

How do *You* Gamble?

Gambling in the 21st Century is considered a benign sin. Preachers used to rail against it. Now they gamble, too.

You can say everything in life is a gamble, but I'm talking about gambling for money. Each person is different on that score. The way we gamble or refuse to comes from our subconscious. It's part of how we define ourselves.

I don't know why I'm a gambling wimp. I don't remember any childhood admonitions against betting. When I first moved to Kentucky and went to my first horse race I chipped in one dollar on a four horse race and bet to show. I won fifty cents and never made another bet.

My older sister, on the other hand, lives in Las Vegas.

I play bridge. Never learned how to play poker. If the Publishers Sweepstakes tells me I can win millions if I send in twelve dollars, I toss the offer. However, if it doesn't cost me anything more than a stamp, I'll gamble.

I buy raffle tickets just to support the cause selling them. Never do I expect to win. Probably, that's why I don't win. Have you noticed that the same people always win the junk raffled off? I mean the valuable prizes.

An article in The Chronicle of Higher Education by Alan Wolfe, professor of political Science at Boston College nudged my mind in this direction. It's entitled, "What We Don't Know About Gambling But Should."

He goes into detail about the lack of scholarly information about gambling, currently and historically. It seems that hardly anyone studies it, yet its prevalence is obvious.

He writes, "Not that long ago, legal gambling was confined to one state, Nevada, which, along the way, had developed a reputation as the place to get divorced or buy sex; things forbidden everywhere else were permitted there. We usually think of taboos as deeply entrenched, separating the dirty from the clean, yet not only are Las Vegas and other Nevada cities now among the fastest growing in the United States, but the industry associated with their once unseemly nightlife is featured on more cable-television stations than

one can count.

"It would be relatively easy to conclude that gambling has become so prominent in American life because we have become a hedonistic country in which anything goes. But as the Rev. Richard McGowan, a Jesuit priest and gambling expert at Boston College, reminded me, 30 years ago gambling was considered a sin while smoking was fashionable, whereas today the reverse is true. We continue to be deeply puritanical in some aspects of our culture while decidedly libertarian in others; at a time when we see debates about hate speech, witness campaigns by feminists against pornography, and hear politicians speak about zero tolerance for under-age drinking or sexual misconduct, gambling is on the rise. It resonates with the permissive rather than the prohibitive side of our culture."

I find this fascinating. It made me ask myself what I considered should be prohibited by law and what should be allowed, and more so, why. Why am I blasé about gambling when I know how badly it damages families and how little it really gives to education.

Yet, I don't want to outlaw it.

I think I want to know more what motivates people to gamble with money. What is the need gambling fulfills?

Wolfe writes, "Gambling has always involved a certain amount of role-playing and theater; you could be Willy Loman at home but anything you imagined yourself in Las Vegas. Now you do not need to travel to Nevada to assume a new identity. Nor do you even need to come face to face with other people. The Internet provides a 24/7 way, generally immune from any effective regulation, to try your luck. P.T. Barnum is reputed to have said that there is a sucker born every minute. In the age of the Internet, there is a gambler born every millisecond."

I wonder if it's the paucity of training in imagination in grade school that makes suckerdome attractive. That's a wild guess out of my prejudice.

Wolfe asks, "Why have Roman Catholics historically been more reluctant to view gambling as a sin than Protestants — but then again, why have even Protestants opted to raise money

through bingo? Are people who gamble responsible for the consequences of their own behavior, or is gambling evidence of an addiction? Why are poker tournaments and lotteries considered gambling, but investing in the stock market or real estate is not? Are we really witnessing something new here, or have Americans always been gamblers? Is gambling more harmful to women than men, and therefore a feminist issue? Is gambling rational? Is it glamorous?"

The main character of my last novel was addicted to catalogue shopping to avoid herself and real intimacy with a husband. When she finally opens up to herself, she no longer has the desire for "bonus gifts" in the mail.

Wolfe writes," If gambling can be an addiction, as many psychologists claim, then those interested in how the mind works will be interested in it. Gambling touches on a number of issues raised by cognitive psychologists and philosophers of the mind. How do gamblers make decisions? Do they possess autonomy?"

"There may have been a time when gambling was studied primarily in courses dealing with "deviant" behavior, but it is difficult to view something as abnormal when a large part of the country appears to be doing it. Perhaps psychologists should study not why so many people gamble but why so many do not. The Journal of Gambling Studies has taken the lead in providing an interdisciplinary forum to explore the range of gambling behavior."

And then there is history. "Historians such as Jackson Lears have written extensively on the subject — *Something for Nothing: Luck in America* (Viking, 2003), teaches us that the culture of chance is not simply an irrational, morally reprehensible arena but an alternative to the culture of control that dominates Americans' lives. Others have analyzed the role that confidence men play in both reality and the American imagination. From their work, we learn that the line between the respectable (stock markets) and the unrespectable (dogfights) is not always as clear as we imagine it, and that greed and politics are sometimes synonyms."

Because I am not around gambling, I haven't put much thought into it. I think I should, and agree with Alan Wolfe's call for academic studies. I've watched people play

poker in casinos and they wear the proverbial poker faces.
My nephew makes money at it because he won't play unless he
can sit on the dealer's right. He doesn't say it's fun. If you
like to gamble, let me know. Is the thrill like surfing or
winning a football game?

Evelyn Cole, MA,MFA
The Whole-mind Writer