“Ministering in a World of Cultural Diversity and Loving It Most of the Time”
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Empowering People in Urban Ministry
‘Culture of Poverty’ versus Being Poor

Key Quotation: “Jesus said: ‘The poor are always with you,’ but do they have to be the same ones all the time?”

JoAnn Ballard
The ‘Culture of Poverty” versus Being Poor

• History of the term, “Culture of Poverty” coined by Oscar Lewis, sociologist and fiction writer of the 1950’s who wrote about the poor in Latin America
The ‘Culture of Poverty” versus Being Poor

- What does the “Culture of Poverty” have to do with the way in which we understand cultures?
  1. It is learned from birth on
  2. It is transmitted from generation to generation
  3. It is a whole orientation towards life
  4. It is collectively shared by a group
The ‘Culture of Poverty’ versus Being Poor

And, it is very controversial because...

1. It sounds very deterministic, as though people are preconditioned to live like this.
2. It discourages government and social programs from expecting significant change.
3. It feeds stereotypes—"You can take people out of the slum, but you can’t take the slum out of the people.
4. It suggests that "mainstream middle class culture" is the model by which the "culture of poverty" is deemed deficient.
The ‘Culture of Poverty” versus Being Poor

Controversy, continued . . .

5. It is easily identified with racial categorizations, i.e. “all blacks are that way.”

6. It becomes an excuse for blame and inaction
On the other hand, does it teach us anything important?

Perhaps . . .

1. That there is transmitted from generation to generation biological traits, learning, social influences that mold responses to life, either positively or negatively.
2. That social context is very formative in people’s lives.
3. That the processes of transformation and change, like culture, do not happen overnight.
4. That the culture of poverty affects the whole person, not just the economic side of a person: psychological, emotional, economic, social, legal, spiritual, attitudinal, life values and expectations.
5. That ministry has three dimensions: rehabilitative, confrontative, and creative.
“Culture of Poverty” versus “Being Poor”

A Biblical Verse to Remember:

“If you reject me, I will punish your families for three or four generations. But if you love me and obey my laws, I will be kind to your families for thousands of generations.” Ex. 20:5-6

GRACE TRUMPS EVIL! The generational curse can be broken!
Ministry then involves:

1. **Rehabilitative:** Fixing those areas of life that are nonfunctional and broken.

2. **Confrontative:** Confronting and defeating those demons of life that destroy, i.e. will, “lies”, etc.

3. **Creative:** Not renewal, but ‘newal” “I make all things new. Bringing to life new creature, new name, new community, new purposes, new hope, etc.
Characteristics of the “Culture of Poverty”

Those who are poor show . . .

• signs of economic deprivation
• a desire for upward mobility
• a desire for mainstream values

Whereas, those in the “culture of poverty” have . . .
“Culture of Poverty” versus “Being Poor”

1. A different set of values, based on survival techniques, centered on the realization that one cannot obtain success. Yet there is . . .

2. Coherency in their values---they make some sense!
“Culture of Poverty” versus “Being Poor”

Description of the “Culture of Poverty”

1. Generally found in industrialized, capitalistic societies
2. Usually emerging out of the lower stata of rapidly changing society
3. Most often found where the economic and social systems break down
4. Seen in societies of cash transactions, transciency and high unemployment
"Culture of Poverty" versus "Being Poor"

The "Culture of Poverty" shows the following characteristics: (Over 70 characteristics have been described variously)

1. A lack of integration in the mainstream society.
2. A distrust of institutions, including the Church.
3. A lack of involvement in local communities beyond the nuclear family.
The Culture of Poverty

Additional characteristics:

• Fragmented families
• Absence of childhood
• Early initiation into sex
• Non-legal marriage
• High incidence of family abandonment
• Trend toward female-centered families
The Culture of Poverty

Characteristics, continued . . .

• Present-time orientation
• Fatalistic
• Sense of inferiority
• Strong feelings of marginality, helplessness, dependence.

By age 6-7, children are acculturated in the COP
Street People: A Case Study in Diseased Eyes

I’ve got to be up-front about my religious pedigree: conservative theological tradition that highlights the person and the soul. I direct an urban institute that works out of a “First Church” chummy with a long row of others all located along the once sedate Wilshire corridor of Los Angeles. In my neighborhood can be found a potpourri of human types and cultural flow that adds up to sensory overload.
With change have come the “street people,” a threat to some, an opportunity to others. They slip into my office or into worship services on a regular basis—a ragtag collection of individuals, but, in increasing number, entire families, tots toddling along behind. Some are hostile or demanding; others stammer their requests in shyness, embarrassed to find themselves in their regrettable fate. Many speak in heavy accents or through adopted interpreters, others in dialects, a few in tears.
The Culture of Poverty

The litany of need is agonizingly varied—a bus ticket to Phoenix, food for the children, a bed for the night, a jacket for warmth, a signature for a document, someone who just wants to talk. Some rant in the clouded confusions of their own mind. I’ve heard these called insensitively in the vernacular, “space cadets.” Yet I must admit that many times I am quite unsure where reality ends and imagination begins. In my despairing moments, I remind myself of St. Augustine’s maxim, “Every meeting is a divine encounter.”
In my town, perhaps 30,000 or more street people hang out as a phantom population, holed up in missions, alcoves, dark alleys, and beaches, sometimes damaged by the demonic effects of child abuse, drugs, and alcohol, or just a bad combination of low or high IQ, loss of job, divorce, heart attack, or bad fiscal decisions. They have dropped out of the bottom of the “security net.”
The Culture of Poverty

