

# *The Forgotten Children of Affluent America*

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This morning, Unitarian Universalist ministers all over New Jersey are addressing the same topic. We do this once a year and this is as close as we are ever likely to get to a bishop's letter -- a group of ministers agreeing to think about and to discuss with their congregations a common concern. I should tell you that it is never easy for us to agree upon the topic. We are, as you might guess, fiercely independent and we have different criteria for deciding what is central to our ministries.

This year, when we decided to discuss the plight of the children forgotten in the midst of our national affluence, I felt despair in the pit of my stomach. I could not imagine how anything could be said which would not amount to spitting into the wind of a fierce gale which has been defining our social policies as a nation for two decades and more. What could Unitarian Universalist ministers say to their upper-middle-class congregations that might make any difference? And then I remembered that the role of preachers is not to seek to control the outcome, but to speak truth as we see it and to trust the creative process to use that message. The job of the preacher is to deal out life passed through the fire of thought and permit the hearers to make what they will of it.

As I prepared for this sermon, I frequently heard a voice in my inner ear speaking with great authority. "It's no disgrace to be poor," said my Aunt Martha, talking like an adult to two small boys who desperately wanted something she could not give them. "Why," we had asked, "do we have to be poor?" "It's no disgrace to be poor," she repeated, more to herself than to us, "it's just damned inconvenient!" It was the kind of comment I would hear her make many times as we were growing up. As she sat at her old treadle-powered sewing machine, manufacturing shirts for us and blouses and dresses for herself out of old flour sacks, she would mutter with a sigh, "It's no disgrace to be poor. We should be grateful for what we have." As we stood together in the kitchen, working over a pile of spotty green beans or tomatoes well past their prime or corn left to grow tough on the cob, culling the usable from the useless and preparing it for canning so there would be food for the winter, she would murmur, more to herself than to me, "It's no disgrace to be poor, but does it have to be so tough?"

As she conducted her frequent war against the vermin which inhabited the walls of the old apartment building in which we lived, sprinkling a deadly green powder on the floors and sweeping it into cracks and crevices, pouring the same powder under the paper which lined the silverware drawer and the shelves of the kitchen cabinet, or as she pulled apart the beds and poured an equally deadly liquid along the edges of the mattresses to

discourage bedbugs, she reminded herself that being poor was no excuse not to be clean and free of bugs. And as we listened to the frequent sounds of ambulances and police cars screaming through the neighborhood in response to drunken brawls and family violence, she admonished us that just because we were poor was no reason not to be proud of ourselves and careful of our behavior.

She and my uncle worked hard to create an island of calm and peace and tranquillity in the midst of a world which was chaotic and unpredictable and sometimes dangerous. And like many poor parents, they invested their lives and their hopes in their children, in a future which would be qualitatively better than the lives they had known. They used to joke with us about that far-off day when one of us would be living in the White House, and how proud they would feel when we invited them to visit. We all knew that it would never happen, but we also heard in that standing joke the expectation that our lives would be better than theirs had been.

Like most poor parents, they had learned that life was never going to be much better for them and so they had invested their hopes for the future in their children. And like most poor parents, they simply did not know how to make that hope come true. They did what they could to protect us from the enviroing hazards of our world. They could be fierce when they perceived an unjust attack upon us. At the same time, they felt cowed and impotent in the face of authority and they did not know how to use the system to transform dreams into reality. They were often reduced to futile rage against a society which treated them as ciphers, which failed to honor their dreams, which saw their children not as promise or opportunity but as burden and expense.

We boys made our way through a public school system which regularly telegraphed to us the message that not very much was expected of us and then out into a world in which neither of us felt welcome, or at home. And of the two of us, one escaped that world of our childhood and one did not. And society tried to convince us -- and itself -- that the difference was the result of merit. Both of us knew, and still understand, that it was more a matter of luck which of us would escape and which would become part of that forgotten America. I tell you this so you understand my prejudice, and where I come from; for I have never forgotten whence I have come or my responsibility to speak for the forgotten children of America.

I was born in the midst of the Great Depression. But the world I experienced was not shaped by that economic catastrophe; the nation's financial collapse only served to make forgotten America more visible. Nor did that world end with the Depression. Rosemary L. Bray, who was born more than 20 years later, describes very much the same world in her memoir, *Unafraid of the Dark*. Rosemary's world was the urban ghetto of Chicago and her poverty was complicated by racism and sexism. But the family she describes, its relation to the larger world as it struggled to survive on the fringes of the mainstream economy, is very similar to the milieu in which I grew up. Not much changed in those 20 years.

