

THE SUPER-RICH HAVE A DIFFERENT FEELING ABOUT MONEY THAN US. MAYBE THEY ARE ADDICTED TO IT?

cent of earners. If you earn that grain of rice, you would think yourself pretty wealthy – you'd have a car and a house, and nice food, and some designer clothes, and a cleaner, and luxurious holidays, and money put away for your kids. There's very little that you'd want that you couldn't have. You'd feel like a queen.

To reiterate, \$100,000 is one grain of rice from Jeff Bezos' sack. Jeff Bezos' sack of rice weighs 62lb. During lockdown, his wealth increased by \$24 billion. *Increased.* And Bezos isn't averse to spending money. Recently, he bought Los Angeles' most expensive house – \$165 million. He has five other homes, including a 165,000-acre ranch in Texas which he launches rockets from, as he's interested in getting into space. He has a \$65 million Gulfstream jet; he bought *The Washington Post*.

I hope I have firmly established in your mind that Jeff Bezos is both incredibly rich and not averse to spending money.

Here's the bit I don't understand: what a stupendous effort it must be, every day, for Bezos not to just... make the world better. Solve problems. Change lives. *Be magic.* Most of us, when we watch the news and see something awful happening – droughts, famines, mudslides, refugee camps, queues for bread – feel a physical unhappiness.

"Poor bastards," we will say. "Can you imagine? There but for the grace of God."

It makes our days worse to see these things. Trying to come to terms with it, we might make a donation to a charity or set up a standing order.

If we were ever asked, "If you could press a button and make this problem better – feed these people, give them medicine or houses – and it wouldn't change a single aspect of your standard of living, would you?" we would reply, "Yes! Of course I'd press that button! Who wouldn't press that button? WHO WOULDN'T PRESS THAT BUTTON?"

Jeff Bezos has that button – and, every day, he doesn't press it. This is what astonishes me. He's of a level of wealth that makes him borderline magic: he could watch the news and change world events with one phone call. Wouldn't you want to do that? The World Health Organisation calculates it would cost \$11.3 billion to provide the entire world with clean water for a year – not even half of the extra money Bezos has just earned. But he doesn't press that button. Saving the Amazon rainforest – buying it outright, and protecting it, and continuing to provide the world with oxygen – would be \$64 billion, and Bezos even named his company after it. Even if you're the kind of person who can be relaxed about global

oxygen supply, wouldn't you just buy the Amazon as a... branding exercise? How would you keep, persistently, *not* saving the world? What would you be waiting for? Why wouldn't you want to be *amazing*? The life of Jeff Bezos is like watching an Avengers film in which every superhero – riddled with superpowers – keeps seeing a comet heading towards Earth, goes, "Nah," and carries on playing pool. Why will this heroically wealthy person not be heroic?

If you've got enough money to spend \$42 million on a clock that will last 10,000 years – as Bezos did, in 2018 – how would you still be "not getting round" to building orphanages, or buying every elephant in the world, or creating whole sustainable cities, or cleaning rivers, or starting inoculation programmes? Don't you want to give the world hope and joy and comfort? *Don't you want to be magic?*

After all, it's not as if Bezos doesn't know about charity – in 2018, he created the Bezos Day One Fund, which has put \$2 billion into various charitable schemes. He is not, let us say, a generous man when we look at his charitable spending as a proportion of his income. I don't want to be all, "Look how kind and amazing I am," but I spend my yearly grain of rice on hundreds of things for others – other people's nursery fees, bills, deposit for a house – and it gives me such a wild joy to wake every morning and know I've solved a couple of problems. Why would you not want this satisfaction? Why would you not want this high?

This is where I start to wonder – are the super-rich just... different from most of us? Fundamentally different? Is there something different in their bodies and minds? Survey after survey shows that, the poorer you are, the more generous you are to others in need: on average, those on low income give 4 per cent of their earnings to charity, while the better off give just 2 per cent. Additionally, the poor just give charities their money, no strings attached. Everyone who's ever worked at a charity will tell you story after story of incredibly poor people ringing up and giving their very last tenner – "It's all I've got, but Children in Need deserves it."

