

Low-Riding Genes

John is a rich man. Now 34 years old, he is a business school graduate and owns a private investment company whose stock went public last year. Proceeds from the sale of equity in the firm netted John a personal profit of several million dollars. Long ago, John began life a lot less fortunately. Born prematurely, he was one of four siblings in a poor family headed by his single, teen-aged mother who worked hard to scrape together her children's basic needs for food, clothing and shelter. John endured the usual number of common childhood health problems. Yet today, unlike most of his wealthy friends at the private country club, John suffers from chronic respiratory problems that limit his ability to exercise (thank goodness for motorized golf carts), as well as high blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar. Wealth as an adult could not spare him from the biological toll that began to weather his body while growing up poor, exposed to unhealthy, unsafe and unequally disadvantaged environments.

The fact is that there are strong connections that link childhood health and adult health as well as childhood wealth (or socioeconomic status - SES) with adult SES. In addition, childhood SES predicts adult health, regardless of health status during childhood or changes in social class from childhood to adulthood. That explains why John, along with millions of other more or less fortunate men and women, pay a big biological price for having grown up in relatively stressful life circumstances. Health is determined by many factors, including physical, social, psychological, family and cultural environments. Each and all of these conditions can help to protect children from or expose children to stresses that get embedded into their developing brain and other vital organ systems (like the pancreas and the kidneys – whose functions determine our risk for developing diabetes and high blood pressure). Exciting new medical science suggests that down to our very core - the chemical structure of our DNA and the action of our genes - we are shaped by the cumulative balance between supportive versus stressful relationships and experiences. And the earlier in life (including during pregnancy) these positive or adverse influences pile up inside us, the more solid and permanent the effects on our health, emotions, learning ability, behavior and, ultimately, our well-being and life course.

Evidence also teaches that your health is affected by your neighbor's well-being. Toxic environments spread their dangers across neighborhoods. And while, increasingly, you may only interact with people of your social class, gated communities and private schools cannot isolate the wealthy from their dependency on a fit and capable workforce or from shouldering the costs of public safety, epidemic disease and disability or the increasing distrust, anger and hatred of populations who suffer unequal opportunity.

Okay, so our life's course of health sets off in a good or challenging direction early in childhood. And so, too, that course depends greatly on the presence and quality of social, economic, educational and environmental resources and experiences we

accumulate from our family and community. Well then, we should ask, how are things going for American families these days as they try to provide for their children's health, growth and development? Unfortunately, more and more of us are falling behind before the race even begins. Ponder the following numbers for they at once illuminate the problems we face and suggest solutions we might devise.

Last year, more Americans (and Floridians) signed up for Medicaid, the government-funded healthcare coverage for people who can't afford private insurance, than at any time since the program began – this thanks to the recession wiping out jobs and, therefore, workplace health coverage.

The income gap between the middle class and the wealthiest Americans reached an all-time high twice in the last hundred years – in 1928, the year before the Great Depression and in 2007, the year before the current Great Recession from which some of us are very slowly emerging. In both of those years, nearly a quarter of the nation's earnings went to the richest 1 % of Americans. The wealthiest 0.1% (a mere 13,000 households in 2007) took home fully 11% of America's total income while the richest 10% got almost half of our nation's earnings. Taking inflation into account, the wages of the typical American rose little to nothing over the thirty years leading up to the Crash and Great Recession of 2008. In fact, in the last eight years, wages decreased. During those same thirty years, the American economy actually grew, in large measure by cutting labor costs and investing overseas. In contrast, during the thirty years from the end of World War II to 1975, everyone's wages grew. In fact, the wages of lower-income Americans grew faster than did those at or near the top.

During the three decades from 1947-1975, often referred to as the Great Prosperity, Americans saved 9-10% of their after-tax income. By the mid-2000's, saving had diminished to 3%. As Robert Reich explains in his new book called Aftershock, the only way most Americans could keep on buying goods (and growing the real economy) was to borrow money and go deeper into debt. Household debt went from 55% of household income in 1980 to 138% by 2007.

While the American economy grew during the conservative administration of President Dwight Eisenhower in the 1950's, the top tax rate was 91%! Yes, that's right, 91%. Even in the late 1960's when Richard Nixon became President, the highest earners were taxed at 77% of income. Such tax policies did not in fact slow economic growth. Instead, these policies helped to expand our prosperity to the middle class as government paid for new reforms that produced job security (minimum wage, collective bargaining), financed public education (77% of students at four-year colleges went to public universities) and healthcare (Medicare and company benefit tax credits) while stimulating economic research and expansion (through grants for academic and military innovation and building a national highway system). The rich kept on getting richer while the rest of the population kept pace at a distance without losing further financial ground.

Here then is the clear choice we and our children face. Will we decide as a nation to honor our founding principles, give all people access to their inalienable rights and once again, as neighbors and citizens, grow a shared prosperity, equity and civility? Or will we choose to put our faith in the disproven ability of free markets to right themselves and raise the circumstances of all who participate – in effect, recreating the bubbles that burst in 1929 and 2008 after the financial elite siphoned the nation’s wealth and transferred capital resources from Main Street (the real economy in which all Americans work) to Wall Street (the financial economy in which the fortunes of a relative handful get traded)?

The difference is as plain as the mark on the DNA of the child who suffers the inescapable imprint of his or her parents’ cumulative stress.

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October 6, 2010