Rosemary's family, however, benefited from a welfare system which, while never generous, never intended to do more than keep people living on the thin edge of poverty, did provide the center piece for a patchwork of economic support which, when supplemented by the occasional, low-paying, unpredictable job and the sustaining structures of family and church, made it possible to raise a family of children, to give them a minimal level of health care, to keep them in school, and to provide them with a full-time mother who was present to protect them from the dangers, temptations and seductions of the outside world.

Rosemary's family had a greater success rate than mine -- all of the children made it out of the culture of poverty in which they grew up. Rosemary Bray, herself an affirmative action baby, went from the Chicago ghetto to Yale and then on to a career in journalism, and is now preparing for the Unitarian Universalist ministry. Her siblings hold responsible jobs and lead solidly middle-class lives. After her children were grown, Rosemary's mother was able to leave the welfare system, as did most recipients of welfare. Reflecting on her own journey, Rosemary says:

"We thought it would be enough to get an education and a job, to marry and start a family, to pay our taxes and vote, be ordinary and unexceptional citizens. It now appears that we were wrong. In attempting to downplay the circumstances of our early lives we left others -- mothers and children such as we once were -- at the mercy of ignorant and vicious ideologues who have never regarded the poor with anything but contempt. Changes in the welfare system since the late 1980s have made it nearly impossible for this story to happen today."

Reflecting on my own experience, and on the engrossing story my friend Rosemary Bray relates, I understand the despair I feel when I think about the plight of the poor in this vastly affluent nation, the even deeper despair when I think about the children who have been abandoned, who have been forgotten, who have fallen through the safety net as we pursue with determination a social policy shaped and driven by free-market values rather than human values.

There is a scandal at the heart of our national life and it has nothing to do with Bill Clinton's alleged propositioning of Paula Jones. In this nation, as we sit watching the stock market climb, making wagers about when the Dow will set another record, we choose not to remember our fellow citizens who are not riding this wave of economic growth; we choose not to remember that our unprecedented prosperity is occurring in the context of the greatest disparity between rich and poor in the recent history of this nation; we choose not to remember that social policy has been structured so as to deprive the poor of the crumbs which once were their right as entitlements and to encourage the continuing concentration of resources in fewer and fewer hands; we choose not to remember that we have evolved the best political system money can buy -- one which deprives the poor of any effective voice. As the Dow zig-zags upward and we calculate what it will mean for the small part of it we own in retirement funds or investments, we choose not to remember that children under 6 years of age comprise the poorest age group in this nation and that our social policies are designed to beggar them even more.

There is a scandal at the heart of our national life and it has nothing to do with the truth about the relationship between a White House intern and the President of the United States. It has to do with the fact that, finding ourselves in the midst of the hottest housing market in decades, busily buying and selling and building houses as if they were commodities, no longer worried about having to pay capital gains taxes on our profits, we choose not to remember in the midst of this frenzy that there are over 2 million homeless children in the United States. We choose not to remember in the midst of this frenzy that the average age of a homeless person in the United States is 9 years of age -- the average age. While we congratulate ourselves on having the most dynamic economy in the world, we choose not to remember that we have failed to house our poorest citizens.

Statistics are telling and not all of them are moving up. In the wake of the program "to end welfare as we know it," we have determined that everyone must have a job and that there must be a lifetime limit for any kind of public assistance. But we have to insist that in exchange for full-time work, a person should receive a living wage. For a single mother with a preschool child in New Jersey, the cost of housing and day care are estimated to be \$725 a month. If that mother can find a full-time job paying \$5.10 an hour, she will take home about \$700 a month. She will be in deficit before she begins to consider the cost of food, clothing, health care, and transportation.

And what is true in New Jersey is true in most of the nation as we who have never known welfare congratulate ourselves that we have "ended welfare as we know it." What we have done is to reincarnate the old work houses of Dickens' England. Only now they are low-paying jobs with no future, with no benefits, and no hope of ever moving out of poverty. At the same time, this policy separates children from their mothers' care for much of their young lives. The underlying effect of the ending of welfare, no matter how we dress it up in the moral language of the dignity of work, is to secure a steady source of low-paid workers for the economy. In their book, *The Breaking of the American Social Compact*, Piven and Cloward quote from Lawrence Mead's *Beyond Entitlement* to demonstrate the forces driving the recent assault on the poor. They quote Mead as saying in urging the attack on welfare:

"Low-wage work apparently must be mandated just as the draft has sometimes apparently been necessary to staff the military. Authority achieves compliance more efficiently than benefits. Government need not make the desired behavior worthwhile to people. It simply threatens punishment (in this case, the loss of benefits) if they do not comply."

