Luke 12: 13-21

Reflection by Kevin Gary

Three days ago at *Target* my son Gabe was captivated by something he just had to HAVE: A shiny new fidget spinner! Four months ago Lucas (11) and Gabe (8) first became conscious of by this new toy. By my count, this would be Gabe’s 6th or 7th fidget spinner, attracted by ever-new variations on the same theme. Gabe and I argued back and forth as to why he does not need yet another spinner. What tried to impart to Gabe (and Lucas) is that there is hole in your heart that only God can fill. I hoped Gabe would hear and understand Augustine’s insight “Your hearts are restless until they rest in God.” Needless to say this is a work in progress.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman elaborates on how marketers masterfully manufacture and exploit the interior poverty of the human condition:

“Consumed goods should bring satisfaction immediately, requiring no learning of skills and no lengthy groundwork, but the satisfaction should end the moment the time needed for consumption is up, and that time ought to be reduced to bare minimum. The needed reduction is best achieved if the consumers cannot hold their attention nor focus their desire on any object for long; if they are impatient, impetuous, and restive; and above all if they are easily excitable and predisposed to quickly lose interest.”

A liberal education, which literally means an education for freedom seeks to counter a culture that aims to make us “impatient, impetuous, and restive...,” or to state it more bluntly, addicted to consumption.

The rich man in Jesus’ parable is working towards what he conceives to be the good life. He has a plan or a dream of what the good life consists of. His logic is clear and all too familiar: If I do A (accrue wealth and material comfort), B (happiness, bliss, contentment) will follow. He sums up his projection for the future accordingly “Now as for you, you have so many good things stored up for many years, rest, eat, drink, be merry!”

Yet we know this bliss is a mirage. It is a fiction, but it is so tempting to be drawn into it. David Foster Wallace powerfully illuminates the dynamics of this way of thinking. On assignment for *Harper’s Magazine*, Wallace goes a one-week luxury cruise seeking to be a dispassionate observer/reporter. What is most striking in Wallace’s account is what goes on inside of him. Initially, he notices the humanity of the menial staff, observing with sympathy the countless and hidden laborers who attend to and anticipate each passenger’s every need. Cruise ships have an extensive servant class. Also, at the start, he feels awkward and uncomfortable being attended to.

Yet there is a shift in his consciousness—an emerging sense of entitlement. Whereas before he was delighted and overwhelmed that room service would clean his room multiple times a day, he eventually comes to expect it, becoming slightly annoyed when they run a bit behind schedule. This impatience also creeps into his dining experience, as he expects the waiter to arrive within minutes.

Rather than satisfaction, Wallace discovers the ur-American part of himself ‘‘that craves pampering and passive pleasure: the dissatisfied-infant part of me, the part that always and indiscriminately WANTS.’’ This part, he finds, ‘‘by its very nature and essence’’ to be insatiable. In response to gratification it simply adjusts ‘‘its desires upward until it once again levels out at its homeostasis of terrible dissatisfaction’’

Recall the rich man’s dream of happiness--it is mirage just on the horizon that does will never exist. Augustine’s insight applies “Our hearts are restless until they rest in God.” No amount of fidget spinners or cruises will ever satisfy.

A Christian liberal education provides a way out out of this trap.

1. First, guides us into the contemplation of endless mysteries in the arts and sciences. A good novel, a well-crafted story, an insight into the workings of the universe is worth more than a 1000 fidget spinners or a lifetime of boring cruises.
2. Second, it helps us, thanks to the Gospel, see through the illusion that wealth and material comforts are the be all and end all of life. It is not simply that the rich man could die and lose his treasure, but rather that he, and so often we, are trapped by this mentality—this homeostasis of terrible dissatisfaction. Yes, we need to be consumers to a degree, but the temptation to make consumption the whole purpose of life abounds.

Rather, as Jesus illuminates, the good life is being able truly to care about other people. That is the treasure we take with us into eternity. Again, quoting Wallace, the good life is “to sacrifice for other people, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day. That is real freedom and real happiness. The alternative is unconsciousness, the default-setting, the “rat race” — the constant gnawing sense of having had and lost some infinite thing.” Another striking moment in Wallace’s narrative is when his cruise ship parks next to another ship in port, which just a bit bigger and a bit nicer than his ship. This has the effect have making the experience a little less sweet.

“Our hearts our restless until they rest God.” May God and our friends help us to be ever conscious of this truth.