

Wrestling with Poverty:

Homily for Sunday, July 31, 2011 by Amy Higgins

I first heard Tracy Chapman's song "Talkin' about a Revolution" in 1988, my senior year in college. I was unsettled. I was inspired. "Talkin' about a Revolution" spoke with raw truth about poverty in America. Chapman's song showed the poor as angry, fed up with the social safety net that wasn't really catching them. It was unsettling to listen and know that I was the "you" being warned to "run, run, run, run, run" because "they", the dispossessed, were going to rise up and take their share, not meekly wait around for whatever might trickle down. (There was a lot of misplaced faith in trickle down in 1988).

Though it made me wince to hear the Durham Morning Herald call Duke "The Gothic Playpen", the contrast between the wealth and privilege of the students within its walls and the entrenched poverty of the mostly black neighborhoods surrounding the campus was stark. Certainly campus groups concerned with social justice strove to bridge this divide; I volunteered as a tutor in the Durham schools, and helped build a Habitat house with the Episcopal group on campus. But these opportunities to do good felt very scripted. There was still a distance, a divide. I felt a sense of anguish; we weren't really changing anything. We were assuaging our consciences. Chapman's song was like an anthem for me, as I struggled to figure out what to do after graduation. I believed then (and I still do) that the best hope of the poor in America is education. I wanted to be an English teacher, but I wanted to help where the need was greatest. I also felt volunteering for a year in an underprivileged area would test my faith—Christ called me to serve the poor; did I have the inner resources to do this? I also needed urgently to test whether teaching was truly my vocation. Did I really have what it took to be a teacher? Before I went on to get my Master's degree and a teaching certification, I needed to find out.

It's hard to explain why I felt such urgency to teach among the poor, but part of it was that I was a new Christian, and my models were people like Jesus, Saint Francis, Cesar Chavez, Gandhi, and, yes, Tracy Chapman. Each of these had a vision of social justice that completely upended the status quo. I felt a spiritual urgency to throw myself into the kind of revolution they envisioned.

Another reason for this sense of urgency was that I grew up caught in the tension between two starkly different economic realities, and in each world I was seen, and therefore saw myself, very differently. My brother and I were 6 and 3 when my parents divorced, and after that, we spent our school years with Mom and summers with Dad. Mom was an alcoholic, and sometimes was hospitalized for bipolar episodes. In the small Missouri town where we lived, I felt painfully the stigma of being the pitied child of a divorced, single Mom. I got looks of pity when I went up to get my tickets for reduced lunch. Mom received child support from my Dad, and my Grammy also supported us, but a lot of the stigma of being poor in America comes from complicating factors—alcoholism and mental illness are two of the most complicating. And I felt that stigma in people's judgmental looks and in their voices when we went to church with Grammy, and someone would say, "Tell your mother we'd love to see her at church!" Sum-

mers, my brother and I would fly out to stay with my Dad and stepmother and live very comfortably, eating out at nice restaurants, renting a cottage on Cape Cod. Appearances were very important to them, and when we rode out with them in the BMW, I felt glamorous. I took pleasure knowing that my friends back in Missouri would envy me. But I also felt ashamed and torn. Back in Missouri, my mom was poor and unemployed. Maybe also depressed and drinking. And feeling that we'd abandoned her. So, the stark contrast between what it felt like to be treated as a poor kid and as a rich kid was a central tension in my life—I guess I was both, but I identified myself as neither. I felt like the truth of who I was was somewhere in-between and the distinction people made was essentially false.

Back to the summer of 1988. I applied and interviewed with two different organizations, both under the umbrella of Catholic Social Services. One was in the mountains of Kentucky, and the other was in Belle Glade, Florida, a sugarcane town near Lake Okeechobee. In Kentucky, I applied to be a “Teacher on Wheels,” where my students would be young women living in remote corners of the mountains. I learned that in most situations, I would be going into the homes of young women whose husbands were opposed to their wives being educated. I went on one visit with a veteran of the organization. We had to wait in the car while the young woman chained up the dogs, and then we went in. There was a sense of tension the whole time because the young woman was so worried that her husband would come home and find us there. I knew right away I didn't have the courage to face that kind of confrontation daily. I wanted to wrestle with poverty, but not with men with shotguns and dogs chained outside.

Belle Glade struck me immediately as a situation where I could both teach and learn. The population was Haitian and Hispanic, and I would be teaching an afterschool homework program in the afternoon and teaching English as a Second Language to adults in the evening.

