

HOLY AND UNHOLY POVERTY

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March 4, 2018

TWO COMMENTARIES

from UW-Madison's Odyssey Project

"Poverty" by Char Braxton

Poverty - the access to basic needs

Clean Water: the water that flows from my faucet is contaminated – the lakes - the oceans – do people & animals really matter?

Shelter: look around (pause) – the schools, the churches & yes - even Madison – the Odyssey Program has women, men & children that need housing: high rent – temporary shelters – unjust application procedures – our administration – just empty chatter, chatter, chatter!!!

Food: processed & non-nutritious – Dollar Store budget – I make too much money – the state has cut me off Food Stamps and my kids are crying & hungry!

Did I ask for this cold, dark, and cruel new poverty in America!!!

NO, NO, NO - I will teach my kids that you can change & teach a world that sees you as a victim of poverty, because we walk with DIGNITY, LOVE & CLARITY!!!

"Rich, Poor Woman" by Keena Atkinson

Rich is better than poor until the cost to be rich is paid in intoxicated blows to my teenage body

Kicks and fists delivered by the father of my child soaked in alcohol and rage.

Pleas and Screams for help absorbed and unanswered.

Hopeless tears landing on eggshells that I didn't tiptoe on gently enough

Leave? I can't leave! That's impossible.

No longer was I his girlfriend, I'd become his property.

leaving was never an option. I never imagined a life outside of stable and unpredictable abuse.

As a little girl, we snuck out in the middle of the night leaving everything including the state to escape my abusive father and there I was again just years later in the same cycle with my own child this time

Rich is better than poor when starting over is a myth. If I leave him, he will find me and kill me. There is nowhere to hide, nowhere to go.

Being rich seemed better, when I was poor in my esteem, poor in my self-worth, poor in my understanding of love.

When I left him, I had nothing.

no money, no plan, eventually...no home,

Just me and my toddler.

Starting over with nothing but... freedom.

I was poor but for the first time I felt rich.

Dinner at the soup kitchen, showers in a gym.

Writing again, exploring hobbies and talents.

Laughing without guilt, smiling without fear.

None of that cost me a dime, and as a poor woman, free was within my budget!

Having say so over my body every day.

Poor in my pockets, rich in my joy!

Don't pity me because I am now happy and free.

Either I was brave enough to leave, or I had nothing else to lose. Facing the unknown and starting over from scratch.

Growing in confidence, creativity and boldness.

Every time the sun rises on my skin, and every time I go to sleep without worrying about that drunken boogeyman stumbling through my front door.

I know that I made the right choice to start over and be poor.

Everything in life comes with a sacrifice, side effect or cost. Breaking this cycle of abuse was my choice.

Poor isn't my name, and it doesn't define me.

Poor happens to be a side effect of generations of domestic abuse, untreated

mental health issues turned into substance abuse, my single mother doing the best she could to raise her daughters alone with few resources. Not being able to teach us something she didn't know herself, and me not being able to fix something that I didn't even know was wrong.

Rich is better than poor, but poor is one of the side effects of a bigger, deeper issue that started generations ago.

I'm just working relentlessly to break free from the cycles.

In this journey of growth, knowledge and purpose I have become a rich poor woman knowing no limits.

I am a rich, poor woman. Breaking cycles and chains.

**** REFLECTIONS ****

The story of **Siddhartha Gautama's** sacrifice of a privileged, princely life for one of physical austerity is a familiar one. Confronted with the spectacle of poverty, illness, aging and death he set out to discover the underlying source of human suffering and how it might be remedied.

Siddhartha, like many others before and after him, was initially convinced that only by literally killing off all human passions, denying oneself every aspect of physical comfort and pleasure, could a person achieve perfect peace and equanimity, and permanent release from life's travails. So rigorous did his ascetic practices become that it very nearly cost Siddhartha his life.

Discovering him severely malnourished and in a semi-stupor, a passerby revived him with offerings of milk and gradually he regained sufficient strength to continue his spiritual journey. It wasn't long before **Siddhartha** achieved enlightenment and became the **Buddha**. Eschewing the ascetic path, he now advocated a more moderate approach to spiritual

seeking – a “Middle Way.” Or, as **Simon the Fiddler** puts it, “Just enough, not too much.”

The 19th century Transcendentalist **Henry David Thoreau** was of much the same mind, advocating what he called “voluntary poverty.” **Thoreau** argued that if one has secured the basics in terms of food, shelter, clothing, and fuel, they will then be in a position – like the Buddha – “to entertain the true problems of life with freedom and the prospect of success.”

Besides bestowing individual benefits, **Thoreau** claimed that voluntary poverty could also be a boon to society. “I am convinced,” he wrote,

...that if all men were to live simply, thievery and robbery would be unknown. These take place only in communities where some have got more than is sufficient, while others have not enough.

