

## A Dollar and a Dream

Dear Mom and Dad,

*There's a monster living under my bed, and I can't make him go away. He roars, and I feed him. He roars again, and I feed him some more. Only this time, you can't just turn on the light to show me that he doesn't exist because I like this monster. Even as he scares me, he excites me. Even as his voracious appetite eats away at my trust fund, I welcome him.*

*I used to think he was evil, but as I enter your grown-up world, I see him treated like a celebrity. You've built elaborate palaces to him in Atlantic City and Las Vegas. He's embraced by tribal nations as an economic savior, and senior citizens take subsidized bus trips to worship at his altars. Governments welcome him as a funding partner for education and medical care.*

*So maybe I shouldn't fear him. Maybe I, too, should embrace him and consider the depletion of my savings account as a charitable contribution. Or maybe I should just delay sending you this letter until my luck changes. As the ads say, as long as I have "a dollar and a dream," things are bound to come out OK, aren't they?*

Teenagers. Adults. Senior citizens. Americans are gambling like never before, and activities once conducted surreptitiously in back streets and alleyways are now encouraged on television and billboards.

Daily Number, Match Four, Pick Six, Powerball. Once, "playing the numbers" was done only through salesmen of questionable repute. Now, these games represent a state-sanctioned enterprise supported by a generous advertising budget.

Today's generation is the first to grow up in a society that not only condones gambling but encourages it. Until 1964, lotteries were illegal in every state. Today, they exist in 38 states and generate sales of \$40 billion. Sports betting and video poker are ubiquitous on the Internet, and "casino destinations" are celebrated as family vacation retreats.

In a 1999 research paper, "State Lotteries at the Turn of the Century," authors Charles Clotfelter, Philip Cook, Julie Edell, and Marian Moore found that "the lottery is state government's biggest business venture... exceeding expenditures



for corrections or parks and natural resources." In their opinion, by spending \$500 million annually on lottery advertising, states "are teaching that gambling is a benign or even virtuous activity that offers... a dream of easy wealth."

Whether it's Ray Charles crooning a rendition of "the one and only Powerball" or New York state promoting the "dollar and a dream" campaign, we've come a long way from the adage that "a penny saved is a penny earned."

Such activities might appear as harm-

less diversions from the tribulations of everyday life, but do we fully understand the consequences of this "lottery mentality"? While church and civic groups have long used the 50/50 raffle to support worthwhile projects, does the illusion of easy money from today's large-scale lotteries distract our political leaders from seeking solutions for social problems that emphasize personal responsibility over fantasy?

Governor Pataki's budget package for New York proposes to provide aid to needy school districts from revenues (\$2 billion over five years) generated by video lottery terminals at racetracks and other sites. Is this a pragmatic approach, or, as suggested by a *New York Times* editorial, just a clever scheme to allow "the state's poor gamblers to finance the state's poor schools"?

If I were Governor Pataki, I'd at least locate some of those gambling machines in Grand Central Station to allow wealthy commuters from Connecticut to share in the fun. Think of it. Someday, a delay on Metro North could translate to higher SAT scores in Harlem.

In fact, maybe this lottery fever needs to grow grander and bolder.

Can we replace complicated actuarial calculations with a Social Security jackpot to determine which baby boomers retire in luxury and which continue to labor into their 80s and beyond? How about Prescription Powerball to decide who receives the most advanced medications and who struggles along with only Tylenol and aspirin to relieve aches and pains?

For now, I'm awaiting the Rumsfeld Super Lotto to fund the reconstruction of Iraq. It's rumored that the grand prize will be a million dollars a year, a fleet of luxury automobiles, unlimited gasoline, and a palace of your choice.

Hey, I have a dollar—can't I have a dream?

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