



CHAPTER 2

Contracting the Condition

How We Get Money Madness

How do you get money madness? It starts with money messages we receive in childhood, long before we understand what money is all about and what role it plays in life. All we understand is the feeling that the money message is attached to; that's what makes the impact, and that's what stays with us. Later on, engaging with money causes us to revisit the moment when we received the childhood money messages—and to relive the moment's emotional impact. The resulting behavior is money madness.

And the truth is these childhood money messages are transmitted to us all the time, in all sorts of ways.

Maybe we overhear our parents' whispered worrying about money. We intuit their anxieties about paying the bills, and it erodes our sense of safety. We take on the anxious feelings for ourselves without really understanding the why or wherefore.

Or maybe we hear our parents arguing about money in raised voices, accusations flying back and forth. We feel the distrust between them and are cowed by the expressions of anger. It's frightening.

The next-door neighbors get a brand-new car or renovate their kitchen with granite countertops or one of them gets promoted to vice president with a corner office, and our parents wallow in envy and a bit of self-pity. What's emotionally charged for them is emotionally charged for us; we follow their feelings in this as in most things, and we get a message about what money—and its lack—can do.

We grow up in a home where money is treated with cavalier indifference. Our parents spend freely, and if they get into debt, assume "it

will work out.” We absorb a sense of carelessness—even inattention—where money is concerned. It breeds a blasé attitude: The message is there are no consequences, no cause-and-effect relationships, when money is the issue.

The messages affect us in much the same way that sensory stimuli reach infants. Like infants, we don’t understand them in any rational or intellectual sense. But like sensory stimuli, they keep coming at us from our environment. **Those that reach us on waves of emotion—sometimes through some form of dramatic initiation, sometimes through the gradual accumulation of impressions—are the most powerful, and they eventually form our perception of money: Money is security, or it’s divisive, or it’s the thing we measure ourselves by.**

Those messages imprint themselves onto our psyches, and that imprinted memory, with its ability to replay the emotions of childhood, is the money monster of the process. Later in life, when we engage with money in some way, the money monster is stirred into action, and the powerful childhood emotion comes flooding back—often with an intensity that quickens our senses in an almost electrifying way.

Money Madness Hurts

As the conduit of our childhood emotions and the instigator of our adult money behavior, the money monster is a diligent demon. He sits right on our shoulder so he can whisper money madness into our ear and rule our money behavior. He drives our behavior by making us feel that a higher salary can slake our fears and anxieties, that buying the sports car will compensate for our inadequacies and weaknesses, that investing in that stock our dentist’s brother-in-law recommended will fulfill our fantasies.

It’s painful. It hurts as a grown-up to feel again the anxiety, fear, confusion, melancholy, resentment—all the emotions that the world of money caused us to feel as children.

And the money monster’s presence on our shoulder is also a weighty burden. Those childhood emotions don’t just rule our money behavior; they confine us. We think we’re acting like responsible

adults, but we're actually limited in our range of motion. Anxiety, fear, confusion, melancholy, resentment don't strengthen capability; they erode it. The money monster takes charge, and he's got us on a leash.

And he is greedy, always hungry for more. "More will fill the emptiness!" he constantly tells us. But the truth is that the more you feed the money monster, the hungrier he gets.

So there we are, all grown up, with our jobs, our houses, our families, our investment portfolios—and driven to childish behavior where money is concerned. By now, however, by adulthood, we're comfortable with our money monsters. They've been with us so long they're almost like old acquaintances; we might not recognize our life without them. We've never questioned our childhood money messages; we've never challenged our money monsters. We don't even know there's a wound there—the original childhood pain that created the money monster in the first place.

Find your childhood money message, and you can confront the money monster and identify the wound. Heal the wound and you tame the money monster. And when that happens, you'll be free to live a truly rich life.

My Money Initiation

It took a major fire for me to see the light on this issue.

I remember that it was a Tuesday, the first day back to work after the long Memorial Day weekend. Philadelphia had just suffered one of its most severe winters, so the "official" start of summer was a welcome event, and the weather was indeed warm and pleasant.

Not that I took any particular notice of the weather. Or of the holiday weekend for that matter.

I was 27 years old, a recent graduate of Wharton Business School, and at work at my first job—financial advisor and marketing manager in a large and well-known Philadelphia investment firm. *Hard* at work. Hard like the legendary stock market go-getters of the bull market in the 1990s. Hungry for success. Ready to measure that success in the money I made for others, which was how I made money for myself.