But if **Thoreau** and the **Buddha** could be described as “moderates” in this regard, others have been moved to make more extreme material sacrifices. Like Siddhartha, **St Francis of Assisi** was born into wealth and privilege. Indeed, the prospect of poverty and disease frightened **Francis** and he went out of his way when traveling on business to avoid coming into contact with the members of Medieval society's underclass. But then legend has it that he received a revelation: “**Francis!**” a disembodied voice told him. “Everything you have loved and desired in the flesh, it is now your duty to despise and hate.”

The voice, which he took to be God's, went on to reassure **Francis** that he would come to abhor his comforts and find delight among the ranks of the poor, whose cause he should make his own. Thus encouraged, **Francis** took that leap of faith, renounced his wealth and status, and founded an order committed to serving the poor. And, paradoxically, he did experience a freedom from fear and a joy he had never previously known.

When he died at the hands of an assassin seventy years ago, **Mohandas K. Gandhi's** personal possessions consisted of a pair of eyeglasses, sandals, a spinning wheel, pocket watch, rice bowl and walking stick. Sometimes described as the “ultimate minimalist,” **Gandhi** steadily reduced his food sources until he was able to consume, as he put it, “the most non-violent vegetarian meal that the poorest human being could afford.”

Like **Francis**, **Gandhi's** choice of clothing – typically nothing more than a “dhoti” or loincloth – was also dictated by his desire to live in a state of holy poverty. For him, the Dhoti symbolized his solidarity with the poor. As long as India's poor were “kept naked” because of British imperialism, **Gandhi** proclaimed he would wear nothing more than they could afford – even in the presence of the King of England.

Both **Gandhi** and **Francis** were God-possessed, and both felt “called” by a higher power to embrace a life of poverty. “I know that God is found more often in the lowliest of His creatures than in the high and mighty,” **Gandhi** explained, “And I am struggling to reach the status of these...hence, my passion for the service of the suppressed classes.”

What's noteworthy about these several examples of “holy poverty” is that each of them features, to a greater or lesser degree, a social as well as a spiritual aspect. **Thoreau's** concerns about growing economic inequality in the 1840's and how it affected human relationships are equally relevant today. If people could just recognize that “less is more,” and be willing to work for a fairer distribution of wealth, we'd all be better off, **Thoreau** predicted.

Francis and **Gandhi** chose to be poor, ostensibly for religious reasons. But this isn't to say that they sanctioned poverty. Both deplored the plight of the dispossessed and used their stature as holy figures to combat the stigma of poverty and underscore our common humanity. Both initiated movements meant to improve the lives of the poor.

For his part, **The Buddha** was convinced from his own experience that want and hunger are an impediment to spiritual practice. Contemporary research bears him out. Some time ago, researchers at the University of Minnesota recruited healthy volunteers who would be willing to reduce their caloric intake to just slightly above the starvation level. The subjects later described the experience as “horrific,” not so much because of the physical discomfort, but because food became the only thing they cared about. “Scarcity,” as **Cass Sunstein** summarized the outcome, “captures the mind.”

This is especially true for children. We may wonder why academic success often eludes kids from impoverished families. Lack of stable housing and overwhelmed parents are part of the reason, but so is hunger. “Hunger makes a child feel cold all the time, **Ursula Le Guin** wrote recently. “It makes a child stupid. It makes a child sick.” **Le Guin** goes on to note that one school-age child in three in America cannot count on three meals a day.

But despite the incredible wealth at our disposal – far in excess of anything **Francis** or even **Gandhi** could have imagined – there's neither much sympathy for “the least among us” or an active, ongoing effort to improve their lot. These days it's hard to imagine any sane politician mounting a “War on Poverty” as **Lyndon Johnson** did in 1964 when the national poverty rate was the same level as it is today.

This is what I call “unholy poverty.” It is unchosen and usually inadvertent. And yet, there is a widespread feeling among Americans – and even among many poor people themselves – that if you are disadvantaged you have only yourself to blame. 60% of Americans surveyed in 2014 described the poor as “lazy,” an attitude shared by only 24% of Europeans. Perhaps even more surprising, given **Jesus' oft** expressed concern for the plight of the poor, is that 46% of all Christians and 53% of white evangelicals fault the poor for their “lack of effort.”

Other critics have argued that they act irresponsibly. Iowa Senator **Chuck Grassley** attributed the failure of low-income individuals to climb the economic ladder to their habit of “spending all their money on booze, women and movies.” Although it does exist, reckless spending is hardly the rule among those mired in poverty. More often, low-income Americans must make hard choices – whether to pay the rent, the utility company or spring for a sack of groceries.

Some 58 million Americans earn less than \$15.00 an hour; 41 million learn less than a poverty wage of \$12.00 an hour. 12 million working Americans are dependent on Pay-Day lenders and absorb exorbitant interest payments in order to meet their basic needs. “Exploitation thrives when it comes to the essentials,” **Matthew Desmond** writes in his Pulitzer Prize winning book *Evicted*. Most often such loans are used to pay for life’s necessities, not its little luxuries.

