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Dalai Lama: Behind Our Anxiety, the Fear of Being Unneeded

By THE DALAI LAMA and ARTHUR C. BROOKS NOV. 4, 2016

In many ways, there has never been a better time to be alive. Violence plagues some corners of the world, and too many still live under the grip of tyrannical regimes. And although all the world's major faiths teach love, compassion and tolerance, unthinkable violence is being perpetrated in the name of religion.

And yet, fewer among us are poor, fewer are hungry, fewer children are dying, and more men and women can read than ever before. In many countries, recognition of women's and minority rights is now the norm. There is still much work to do, of course, but there is hope and there is progress.

How strange, then, to see such anger

and great discontent in some of the world's richest nations. In the United States, Britain and across the European Continent, people are convulsed with political frustration and anxiety about the future. Refugees and migrants clamor for the chance to live in these safe, prosperous countries, but those who already live in those promised lands report great uneasiness about their own futures that seems to border on hopelessness.

Why?

A small hint comes from interesting research about how people thrive. In one shocking experiment, researchers found that senior citizens who didn't feel useful to others were nearly three times as likely to die prematurely as those who did feel useful. This speaks to a broader human truth: We all need to be needed.

Being "needed" does not entail selfish pride or unhealthy attachment to the worldly esteem of others. Rather, it consists of a natural human hunger to

serve our fellow men and women. As the 13th-century Buddhist sages taught, “If one lights a fire for others, it will also brighten one’s own way.”

Virtually all the world’s major religions teach that diligent work in the service of others is our highest nature and thus lies at the center of a happy life.

Scientific surveys and studies confirm shared tenets of our faiths. Americans who prioritize doing good for others are almost twice as likely to say they are very happy about their lives. In Germany, people who seek to serve society are five times likelier to say they are very happy than those who do not view service as important. Selflessness and joy are intertwined. The more we are one with the rest of humanity, the better we feel.

This helps explain why pain and indignation are sweeping through prosperous countries. The problem is not a lack of material riches. It is the growing number of people who feel they are no longer useful, no longer needed,

no longer one with their societies.

In America today, compared with 50 years ago, three times as many working-age men are completely outside the work force. This pattern is occurring throughout the developed world — and the consequences are not merely economic. Feeling superfluous is a blow to the human spirit. It leads to social isolation and emotional pain, and creates the conditions for negative emotions to take root.

What can we do to help? The first answer is not systematic. It is personal. Everyone has something valuable to share. We should start each day by consciously asking ourselves, “What can I do today to appreciate the gifts that others offer me?” We need to make sure that global brotherhood and oneness with others are not just abstract ideas that we profess, but personal commitments that we mindfully put into practice.

Each of us has the responsibility to make this a habit. But those in positions

of responsibility have a special opportunity to expand inclusion and build societies that truly need everyone.

Leaders need to recognize that a compassionate society must create a wealth of opportunities for meaningful work, so that everyone who is capable of contributing can do so. A compassionate society must provide children with education and training that enriches their lives, both with greater ethical understanding and with practical skills that can lead to economic security and inner peace. A compassionate society must protect the vulnerable while ensuring that these policies do not trap people in misery and dependence.

Building such a society is no easy task. No ideology or political party holds all the answers. Misguided thinking from all sides contributes to social exclusion, so overcoming it will take innovative solutions from all sides. Indeed, what unites the two of us in friendship and collaboration is not shared politics or the same religion. It is something

simpler: a shared belief in compassion, in human dignity, in the intrinsic usefulness of every person to contribute positively for a better and more meaningful world. The problems we face cut across conventional categories; so must our dialogue, and our friendships.

Many are confused and frightened to see anger and frustration sweeping like wildfire across societies that enjoy historic safety and prosperity. But their refusal to be content with physical and material security actually reveals something beautiful: a universal human hunger to be *needed*. Let us work together to build a society that feeds this hunger.

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