels the imagination for a better life, a little security, and perhaps the pride of achievement. The dream serves as the driving force for enterprises as widely different as the lottery is from the stock market. It inspires princes and paupers alike.

But what if a million isn't enough?

That's the case in Romania, where inflation has eroded purchasing power to dangerous levels. The minimum wage is one million lei per month, about \$35 under the current exchange rate. The average wage is two million per month. But the minimum amount required to live in this country (basic food and shelter) is three million lei per month, a little more than \$100 per person. Nearly everyone is a millionaire in Romania, but the title doesn't mean anything like it does in the states. Millionaires are going hungry.

A short walk through any part of any town or city is enough to convince you that life in this place is far, far from life in the United States. The tiny yards of tiny houses hold thinly veiled secrets behind their ramshackle fences. A chicken grazes among the weeds; unaware that it represents either a single supper or a thousand breakfasts. An old man, stooped by years of hard labor, pours himself into the maintenance of a table that would have been declared firewood anywhere else. A garbage container just outside a restaurant serves dinner for two as they forage, unashamed, for a little scrap of sustenance. Each of these neighbors, and thousands like them on the crowded buses and smoky cars that pass them by, has a story to tell.

What is it like to live in a time and place where the average salary is two-thirds of a living wage? Most Americans have no idea what that's like. That hasn't happened here since the Great Depression, and even then there was at least a sympathetic government that attempted to maintain order and to "put a chicken in every pot." Regardless of the official public policy in Romania, the private policy seems to prevail – look out for yourself. No wonder people resort to greasing the palms of those with resources. That's what you do when you're hungry and have few alternatives. And when you find out how well it works, you repeat the pattern until there is no conscience left to contend with. A hungry father gives no thought to how he contributes to societal chaos or economic ruin when he does what is necessary to feed his family. He thinks only about his stomach and the cries of his children.

Americans like me have to swallow a lot of pride to be missionaries in a place like this. When I try to put myself in Romanian shoes, I am blown away by how much I take for granted in American culture. All my assumptions – about how diligence will be rewarded, how the economy will grow, how order will be maintained – they all appear amazingly fragile in contrast to Eastern Europe. When I reflect on my reasons for being there, I'm further shocked to realize how tenuous my faith is as well.

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But his principles for living have the power to enrich us far more than material wealth can, and that's a message for all people in all times and places.

Faith is pretty easy when your moral fiber is supported by an orderly infrastructure, but try to tell someone that faith in God will improve their lives when their monthly paycheck is only enough for twenty days.

I sometimes feel like I should apologize for being an American. All my sense of self-sufficiency just melts away as I realize how the blessings of my life are unconnected with my personal fortitude, persistence, shrewdness or savvy. Do any of the morally upright you-can-do-anything-you-put-your-mind-to messages really hold water without societal order?

I started something new on this trip to Romania. I conducted a seminar for Romanian business people about "Five Principles of Prosperity." It was an attempt to share Biblical principles about an orderly economy without sounding too American or too Christian, knowing the audience would quickly dismiss my message on either account. Putting it together challenged me to segregate all my American assumptions about prosperity from God's ideas, and then convey God's ideas in ways that would make sense. God's ideas don't often make sense, even in an orderly society, much less in a chaotic one. Put the interests of others ahead of your own? How ridiculous!

The results were shocking. They asked tough questions like, "Doesn't acting like a servant make you look weak and vulnerable?" Their wheels were turning. You could see them wrestling with their most basic assumptions about themselves and their culture. Hearing God's ideas about servant-leadership had the same effect on them it always has on me – it made them squirm. But as one American observed, "People hung on your every word." They asked me back and invited me to give the talk in other communities throughout the country.

God doesn't really tell us how to be a millionaire. In fact, he warns pretty strongly against aspirations of prosperity. But his principles for living have the power to enrich us far more than material wealth can, and that's a message for all people in all times and places. Justice and injustice live side-by-side in every culture, but God's principles, whether we give him the credit as their author or not, transcend culture. They transcend and transform culture when we let them. But letting them transform culture begins with letting them transform us – me – one heart at a time. That transformation ultimately requires me to recognize my own spiritual poverty and submit myself as a servant to Almighty God. The amazing thing is that by submitting, I become an heir of heaven. And being an heir of heaven beats winning the lottery any day.