

One Nation, Underprivileged

Why American Poverty Affects Us All

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Concept One, Chapter Six, elaborates on the causal effect of how one views the events and forces behind poverty. There are two views: (1) My individual and collective obligation to the poor in this country will be weak to non-existent; in fact, the attitude may be “they are getting what they deserve.” Some may even put a spiritual spin on it by saying, “They are reaping what they have sown.” The other view is to recognize that poverty is the result of events and forces beyond the control of the individual; an economy that produces low-wage jobs or an educational structure that fails to adequately educate poor children. If one’s view is the later, they will feel a personal and/or collective desire to assist those in need since most individuals find themselves in poverty through little fault of their own. This is not even taking into account that the majority of Americans could find themselves in poverty if they became unemployed, experienced a major illness, or experienced a structural change in their family. The poor in this category is referred to as the “deserving poor”; that is, deserving of compassion and assistance. On the other hand, the deserving poor are the “abled bodied” by appearance. This could be termed another incidence of blaming the victim.

One argument against blaming the poor is that nearly half of the poor population in the United States is either children under the age of 18 or the elderly over age 65. Nearly one-third of the poor between the ages 25 and 64 suffer from some type of severe disability. Surely, these poor are not responsible for their poverty and are certainly not deserving of it. Another argument against the claims that the poor are to blame for their plight is that at one time those who have fallen into poverty were gainfully employed.

As citizens of America, we all have a responsibility to aid those in poverty; in helping the poor, we are helping ourselves. I like the quote of Ben Franklin who said, “We must all hang together, or most assuredly, we shall all hang separately.” To turn our heads and do nothing is to be a part of the

problem. While we do nothing, the wage gap in our country is growing wider and wider between the “haves” and the “have nots.”

- By 2020, the top fifth of American earners will account for more than 60 percent of all the income earned. The bottom fifth will account for two percent.
- The average income of a top CEO in this country has grown from 39 times the average worker’s salary in 1970 to more than 1,000 times what an average worker earns during a year.

Concept two is that there needs to be a new paradigm which describes poverty as an injustice because the old paradigm, whether conservative or liberal, of focusing on and blaming the individual is unfair and should be considered a social injustice.

According to the conservative view of the old paradigm, badly designed social welfare programs can encourage people into making destructive decisions during their lives, such as dropping out of school, having children out of wedlock, not getting married, failing to take a low paying job, or engaging in crime.

The liberal version of the old paradigm focuses more on marketable skills, training, and education, as well as other characteristics that put the poor at a disadvantage in competing in the labor market.

Both views put the focus on the individual and in a sense label the poor as “underclass”, and both views reflect the myth that the majority of Americans believe about poverty.

A new paradigm that focuses on reality and injustice is needed for a shift to take place in America to eliminate poverty in a land of abundance. Within the old paradigm, the public’s apathy toward the poor has been part of the problem; within the new paradigm, the public’s involvement in

alleviating poverty is part of the solution. Poverty is not “them”; poverty is “us.” This new paradigm views the condition of poverty as underserved and unwarranted.

Concept three concerns the growing income disparities in our country that violate basic human morality and sound social policy. I agree wholeheartedly with the president of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, William J. McDonough, when he voiced his concerns about the gap between the rich and poor in our country widening each year. Mr. McDonough spoke on the one-year anniversary of the September 11 tragedy from inside Trinity Church. Mr. McDonough’s main theme was the importance in today’s world of applying the commandment to love thy neighbor as thyself to include one’s fellow worker. Being a spiritual person myself, I respect and agree with Mr. McDonough’s remarks:

“I believe there is one issue in particular which requires corrective action. A recent study shows that, twenty years ago, the average chief executive officer of a publicly traded company made forty-two times more than the average production worker. Perhaps one could justify that by the additional education required, the greater dedication, perhaps even the harder work. The same study shows that the average present day CEO makes over 400 times the average employee’s income. It is hard to find somebody more convinced than I of the superiority of the American economic system, but I can find nothing in economic theory that justifies this development. I am old enough to have known both the CEOs of twenty years ago and those of today. I can assure you that we CEOs of today are not 10 times better than those of twenty years ago.”

Raising the living standards of those who are working to lift themselves and their families out of poverty is the morally and economically right thing to do.

Even though I have a desire to make a difference, I do not really understand where to begin. Reading our policy text book has given me some clue about searching for a group of people who are like-minded and are already involved in social security reform. Fear may also be holding me back because I am not by nature a militant person; therefore, bringing the issue of poverty and the need for Social Security reform to the awareness of others in everyday conversation is much more appealing to me, but in my heart, I know it is not enough action for me to take. I agree with the author's statements that "change can occur from the ground up" and that "we must begin, and we must persevere." While I do not clearly see the path before me, I trust that as I continue to take steps fighting against poverty, I will understand more along the way.

Margaret Mead's quote, "Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Is a powerfully encouraging statement for social workers and other people willing to advocate for positive change in our country. It is a statement that I have believed for a long time and try to live out in my life.

When I began the social work program at UTC in the fall of 2006, I had a desire to learn more about child abuse. In the introductory policy class, I learned about older single women's, widowed or divorced, limited social security benefits and was horrified because I am one of those women. I am blessed because I do have other resources; many other women are not as fortunate.

The majority of my clients in the VOCA program of Partnership are, indeed, the less fortunate. The lowest social security benefit drawn by my clientele is \$579 per month. This particular client owns her own home which she inherited, but she has no way to keep up the maintenance and is behind in back taxes. At the present time, she is in great danger of either losing her home to foreclosure or the house may possibly be condemned. As her intern social worker, my job is to look for other resources for her. The only alternative that I see is for her to see the house and apply for Section 8 housing. I also

heard from another case manager this week that the waiting list for the Section 8 housing, even in the neediest of cases, is three months. I am not expecting the client to be receptive to my suggestion; even if she were receptive, it will undoubtedly be a hard decision for her to make.

Somewhere along the way my desire for learning more about child abuse has diminished and been replaced by a desire to work on social security reform.

I was also told by another client this past week (2-5-08) that she was caught stealing last year. She and her family members were hungry and had no money to purchase food. The store owner did not press charges but banned her from ever coming in the store again. She cried as she told me.

I can easily relate information from the book to my field agency experiences. In the author's words, "to know there is a problem and do nothing is to become a part of the problem." I have learned about poverty, seen poverty, and am in danger of becoming in poverty; therefore, I want to make a difference in our nation overcoming this shameful plight and will continue to seek ways to become involved.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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