

# *The Poor You Have with You Always*

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The advocates of Liberation Theology suggest that, as a matter of course, people who comment on public issues ought to preface their remarks with a clear indication of who they are, what their position in society is, what history has shaped them, and the values and convictions to which they give allegiance. It seems to me that this is a reasonable expectation if listeners are to evaluate and understand what is being said to them. Therefore, this morning, I want to begin this sermon with a personal statement.

I was born in the midst of the great depression, offspring of a family which traces its roots in this country back to 1741, when two brothers came from German speaking Switzerland to settle in the mountains in South Central Pennsylvania. The family took root in that place, and has remained rooted there to the present day. In so far as I am able to tell, the generations of that family were sustained by a stubborn belief in the American Dream--an unexamined conviction that through hard work and determined effort, each generation will experience an improved social and economic condition. It is equally true, in so far as I can tell, that the family's continued trust in the American Dream was one more evidence of the triumph of faith over experience, for the family remained desperately poor generation after generation.

I remember, as a small child, being taken, on occasion, to visit my grandfather. He was a small, wiry man, with an olive complexion and strands of glossy, black hair combed across his bald pate. He had a twinkle in his eye, and a quiet sense of humor. He made his home in an abandoned bus body at the edge of a junkyard on the outskirts of Waynesboro, Pennsylvania. He lighted the interior of that old hulk with kerosene lamps, and heated the interior and cooked with a small kerosene heater. He carried water from an outside tap near the shack which served as an office for the junkyard. He used an outdoor privy. I don't know how he washed his clothes, but he was always clean and neat, if somewhat patched and ragged.

My grandfather was a man with little formal education, and few marketable skills. Nonetheless, he worked hard, all his life, first to support his ten children, and then to support himself. For the most part, he was a farm laborer, picking up day jobs wherever and whenever he could find them. And he worked until the day he died. On that day, he had been hired to chop trees in an orchard. As evening drew on and he did not return to the farm house to collect his wages, someone went looking for him. They found him under a tree, his ax in his hand, dead of a heart attack.

My father was his eldest son. He, too, had little formal education, and went to work as a truck driver, hauling loads short distances around the middle Atlantic region. When my

mother died, my father broke up the family and sent his children to live with various relatives. I saw little of him after that, and received virtually no support from him. The aunt and uncle who raised me, followed the family pattern--little formal education and few marketable skills.

For a while, my Uncle Jim worked in Franklin Roosevelt's WPA. Later, he found a job as a hospital orderly--mopping floors, cleaning bed-pans, pushing laundry carts. He was generally treated as a cipher by the hospital staff, and he was very poorly paid. When the Second World War began, and the nation needed laborers again, he secured employment in a factory which produced airplanes. There, he swept floors, and carried tools and from one part of the plant to another, and was generally treated as a cipher, and remained at the bottom of the pay scale. When the war ended, and men were mustered out of the service and the munitions plants began to scale back their production, his services were no longer needed, and he found himself without employment. From that point on, he took one low-paying job after another.

For a while, my Aunt worked as a dishwasher in a small restaurant. At twelve, I took a job delivering packages, not to earn spending money, but because the family needed the \$3.00 a week I could bring home. In high school, I worked thirty-five hours a week in a grocery store, to add to the family resources. For a while, the family cleaned offices on Friday evenings. And in the autumn, after the farmers had completed the harvest, we would scour the fields, picking up the potatoes that were considered too small or too cut up to be worth gathering. I don't remember ever being hungry, but I do remember a monotonous and not very well-balanced diet. We worked hard and life never seemed to grow easier for us. There was never enough money; there was never a respite from worry.

My Uncle died young. I will never know for certain, but I have always believed that had he been able to obtain adequate medical care, that attack need not have been fatal. But we were shaped by a culture of poverty in which one saw the dentist only when a tooth needed to be extracted, and one visited the doctor only when time and patience and home remedies had failed. Already, my Uncle had seen one of his grandsons die because the child's fever went undiagnosed, and the parents not knowing how they could afford the services of a doctor, were reluctant to seek medical attention. And so, when the pain came to my Uncle Jim in the middle of the night, he, with the stoicism of the poor, tried to wait it out, and he died before morning.

