

**BY MEGAN WILDHOOD**  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Chuck Collins is the great-grandson of Oscar Mayer. A member of the economic elite, you might be tempted to stereotype him as callous. But in 1986, he donated his inheritance of half a million dollars to charitable organizations rather than letting it mature to the \$6 million or \$7 million it would be today.

Today, he's an inequality expert, among other things, with the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, DC, where he wrangles other wealthy people not only to contribute to building a more equitable and sustainable society, but to take the majority of responsibility for fixing the future.

He expects a lot of the wealthy, since they have more resources while others are just trying to survive. He thinks the struggle for economic justice and income equality should be led by those excluded from wealth and opportunity in order to avoid paternalism or a "we know what's best" mentality on the part of the rich. Wealthy people have more responsibility because they have more resources, but they should not assume they are experts on what those without means need; one of their primary responsibilities is to get to know disadvantaged people and listen.

His latest book, "Born on Third Base," is in service to his mission to change the stories we tell about wealth and privilege to more accurate ones and begin to foster empathy between the rich and the poor in order to reverse inequalities.

"To build a movement," he said, "we need to win hearts and minds to the shortsightedness of an economic system that funnels most income and wealth to the few. Ultimately, we need to change the story of wealth, how it is created, where it comes from and why it is distributed the way it is."

This is an honest and personal book intended to challenge common assumptions that contribute to inequality, such as "poor people are lazy," "wealth is virtuous and earned," and "people are self-made." The book offers some concrete suggestions for what to do, if we find the political and social will.

**Megan Wildhood:** *I haven't heard anyone else talk about the role of empathy in tackling income inequality the way that you have. Why empathy?*

**Chuck Collins:** Part of what keeps us apart is we don't, in an open-hearted way, understand each other's experience. Privilege is a disconnection drug that keeps you apart. It keeps you from feeling other

people's experience. I think we all feel the gap, wherever we are on the economic spectrum. And the question is what do we do with that emotionally? We could disconnect, or we could try to remain as open-hearted as possible. And part of what I try to do for all of my friends in the 99 percent is to say, yes, there are these scoundrels who use their wealth and power to get more wealth and power. But there are also allies, people who are also using their privilege to work toward a world with less-unfair privilege. And there's a huge segment of people who are anesthetized by privilege and the benefits of having way, way more than they need. But they're disconnected, and the invitation to the 99 percent is to realize that there are a lot of people who are very fearful and disconnected and who want to be in an authentic community of connection and know that that means greater equality but have no idea how to get there and need connection with other people just like we all do.

**M.W.:** *How do people start to change these myths like wealth is about virtue and poverty is about laziness?*

**C.C.:** I think part of it is having role models of people who tell their story through the lens of advantage, in a matter-of-fact, uncomplicated, unshameful way. Shame actually holds us all back to keep from telling honest stories. We attach a lot of shame to getting help in our culture. If you're in a privileged situation, all you have to do is look at how we view people who need help in our culture and you think, well, I don't want to have that attitude coming at me.

There is a lot of misunderstanding as to how systems of advantage work, how the deck is stacked in favor of some people and against others. Particularly in this moment, we are living in a time of deep structural inequalities that are delinked from individual effort and merit, where both wealth and disadvantage are compounding. Building wealth is a lot about where you show up and what you start with. We need to create a new framework for looking at the world that isn't just about our own lives but looks at multigenerational advantage and the legacy of race.

My life experience of being in a family

with four generations of economic stability and what that provides in terms of the ability to move forward in one's life and the family safety nets that are there to catch people from life's inevitable challenges or disruptions or bad luck is huge.

Put my family history alongside someone who is black with a parallel story of dispossession. Five generations going back, your ancestors don't even own themselves, they're someone else's property. Then the accumulating forces that come from the Jim Crow era and racial discrimination in wealth-building and the destruction of wealth in black business districts by violence and programs. Put that next to a racialized system of mass incarceration. As white people, we look at our lives and we don't see

the parallel, multigenerational story that the person across the table has gone through. The person standing next to me at the traffic crosswalk has had a very different multigenerational journey that has huge adversities that they've had to overcome just to be there at that intersection. We are just beginning to catch a glimmer of just how big those historic forces are.

**M.W.:** *Why do you think it's so hard to talk*

*about money and class in America, publicly or among friends?*

**C.C.:** That's a good question. I think it is related to culture. We have this story about wealth, that it is basically evidence of individual virtue coupled with this very Protestant work ethic culture in this country. I have friends from different cultures who are much more forward about money. They'll not hesitate to ask, "How much was that?" "How much do you make?" They have less taboos, less uptightness about money matters. For us, though, it's so tied to your value as a human being that it creates shame and vulnerability. "How much do you make?" implies, "Why aren't you making more?" and "Why aren't you applying yourself more?"

**M.W.:** *Do you think the huge wealth gap and the fact that it's growing rapidly is purely an American thing? I know there's a huge gap between the wealthy and the poor globally. What do you think the roots of this inequality are?*

**C.C.:** It is a global phenomenon and it is a function of unrestrained capitalism. It's the nature of capitalism to create inequalities. As wealth grows, it concentrates at the top so those people can rig the rules to get more wealth and power so it compounds ad infinitum. What's different in the U.S. is the unbridled nature of capitalism. The Nordic countries (like Sweden, Denmark and Norway) tax higher incomes and wealth, and they also invest in things that raise the floor. So U.S. inequalities are worse. There is incredible evidence in every discipline that these income disparities are trashing everything we care about, from bodily and community health to sports, and that income inequality is making us sick.

The same is true for unbridled corporate power in the U.S. In these Nordic countries, the inequalities are less drastic. Some people suggest that it's just a function of technology, and to some extent, it is. But most of the gains of technology and so-called labor-saving devices have not reached the majority of people who use and depend on them. Corporations are trying to squeeze every nickel out of each of us whether it's our cell phone bill or our employment or our insurance. Part of what large corporations that are controlled by wealthy interests do is try to extract as much value from nature and from people and from our community while paying as little as possible. So it's understandable that people want to do away with this type of capitalism.

We should be working toward a democratic capitalism, a stakeholder capitalism where communities, nature, workers, consumers and owners of capital are all stakeholders in a healthier society that doesn't have these grotesque inequalities. I can imagine living in a society where, Megan, you get up early, you work hard, you do two jobs — and I really don't want to do that. So you're going to have as much as twice as much income as me. But that's about the gap, a natural gap based on actual effort. There will be that. But I want to live in a society where no one falls all the way to the bottom, to complete destitution. And we shouldn't be working so much. We shouldn't be toiling to have a decent life. We should have an economy that's focused on working to have a decent life but not working to death and creating a caring economy where the priority is caring for each other and for the Earth.

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