Those who hold poor people responsible for their status often point to individuals who overcame formidable obstacles and ascending into the ranks of the middle or upper-class. It’s all about will-power, perseverance, making the most of one’s God-given gifts, they argue. And there is no denying that a limited number of women and men do make good, and this lends credence to that hoary **Horatio Alger** story.

But **Alger** was the product of 19th century fiction, a character invented, in fact, by a former Unitarian minister. Yes...individual advancement is possible in the U.S., but when it comes to overall social mobility we rank near the bottom when compared to other so-called “wealthy” nations. As **Jeff Madrick** recently observed. “The more privileged parents are, the more likely their children will be upwardly mobile. The rest are left behind, and the gap is widening.”

There are reasons why it has become increasingly difficult for impoverished Americans to improve upon their situation. These days the truly destitute face what the

social historian **Earl Shorris** describes as a “surround of force.”

Their environment contains so many inhibiting forces – hunger, isolation, exploitative landlords, police, drugs, illness, racism – that they literally cannot find an exit. In many cases, they have ceased believing that any avenues of escape exist.

The Milwaukee families that **Matthew Desmond** followed over time in his study of eviction are a case in point. When a party loses their home because they cannot afford the rent payments – which often consume in excess of 50% of their income – it creates a whole cascade of other problems. Furniture, clothing, books can be lost in the process; support networks sundered, schooling disrupted, and having once been evicted, the tenant is considered a poor risk by other landlords and rejected. The affected individual may then have no option but to move into substandard housing in a dangerous neighborhood which, **Desmond** says, “is a blow to one’s psychological health” and engenders fatigue and hopelessness.

These conditions affect poor whites in decaying rural communities as well. Surveys indicate that members of this cohort are losing confidence in their ability to create the conditions for their own success. Representing two thirds of America’s poor, this is now the most pessimistic of all racial and ethnic groups. In the end, poverty not only captures the mind, it kills the spirit.

What makes today’s poverty unholy is not just the mental and physical suffering and reduced lifespans it produces, but the realization that those who have the power to create a more equitable culture just don’t care. It’s almost as if our leaders have channeled **Ayn Rand**, who put it this way in an essay entitled “Man’s Rights:”

There are no economic rights, no collective rights, no public interest

rights.... The right to life means that a man has the right to support his life by his own work; it does not mean that others must provide him with the necessities of life....

The U.S. social safety net is now the weakest among the world's wealthy nations. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, our country's overall poverty prevention rating is significantly lower than, not just Germany and the Scandinavian nations, but Poland's, Portugal's and Turkey's.

"No moral code or ethical principle, **Jeff Madrick** writes, "no piece of scripture or holy teaching can be summoned to defend what we have allowed this country to become."

Perhaps what we need is another Great Depression to turn things around. Back in the 1930's, as more and more jobs were lost, sympathy for the poor increased, and support grew for Social Security, the Works Progress Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps. The "survival of the fittest" Social Darwinism that had informed social policy during the Gilded Age fell out of favor.

Building on these New Deal initiatives, after World War II the government passed a generously funded GI Bill that enabled millions of returning service personnel to attend college, become homeowners, and be covered by unemployment insurance. By these collective means a generation of white Americans were able to achieve middle-class status.

What's truly disappointing about this is that many who benefited from this grand social experiment in redistribution have no interest in extending similar consideration to those who are struggling today. Millions of poor Americans face eviction each year for lack of resources. In many communities the waiting period for public housing can be counted in decades and only one family in three receives any form of rent assistance. As **Dr. King** observed without irony more than fifty years ago, "So often in America

we have socialism for the rich and rugged, free-enterprise capitalism for the poor."

Society's resources are allocated, as we well know, not on the basis of need, but in proportion to group's political clout. As a result, 20% of the U.S. population now has a negative net worth – they owe more than they own. More and more jobs are part time, temporary or contract labor, which means they don't include benefits, sick leave, vacation, or retirement plans.

Thanks to the tireless efforts of the business class and its political allies, the strength of organized labor continues its slide, with fewer than 11% of Americans now covered by a union contract. No mass movement of low wage earners and the poor has arisen to challenge this unjust system since the late 1960's when **Martin Luther King and Luther King and Ralph Abernathy** mounted a Poor People's Campaign that faltered after King's death. Writing in *The New York Review of Books* recently, **Nicholas Kristof** mused about the passivity of today's poor.

They are far too willing to acquiesce...because they have been conditioned to retreat to the margins.... I found myself thinking that the problem is not that the poor riot, but they don't riot enough."

As a disciple of Gandhi, **Martin Luther King Jr.** would have questioned **Kristof's** solution, but not its intent. Now, fifty years later **The Rev. William Barber** has called for a new initiative patterned on **King's** earlier efforts to build a multi-racial coalition to eradicate unholy poverty in this country. It's one we as UU's are called upon to support. Let us, then, embrace the maladjustment that **Dr. King** once spoke of:

I never intend to adjust myself to the inequalities of an economic system that

takes necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes.... The salvation

of the world lies in the hands of the maladjusted.