I grew up wearing the shirts my Aunt made for me, on her treadle sewing machine, out of fabric from feed sacks she had been given. I grew up wearing cast-off shoes given us by the Salvation Army and eating surplus foods which had been donated to the Salvation Army. When I went to college my Aunt carefully packed a shirt she had made from a pair of drapes, so I would have something a little nicer to wear for special occasions. I grew up watching my classmates dropping out of school, giving up any dreams of the future, defeated before they had begun. I grew up watching the despair and the pain and the hopelessness of families around me which often found expression in drunkenness and brutality and violence. I grew up knowing that the slightest thing happening could tip the balance for me and for my family and that all of life was a risky gamble.

A capricious fate decreed that I would escape that world, that I would come to have a middle-class life-style and that I would live these years in one of the wealthiest communities on the face of the earth. But in my heart of hearts, I know how narrow a chance it was; I recognize that I could just as easily have been one of many victims I knew who did not escape, who were ground up in the system, whose dreams became a mocking reminder of their failure. And that is why, despite all the intervening the years, some part of me is still that little boy, visiting his grandfather in the old, rusting bus body at the edge of the junk yard. And that is why, despite the passage of time, I am still haunted by the people I grew up with. And that is why, I still feel a compulsion to speak for my Grandfather, for my Aunt and Uncle, for my friend Larry, who could find no way out, Larry, whose intelligence and wit became a mocking burden, and who, one day, quietly ended his life--a life which might have enriched the world but had become to great an anguish to bear. I carry the responsibility of a survivor, an obligation to speak for those who did not survive. That may help you understand the rage I feel as I watch the current outbreak of class warfare in the United States--a class warfare aimed at the poor and enlisting the sympathies of the middle class in support of the rich who grow steadily richer with every passing day.

I have listened to the current demagoguery about the way in which the welfare system is destroying the nation's economy; I have watched with mounting anger as the crocodile tears have been flowing from congress, from state legislatures, from governors, from those who suggest that removing people--especially women and children--from public support is the kind of tough love those people need and frankly, I am sickened by the callousness, the mendacity, the self-serving distortions which are being used as the basis of public policy. But more than this, I am dismayed by the ringing silence of the religious community in the face of this unremitting assault upon the poor.

It is not as if we do not know better. The statistics are there for anyone to read. A substantial number of the people on public welfare are children. Six million children in this country, more than a quarter of all our children, live in poverty, dependent, to some degree upon public assistance--a figure which has doubled in the last two decades. Most of the parents of those children hold regular jobs--jobs which pay so poorly that their incomes must be subsidized by public funds if the families are to function and provide a minimal level of care for the children. Many of the adults on welfare are women, single mothers who are attempting to care for their children in a society which provides no adequate child-care facilities and little emotional support. Most of the adults on welfare are people with few skills and little education and little understanding of how to use the system to their own advantage. And yet, most of the people on welfare do not remain on the rolls forever, but use the welfare system as a safety net when the precarious financial and social supports they have cobbled together collapse, as they frequently do. Very few people want to spend their lives on the public welfare rolls. Some have no choice but to rely on welfare from time to time, and some lost souls never achieve the dream of independence.

In light of these realities, what are we to make of the cry that the welfare system is too costly and ends up destroying lives and that the time has come to end welfare, to move all

those who rely on public assistance into the labor force? Does no one see the irony of a situation in which the Congress and state legislatures and governors are insisting that people on public assistance rolls must find work, at the very time the Federal Reserve Board is raising interest rates because it believes that the employment levels are too high and threaten runaway inflation? The Federal Reserve is following a policy designed to increase the unemployment rate; federal and state legislatures are urging a policy which would dump the desperate into the job market. Can anyone doubt that the beneficiaries of this policy will be those who have a vested interest in depressing wages, of keeping the poor poor. There was a time when we had a term for this kind of policy. We would have called it what it is, the exploitation of labor and the poor. There was a time when we knew that we would pay a terrible price for such a policy--a price in crime and violence, in disease and despair, in stunted growth and hopelessness.

For some reason, we seem unable to realize the full implications of the politics of meanness which currently dominate our public discourse. Perhaps our narrow vision is to be explained by our failure to understand the real purpose and function of public aid to the poor. In their book *AMERICA'S MISUNDERSTOOD WELFARE STATE*, Marmar, Mashaw and Harvey suggest that somewhere along the line we allowed ourselves to believe that the purpose of government programs of assistance is to end poverty. And so, we look at the money which has been spent over the years and are dismayed to discover that there are still poor people after all that expenditure of time and treasure. What is more, we assume it is the same poor people. We conclude that they are deadbeats, riding the system and sending us the bill. In truth, welfare programs are not designed to end poverty or even to reduce it. They are intended to soften the harsh outlines of an economic system which cares little for the individual and has no compassion for the weak, the helpless, the damaged. And since there will always be such people in a system which uses people when they are useful and spits them out when they are not, the welfare system, the program of aid to those in need is a continuing and on-going cost of the capitalist system, and the only thing more costly, in the long run, would be to have no such program of aid.