The super-rich almost never give their very last million. Instead, when they give their money away, it's just a fraction of what they have, and often as part of a highly publicised philanthropic exercise – where the donation involves getting a foundation or building named after them. Or else they do it at a luxurious charity auction, where they get their pictures in the paper for bidding £60,000 to play ping-pong with the prime minister.

The super-super-rich seem to have a different *feeling* about money than the rest of us. Maybe they are, in some way, addicted to it? After all, after your first billion, it all becomes essentially meaningless – you can only wear one pair of shoes at a time. Fly in one jet. Wear one Rolex. Your wealth is almost entirely abstract to you – when it gets into the hundreds of millions, it's basically just numbers in newspaper reports. You can't touch it. You can't experience it. You're just... hoarding numbers, like a dragon sitting on a pile of gold. You are a lizard, in a cave. Your wealth is a dead thing – when it could be coursing, like electricity from your fingertips, through every village and city in the world. *You could be magic.*

And so this was when I started wondering about spells and curses. Again, back in history, "a spell" was used to describe things that these days, with modern medicine, we would know were down to viruses, infections and disease. If a man in dispute with a neighbour were stricken with fever and died, the neighbour might have been thought to have cursed him – when, in fact, a malarial insect bite was to blame, instead.

To many, it might seem as if the superwealth hoarders – not pressing that button every day, not making things better *while your life continues, just as before* – have, in some way, a spell or curse on them. These are the classic baddies of every Disney movie, fairytale and history book. These are the rapacious kings and unkind, blithe emperors, castled away from suffering peasants – and their origin story would be that a spell was put on them, in the cradle. Some Maleficent would have cursed them not to care. They would have been born under a bad moon.

Then I remembered a recent report that found that "entrepreneurs" were almost twice as likely as the rest of the population to have been infected with the *Toxoplasma gondii* parasite. Previously, the parasite had been linked to car accidents, neuroticism and suicide. "Now the latest research provides new evidence that it actually drives risk-taking in business, helping to promote entrepreneurial activity," the report ran.

So there is a parasite that changes your personality and makes you inclined to accumulate wealth? To become superwealthy is, perhaps, to be ... *ill*? You are cursed with a parasite – and it stops you realising you are magic. There is a spell at work on you that keeps the world dirty, struggling and poor.

Maybe we are in a story that neither the central, impossibly wealthy characters, nor the world, quite yet understands. ■

CAITLIN MORAN

MY PROBLEM WITH THE WORLD'S RICHEST MAN

Jeff Bezos is worth a whopping £160 billion. He could help us out!

Are there such things as evil spells, curses or magic? Are these things that, in some way, exist? I kind of think they do. Let's talk, first, about magic. "Magic" is, when you boil it down to the essentials, simply someone who has a power

no one else has, or knows about. In medieval times, if you were the only person who knew a certain herb cured an illness or infection, you would be suspected of "magic". In the 1948 film *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Bing Crosby travels back to Arthurian times, takes a box of matches from his pocket and lights one. He is instantly revered as a great wizard. Back in 20th-century Connecticut, of course, he's not magic. He's just an ordinary man, lighting a fag. In King Arthur's court, however, he is now the most powerful person in the land. Everyone bows down to him. If everyone else had a box of matches, he would have no power at all.

But that's magic – simply having, or knowing, something that other people don't. That's what humans mean when they talk about magic. That's the roots of it. Your magic is that you have something most people don't. Other people's lack makes you magic.

Jeff Bezos, currently, is magic. Or could be. He is magic-ready. He is capable of performing miracles that others can't. Just as medieval witches had black cohosh, and Bing Crosby had a box of matches, Jeff Bezos has something nearly everyone else doesn't: \$204 billion (£160 billion), as of August. This has been a year of incalculable numbers (infections, deaths, income inequality, losses to the economy) and we are, perhaps, apt not to really dwell on what "\$204 billion" – the most money any human being on this planet has ever had, the richest person in humankind's existence – means.

Usefully, on TikTok, a user called Humphrey Yang has visually explained \$204 billion – using a bag of rice. Each grain of rice represents \$100,000. In the UK, one and a half grains of rice per year would put you in the top 1 per

