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Poverty Hurts 24/7

Natalie and I, with a contingency of concerned citizens, recently toured the Marathon County, WI social service facilities, components of the United Way. The crowd moved ahead while I concentrated on capturing visual images. Photos taken, a chair in the hallway was welcome. Here was the view.



The lockers were in the hallway. Did they contain all the remaining resources for one person? Juxtaposed next to an image of storage units, possibly filled with the



excess material possessions of many people, raises troubling questions about societal materialism, and wasted resources.

As these images clogged one part of consciousness, the experience of childhood and poverty slowly began to flood another part, and then they merged into one set of conclusions. The first merger point was recognition that poverty is real, not an abstract social discussion about redistribution.

Childhood

Our parents fought against their humble origins, but were unable to break the poverty continuum. There were eight family members, our parents and six children. Personally, Christmas was an annual reminder of the physical paucity and dark psychological deprivation that pounded at self-image. With few resources, the perception was that others had abundant affluence. Collectively among the siblings, the economic state, never discussed, is not a shared experience. None of us dared ask why, a forbidden question, partially out of fear and acceptance. In some children's minds, unasked questions are profound, as both symbols and reality.

Christmas began with a tree. A pagan symbol converted to Christian purpose, trees can be symbols of affluence. The rich had large "perfectly shaped" balsam firs, while each Christmas Eve afternoon, a farmer delivered a small, lowly cedar tree to our home. While rough in appearance, the cedar has a delightful, woody aroma. After decorating the tree and hanging stockings on the bench, we walked to Church, while other families drove cars.

We impatiently spent the night, rising early to open presents. Reality was manifest in the type, number, and quality of gifts. Each child received one low priced gift and a stocking full of small items, mainly tangerines, candy, and underwear. By contrast, our friends appeared to receive unlimited amounts of cool stuff. On the day after Christmas, we discarded the tree.

Christmas dinner was a feast fit for royalty. Mom was an excellent cook, and the chicken or ham, potatoes, homemade cranberry sauce all exceeded gourmet standards. Mom sold her home baked bread for twenty cents a loaf, and unquestionably, these sales were the source for procuring our presents. Never, until much older, was it comprehended how much she gave up for what an ungrateful child perceived as so little.

Economic circumstances aside, Christmas was a joyful occasion. I have few memories of Dad but can picture Mom watching us. It is impossible to look into past moments and know what combinations of joy and pain she experienced. One can only hope she was content, having done everything in her power to bring Christmas to her family.

Christmas celebrations for the author ended one December 3. An ambulance came to our home, and a tearful mother informed her children, "Your father has died." I was sixteen, the youngest brother Glenn, only ten. For Mom, it meant widowhood and facing the grind of raising her family, while already in difficult circumstances, with virtually no income. One sister married shortly before Dad died, the other shortly after. I joined the Army upon reaching seventeen.

I angrily walked away from God, Christmas and for the most part, family, for the next six years, and my siblings started the migration from our hometown. Our parent's graves are all that remain.

Natalie and I were engaged fifty-two years ago, just prior to Christmas, a day she fully loves and celebrates for its religious meaning, the Birth of Christ, and the warmth of family and friends. She too, was born of humble circumstances, but her joy of life mostly carried her above the pain that I had



experienced. Two of her characteristics bridge the differences in our perceptions, her extraordinary faith foundation, and rejection of materialism.

For our first Christmas as a married couple, I cut a perfectly shaped little Christmas tree. We proudly decorated and admired its beauty. Upon returning from Christmas with her family, we found the needles had fallen off. The tree was not a Balsam, but a lowly little Tamarac, which sheds its needles each year much as oak or maple. She calls it our "Charlie Brown Christmas tree" and we laugh when thinking about it.

Our children returned the great joys of Christmas to my heart. We had trees, presents, great food, love, and faith in the birth of Christ and its celebration. Presents are physical manifestations of love, more important to some, less so to others, but it was pure joy watching the kids tear open the packages, laughing and playing.

For our family, infinitudes of "Thank you, God" are inadequate.

Conclusions

The great recession and sluggish recovery have increased poverty throughout society, and many people suffer profoundly from its effects. Poverty hurts 24/7, and it strikes hardest at the young members of society.

Material possessions, as envisioned by a child, are confused between needs and want. Mired in the relentless state of deprivation, it may be difficult to discern the difference. The curse of poverty is not just a shortage of goods and services, but also the destruction of self-image.

Adults must never underestimate the peer effect on children. If poor, gifts of food, clothing, and objects to match those of peers are important and build positive self-images. How can people help themselves without believing a different reality is possible and they own the opportunity?

In addition, the value of resources is quality of utilization, not quantity. For families, the gifts under the tree are important. As children, there was never a food shortage for Christmas, for either Nat or myself, but some items remained scarce at times. Our Mom's frugal habits, chicken coops, and cooking ability kept hunger away. Today, the resource mix has changed. In many cases, food stamps are available. While children may not be starving in the streets, the insidious effects of malnutrition are pervasive with lifetime effects.

On Christmas day, and throughout the year, the greatest expression of our love is making sure there are resources available for those in need. Nothing on Christmas replaces the joys of a child opening what may be a life-changing gift. Happiness is parents somehow able to bring Christmas peace to their families with needed food, clothing, shelter, a Christmas tree, and gifts to put under it.

Poverty may hurt 24/7, but on Christmas day, we collectively have the power to relieve the pain for every person, every family in need. Once the festivities are over, the needs will remain, and society (we the people) must wage a perpetual war against its insidious effects.



Give generously to the local charities focusing contributions very precisely to the point of need. For the Wausau, WI area, these include your local churches and:

The United Way
The Women's Community Center
Warming Center
Salvation Army
Catholic Charities
St Vincent DePaul

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year,

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