What is more, if we were serious about reducing the cost of this necessary program of aid to women and children, to the helpless and the lost, we would not be focusing on punitive and vengeful programs designed to force them onto a job market which does not need them and is unwilling to pay them at a level which can sustain a reasonable existence. Rather, given the fact that most people on welfare would prefer not to be there, we would begin to focus on an economic system with a wage structure which allows women and men to work full time at necessary jobs, and pays them so poorly that they cannot survive. What are we to make of a system which pays janitors in high-rise, luxury office buildings in Washington, D.C. \$4.75 an hour, with an extra quarter if their duties require that they clean toilets? What are we to make of a system which arranges the hours of such people so that they are not entitled to any benefits--health insurance, sick leave, pension? Why are we surprised when the brightest of their children, watching their elders cleaning rich people's toilets for a wage that will not sustain them, choose drugs or crime as a better option? Either we must continue to subsidize such employers with an adequate welfare system, or we must insist upon a living wage, or we must barricade ourselves

against the violence and the rage which is building in young people who count themselves as already dead therefore having nothing to lose.

I am not suggesting that there are no welfare cheats, no scoundrels who have learned how to abuse the system. Of course there are cheats and scoundrels and abusers of the welfare system, just as there are cheats and scoundrels who work on Wall Street and in banks and savings and loans, and in government procurement offices and in Congress and state legislatures. No one argues that because of repeated scandals and the presence of scoundrels we should close down the stock market, or abandon the banking system, or turn the Pentagon into luxury apartments. Indeed, we use the tax revenues of the government to rescue such institutions from the consequences of malfeasance. Why is welfare for the Savings and Loan Industry acceptable, even though it represents a massive transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich, while welfare for people chewed up and spit out by the system is evil and invidious? And why do those in the middle class allow themselves to be cozened into believing that their interests are tied to the Savings and Loans and not to the welfare of the poor?

Some of you have sometimes asked me whether there is anything left in me of my religious heritage, the Jewish-Christian tradition in which I was raised. There is a small vestige remaining, and this is the heart of it: In my mind I hear the echo of the voice of Amos, the eighth century prophet:

Hear this, O ye that swallow up the needy, even to make the poor of the land to fail, saying, "When will the new moon be gone that we may sell corn? and the sabbath, that we may set forth wheat, making the measure small and the price high and falsifying the balances by deceit that we may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes, and sell the refuse of the wheat....Shall not the land tremble for this, and everyone mourn that dwelleth therein?"

Echoing in my mind are the words attributed to Jesus of Nazareth:

For I was hungry and you gave me meat; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; Naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came unto me....In as much as you have done it unto the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me."

In his book, *WHO WILL TELL THE PEOPLE*, William Greider, echoing both of these ancient sources, reminds us: "The quality of democracy is not measured by the contentment of the affluent, but in how the political system regards those who lack personal advantages....The challenging conditions they face in their daily lives were once part of the general equation that the political system took into account when it decided the largest economic questions. Now these citizens are absent from politics--both as participants and as the subjects of consideration."

The voices out of my past speak to me with urgency--the voice of my Grandfather, of my Aunt and Uncle, the voices of those who struggled to survive in a land which promised

much and gave little, the voice of my classmate, Larry, the voices of so many now silenced. They challenge me to speak in their behalf, to cry out in the midst of this wealthy community, to remind us all that in the political struggle of this day, what is at stake is nothing less than our very souls. If we do not speak for the poor, if we do not defend the minimal safety net which is their only protection, if we do not insist that our political leaders end their warfare on those least able to defend themselves, if we do not insist that the measure of a humane society is its willingness to care for those unable to care for themselves, its willingness to protect the children, and its willingness to defend the defenseless what we shall lose is any future worth having.

I have known the poor; I have lived among the poor; I have been numbered among the poor and this I know: What separates you and me from them is not our skill, our intelligence, our hard work so much as it is luck--the families into which we happen to be born, the door that opened at just the right moment, the gift that came to us without our asking. Jesus of Nazareth is reputed to have said, "The poor you will have with you always." The question implicit in that statement is, "How will you respond to the need?" The very soul of this nation will be shaped by how we answer.