So I put in 12- and 14- and 16-hour days. I went without sleep,

skipped meals, was the first to arrive at the office in the morning, and rarely left till night had fallen, even in the long, light-filled days of late May. When I had a date, I'd come back to the office after taking the woman home so I could work some more. Sometimes, I left the office as my boss was arriving for work.

I went after all the leads, read all the research reports, dutifully executed all the transactions. I also compiled lists of new prospects, created in-depth customer profiles, monitored deals, and generated endless reports of trades executed. I was passionate, focused, single-minded—a comer.

The fire that Tuesday started in the ninth floor records room. It spread quickly, consuming tons of paper documents that fueled its heat to 2,000°F. The building was evacuated; 1,500 of us marched out in good fire-drill form. Then the city's firefighters poured more than 12 million gallons of water onto the blaze. The water cooled the fire, then quenched it, then flooded down from the ninth floor to the second floor where the brokerage offices were located, soaking—and thereby destroying—computers, printers, scanners, cartridges, files, tapes, disks.

I panicked. *My records!* I thought. *My lists of prospects! My customer profiles! Deal reports! Transaction data!* They were the tools of my trade. Their destruction, as I saw it, meant the destruction of my livelihood.

I was a nervous wreck. I wouldn't be able to learn the fate of all the hard-earned, hard-won information in my files till morning—if then. I had to do something, so I spent the evening going from door to door in my neighborhood, trying to sell financial services. "Hi, I'm Spencer Sherman," I would begin. "I live up the street, and I'd love to talk with you about growing your money." I rang more than 40 doorbells. One trusting soul, who may simply have felt sorry for me, actually agreed to let me invest his IRA. The rest probably thought there was a madman on the block.

In the morning, I raced back to my office. Blue-uniformed police officers barred my way. The fire was still smoldering; arson was suspected; a reward had been posted. The officials manning the still-chaotic site were jittery. The atmosphere was tense.

I babbled that retrieving my documents from the doomed building was a matter of life or death. One sympathetic cop allowed me to

pass. I headed up to the second floor, up to my knees in water, splashing through garbage and downed wires. It was dumb and dangerous, but I was oblivious to those facts and everything else as I reached my office and grasped my livelihood in my hands.

The computer was a goner—saturated and dead. My paper files had all been drowned, but I jammed them soaking wet into my knapsack, which now weighed as much as a stack of gold ingots, and raced for home.

My house had a small, fenced-in plot of lawn out back. I meticulously separated the dripping-wet papers and spread them, one by one, across the lawn to dry.

It was useless, of course. The writing on the papers might as well have been done in disappearing ink. That afternoon, I tiptoed among the sun-dried pages—the papers I had “saved” as if they were the singular totems of a primal religion—and noted that every single one of them was blank.

That’s when it hit me. *What on earth am I doing?*

I stopped. I simply stopped in my tracks. And what had started out as the worst day of my life began turning into the best. In that moment, I saw for the first time my own money madness and what it was doing to me. The fire had done more than burn up paper; it had illuminated a profound truth about my behavior around money—actually, about all human behavior around money.

Barefoot on my back lawn, I witnessed my own crazy behavior. I saw myself as I must have appeared to others. As I clearly did appear to my neighbors, to the sympathetic policeman who let me enter the still-smoking building, to the colleagues I had called, and to the clients who had called me *to ask if I was all right*—not to ask whether they had lost their money. Of course they hadn’t. Data about such transactions are backed up any number of times in computers located outside the city and equipped with every form of recovery program.

I was young, fit, and vigorous. In no way was my career over or my livelihood destroyed. Yet that’s exactly how I was behaving. Zigzagging among the blank sheets of paper, I must have looked like a character in a madcap comedy. My behavior was not just illogical, it was ludicrous.

There was nothing I could do except acknowledge what I was feeling. And what I was feeling was fear. *What am I so afraid of?* I asked myself.

My Childhood Money Message

The answer was there instantly, springing up from my memory in sharp focus. It took me from my grown-up home in Philadelphia back to my childhood and into my family's modest apartment in Queens, New York.

I am eight years old. It is evening, after dinner. I am standing in the narrow galley kitchen of the apartment, and my father is seated at the table. That day, my pals and I have been talking about money; some of the guys have confided—boasted!—what their fathers do for a living and how much money they make. So as children of that age do, I ask my father how much money he makes.

My father does not answer. He just stares at me—a cold look of barely suppressed fury.