I know I had some success in that very first year as a teacher; some of my ESL students amazed me, and I was humbled by their dedication to learning English, even after spending 10-hour days in the fields. The afterschool program was harder. A lot of these kids were already so frustrated from struggling to read and write and understand their teachers during the day that they had no will to focus again after school and try to learn more. I didn't know how to convince them that studying with me was more important than running and playing with their friends; I wasn't even convinced myself. My inner resources, combined with the limited resources at the center, could not begin to overcome the many obstacles that stood between these children and academic success. Most days, I ended up crying out of frustration and futility. I was ill-equipped and overwhelmed. I had thrown myself into revolution with the effectiveness of a band-aid on a gunshot wound.

I did connect deeply with one 16-year old Haitian-American girl, Guirlane. She was smart and confident, and burned with an ambition to go to college. She came after school almost every day, and I helped her with science and math, which she struggled with. But she loved English, and she was a good reader. I introduced her to the poems of Ntozake Shange, and I proofread some exciting creative pieces that showed her own strong voice emerging. Guirlane went on to

college at Xavier, and I hope she was able to raise her family out of the cycle of poverty. But I think Guirlane had a spirit made for wrestling, and she would have known success with or without me.

I came home from that year humbled. Yes, I had what it took to be a teacher, but I had a lot to learn about being part of a revolution. What I see better now, at 45, is how our educational system is failing America's poorest kids. As long as property taxes are the source of support for public education, our system of abundant resources for kids in wealthy districts, and drastically lower resources for children in poor districts, will just perpetuate the growing gap between the haves and the have-nots. What I don't understand is why now, when the situation is so much worse, I don't hear a whisper of revolution. Maybe people are too demoralized to be angry. Maybe they buy into the cultural stigma that insists that their poverty is somehow their own fault. Maybe the news is so filled with middle-class anxiety over the economy and the debt ceiling, that the the drastic reductions in social welfare programs, and widespread dismantling of mental health services in most states, goes largely unnoticed.

The anger in Chapman's song was scary to me in 1988. It still is. It unsettles, but it also inspires. The anger it expresses in the face of poverty is so much bitter hopelessness or silence. And when the poor are too tired or hopeless to be angry any more, we need to be angry on their behalf.

Jo Goodwin Parker wrote an essay entitled, "What is Poverty?" that I have my students read every semester. In it, she writes, "Poverty is an acid that drips on pride until all pride is worn away. Poverty is a chisel that chips on honor until honor is worn away. . . . Others like me are all around you. Look at us with an angry heart, anger that will help you help me. Anger that will let you tell of me. The poor are always silent. Can you be silent too?"

Both the Genesis reading and the Gospel for today shed some light on our complex, frustrating, yet essential call to wrestle with poverty here in America. Jacob wrestled with God, and it was in that fight that he received both a wound and a blessing. The injury to his hip left him with a permanent limp. His refusal to give up the fight earned him a new name, Israel, "One who has wrestled with God and with humans." Wrestling with poverty means wrestling with substance abuse, mental illness, crime and violence, all of which grow out of the anger and despair that poverty breeds. Dealing with these complications can leave us wounded—talk to any life-long social worker, substance abuse counselor, any teacher in a poorly funded urban school. But the alternative—to give up, to look the other way, to shrug and say "it's their own fault," is not acceptable.

The miracle of the loaves and fishes can be seen as a call to change our perceptions about scarcity and abundance, and in doing so, to open the possibility of transformation.

Jesus' disciples come to him and urge him to "send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Clearly, they are worried. Here's a big crowd of

—at least temporarily—homeless, hungry people. There is a scarcity of food; only enough, the reader presumes, for them to feed themselves. Jesus sees things differently. “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” As he takes the 5 loaves and 2 fishes, and blesses them and has the disciples pass them around, he is asking them to share freely and to trust that in response, God will ensure that all have enough. This story is anchored in a powerful, figurative truth. It is human nature to perceive scarcity and to guard jealously what we have. But if we give freely of what we have and trust in the generosity of others in return, we can find abundance where before there was only fear.

I’ll conclude by saying that I still don’t have any easy answers. There’s no roadmap to the revolution Tracy Chapman was talking about. But we are called to be angry, and we are called to wrestle against poverty, and for policies that provide hope, opportunity, healing, food and shelter. We are called to expect that we will be wounded, and also blessed in the fight.