And, of course, forcing people to accept jobs which fail to pay a living wage does not guarantee that such jobs will always be available for the unskilled and inexperienced. Statistics recently released suggest that across the nation only about 30 percent of those forced off welfare have been successful in finding jobs, and that statistic counts as successful anyone who has earned at least \$100 in a three-month period. It is small wonder that food banks all over the country are reporting a 17 percent increase in requests for emergency food aid. And it is telling that almost two-fifths of those receiving emergency food aid are 18 or under, that nearly one-half of the families receiving such aid from food banks have children under 5. And these statistics are from the early part of

1997, before some of the largest cuts in food stamps and other resources for the poor took effect. In the midst of the nation's dynamic and vibrant economy, America's forgotten children are going hungry.

Poor people, by and large, have accepted the reality that they probably will not escape the trap of poverty, but they continue to hope that with a little luck, their children might. Even the most poverty-stricken ghettos are not devoid of dreams for the future. In his book *There Are No Children Here*, Alex Kotlowitz chronicles the lives of two small boys growing up in a Chicago housing project. Over and over again, like a small candle flickering in the overpowering gloom of poverty and despair, one hears in the voices of the boys and of their mother the inchoate hope that the children somehow will escape. Most of them do not. Once more, the fierce disparities between the rich and the poor drain that hope of any reality.

In 1991, Jonathan Kozol explained in his book *Savage Inequalities* part of the reason that the flickering hope for the children of the poor so often dies. He examined the vast gulf between the schooling of the children of the rich and the children of the poor. Poor children are concentrated in systems which spend significantly less per child upon education, and in districts where a significantly larger percentage of the school budget must be spent upon maintaining aging and derelict buildings. Poor children have fewer books and resources, less well-equipped libraries and labs, less experienced teachers, and larger class sizes than their affluent contemporaries. We in New Jersey know about this, as our courts struggle against entrenched political realities to enforce some kind of equality of resources on the state schools. Most of us would be quite willing to have equality in schooling, provided it did not affect the quality of our schools. In defense, we often insist that money is not the key to education, that if those other districts were better run, they would get more return on their investment, all the while fiercely fighting any effort to reduce the money spent by our schools, for fear that it would have a negative impact upon the quality of our children's education. And year after year the inequality grows and the children graduate from their unequal schools, some to promise and some to despair.

There is a scandal at the heart of our national life and it has nothing to do with whether the President of the United States can keep his zipper closed. The scandal has to do with the fact that while we debate what should be done with a purported budget surplus, one which results from having balanced the national budget on the backs of the poor, two societies have been created -- one of affluence and one of poverty, one of hope and one of despair, one fully in command of the national birthright and one condemned to be forever outside the charmed circle of the American dream. The scandal has to do with our determined blindness to the fact that what is at stake in our policies toward the poor, toward affluent America's forgotten children, is nothing less than the soul of the nation. We cannot continue a policy which subordinates human beings to market values without destroying our own humanity. A people is judged by how it treats its poorest, weakest, least advantaged members.

In his book *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Lewis Lapham remarked:

"The barbarism implicit in the restless energies of big-time, global capitalism requires some sort of check or balance, if not by a spiritual doctrine or impulse, then by a lively interest in (or practice of) democratic government. The collapse of communism at the end of the Cold War removed from the world's political stage the last pretense of a principled opposition to the rule of money, and the pages of history suggest that oligarchies unhindered by conscience or common sense seldom take much interest in the cause of civil liberty."

What Lapham remarks about the global condition is equally true of our national condition. Our children -- and they are all our children, regardless of the political jurisdiction in which they live or the school districts in which they are educated -- lay upon us a moral responsibility. We cannot be a moral people and permit our children to go hungry and homeless while the rich grow richer; we cannot be a moral people and educate some of our children for success while grooming others to provide the forced labor at the bottom of the labor market or starve; we cannot be a moral people if we accept luxury as our right and forget those, especially the children, who are condemned to lives of despair by the very policies which benefit us. We cannot be a moral people if we do not demand social policies which seek to ameliorate the discrepancies between the rich and the poor, policies which seek to provide the kind of support which allowed Rosemary Bray and countless others to emerge from poverty and to make of their talents a gift to the nation and the world.

"It is no disgrace to be poor," said my Aunt Martha. And she was right. But it is a disgrace to be affluent in America and to forget those others, who were children when we were children, who are contemporaries of our children and our grandchildren, who are not so blessed. It is more than a disgrace. It is a sin to turn our backs on the forgotten children of affluent America.