Do I understand the message in his eyes? You bet I do. Not in so many words—no child of eight could possibly articulate the impact of such a stare. But I know what it says.

It says: Keep out! It says: Back off! You have approached a high-voltage wire that is dangerous and absolutely off-limits! It says: Shh! Money is the key to our survival; don't even speak of it. Ever. To anyone.

What I felt was a two-pronged hammer blow that stunned and frightened me. *Pow!* Shame. *Bam!* Fear. Even mature adults aren't too good at dealing with shame and fear. For a kid, the whole thing was simply beyond my ability to understand, much less cope with.

I responded as any child would. In the parlance of psychology, I internalized the hammer blow. That childhood message about money—*Do not enter! Danger! Quiet! Money means everything!*—was almost literally stamped into my subconscious, imprinted onto my psyche. And my personal money monster began to take shape.

Money Messages Keep Playing for Life

Money is security. You can never have enough money. And you must never speak of it to others.

That's the message I received that evening in our kitchen in

Queens, my initiation into the money taboo. From that moment on, the meaning of the message stayed with me; it would drive my actions where money was concerned for a long time to come.

In my case, the initiation was dramatic: The money message was imprinted onto my psyche in a moment as searing as the fire that 20 years later would finally prompt me to question the message. But eight-year-olds don't question most messages they receive from their parents. We especially don't question the childhood *money* messages we receive, because we simply don't have the knowledge, objectivity, or wherewithal to do so.

Think about it: What's money when you're a kid? It's a treat from the ice-cream truck. It's a doll or a toy or a game for the Xbox. It's the new car that Mommy and Daddy have decided they can't afford. It might even be something Mommy and Daddy complain you don't understand the value of, and you don't. Money is *things*—and beyond that, it's pretty abstract.

Because of that—because as kids we just don't get what money is—our childhood money messages tend to be distorted perceptions. After all, they are formed in emotion and refracted through feeling—the pleasure of the treat or toy, the down feeling you intuit about the new car, the hurt when you're told you don't know the value of a dollar. Rational interpretation doesn't have much to do with the process.

Instead, the emotion imprints itself within us, giving rise to a money monster that lurks in our psyches, ready to haul out the defining emotion of the past to regulate our money behavior in the present. Thus do the money messages we receive in childhood continue to affect us as adults.

That evening in the kitchen wasn't the only time I heard my childhood money message, although it was clearly one of the most formative, because it came back in a flash on the day I was able to see my money madness in action for the first time. The message—*Money is security, you can never have enough, you must never talk about it*—was all around me. It did not need to be articulated; it was part of the fabric of my life.

When we went out to the neighborhood restaurant for dinner, my father would always wear an old, almost threadbare jacket, never the new, dark blue coat my mother always urged him to wear. The mes-

sage there was: Why should our neighbors know we're doing well enough that I can afford a new jacket? The message seeped through to me via my feelings of embarrassment: *Never let anyone know your money situation. If it's good, people will try to get the money from you, so be watchful where money is concerned. Be wary. Be afraid.*

When we would drive into Manhattan for a visit to a museum on a Sunday, my father always refused to "waste money," as he said, on a parking lot or garage. Instead, we would drive around and around the city blocks in search of an elusive free parking space—endlessly, as it seemed to my sister and me. For me, every minute spent searching ticked away the time I would have to explore the treasures of the museum—the dinosaur, the dioramas of life in ancient times when mastodons roamed the earth, the planetarium. To a child, such a loss of pleasure is momentous, and it became a further lesson for me in the profound importance of money, which was powerful enough to direct our lives down to the smallest detail.

This sense of the importance of money permeated my childhood, carefully recorded every step of the way by my money monster—the sense that money was so profoundly essential it couldn't even be discussed, as if words couldn't measure its significance or the power of its consequences. That's why it was such a secret, and that's why the secret had to be guarded so closely.

As I grew to adulthood, the money monster reliably showed up for every money decision, increasingly dictating my responses to money and my behavior where money was concerned. Always, I turned inward, clammed up, and held tight to what I had earned even as I worked hard to build my money fortress higher and thicker.

So it was probably not surprising that I chose a career in money: because I saw money as key to my survival and my identity. Nor was it surprising that I found it so difficult to discuss fees with a prospective client—or to talk about money at all. When I first met Janine, I was completely at ease discussing my sexual history in detail on our second date, but talk about money—values, goals, dreams, debts, possessions, assets? You've got to be kidding!