Our students once worked with Andrew. He is a latter day Rip Van Winkle, perhaps sixty-ish, flowing white beard, a twinkle in his pixie blue eyes. He doesn’t drive, smoke, or even eat hamburger meat. When I would get him french fries, he would try to pay me with his little stack of pennies and nickels. Church friends tried to salvage him, set him up in a tiny apartment, where he could receive social security checks. He was found later sleeping on an oil slick in an underground parking garage. Later he set up shop in the alcove across the street from the church under a pile of rags and newspapers, accompanied by his two grocery carts of personal belongings. Each morning, he ritualistically swept off the sidewalk and the sewer gutters as a part of his civic duty.
A friend of mine saw him and almost sneered, “If only he would accept Jesus Christ, he could get cleaned up and live more purposefully . . . like us.” I was impudent. “Maybe not; I think that he is a Christian.” “But he can’t be and live like that!” was the retort. Between you and me, I had trouble imagining Andrew, “cleaned up.”

And I reflected on Jesus. He was an itinerate prophet, and such were not reputable in Israel as productive members of society. He had no place to lay his head, gave no thought to tomorrow, and seems to have lived off of the good will of his friends. Furthermore, on occasion, he brusquely detached himself from his family. And to the temple moneychangers, whom he very much upset, he must have appeared to be a rude intruder. Could it be that Jesus was a street person?
Has Jesus sanctioned the middle class lifestyle as that which is most Christian? Or are we to follow him into his homelessness, into his “live for today” philosophy, where we just “hang loose?” Is the external material condition of anyone an adequate or appropriate measure for an honest expression of the gospel?
Recently, George Caywood, director of the Union Rescue Mission of Los Angeles, shared with me a conversation he had with one of the former street persons now involved in their Christian growth program. The gentleman had observed that street people generally go through a sequence of questions as they are seduced into the street lifestyle. For a variety of reasons, a person finds him or herself on the streets for the first time and contemplates: “Do people survive like this?” The more that he observes, the more he becomes convinced that the streets are a viable option. As he gets more personally involved in the lifestyle, he then asks the question: “Can I survive like this?” The option becomes a habit as he reinforces the conviction of his own survivability. The final, and most disastrous question is “What must I do to survive like this?” Once the person has entered the netherworld of this question, then the game of manipulation and the use of people as “things” is in full weed. The world no longer is made up of human beings but rather objects that only have meaning as they meet one’s physical necessities. Forget the upper layers of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs!
Again and again, in my encounters with street persons, I seek to find out who they are and ask lots of probing questions. And frequently they erupt with anger “I didn’t come in here to be quizzed. I came here to get . . ..” I try to talk to them about Christ and the Christian community, but their habits of manipulation are such that they hear little of what I say.
The sin, then, is less in the lifestyle than in the corruption of the eyes, eyes created in the image of God, intended to sparkle around the true personhood of others. Eyes that laugh when others laugh and weep when others weep. The tragedy is that those eyes damaged in stage three, are eyes so marred that they cannot see beyond their own needs. In the spectator’s eyes, the world becomes masked and dehumanized, only useful as a delivery system of survival. John 9 describes the healing of a street person, a beggar born blind. The miracle that unfolds is one not just of physical eyesight but of restored capacity to see people as humans again: “Tell me so that I may believe in him.” (Verse 35). It is not good enough just to see. The real miracle is to see people as Jesus sees them; in other words, through Jesus’ eyes.
Caywood’s informant gave me another important insight. The eyes of the most damaged street people are incapable of understanding and accepting the words and gestures of “I love you.” Their feelings are so numbed, their manipulative ways so honed, that genuine words of tenderness and care are dispassionately rejected or misunderstood in the grasp for material gain. Any relationship of this type is inherently deceptive and non-reciprocal.
However, the eyes do watch. They watch the language of love directed towards another. In time, those eyes assess and heal by watching carefully how love is expressed to others. Love to a third party in similar circumstances is more instructive than “in your face” love. Perhaps, we can call this exhibition of love, “indirect” or “oblique” love. The verse, “Behold, how the brethren love one another” is not just a sentimental description of how the church relates to itself. Rather, it is a poignant example of a creative process to strip the scales from the damaged eyes of those who can only understand love obliquely expressed. Key to this strategy are the dynamics of a loving community of believers who offer hospitality to others in a way that exhibits indirect love. Many churches, insular as they are, are too detached from street people to exhibit the power of a loving community.
Caywood shared with me this further insight. While ministering at the mission, he verbally handed out some bold “I love you’s.” One recipient, whom we will call Hugo, had never heard these words addressed to him before. They remained vacuous. However, as Hugo watched Caywood reinforce words with deeds to others, bit-by-bit the lessons of personhood and love took on positive content. After five years of living at the mission, Hugo announced abruptly that he was going home to care for his dying mother. Hugo’s story was not uncommon—child abuse, deprivation, never once hearing the words “I love you” from his mother. He felt a responsibility to care for her in her last agonizing months, but, even more, he dreamed of hearing her tell him just once, “I love you.” Sadly, she never did. But the power of the story is that, after never knowing what the words meant, a Christian community had so refashioned him that he could, for the first time, hunger for parental love even unrequited. From the paralysis of desensitization and dehumanization, he became a person who could see people as people again.
There is a final irony to this whole discussion. If street people can be diagnosed by the disease of their eyes, so, too, can Christians. The Christ that sees street people only as “lazy bums,” “dirty,” “should be banned from the neighborhood,” “a bunch of liars,” “riffraff,” “they’re out to get you every time,” “I’m sorry, we can’t help you at all”—these are the Christians who have depersonalized others to the point of being guilty of seeing people as things. And, like the Pharisees of John 9, they cynically sneer a modern version of “You were steeped sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!” (Verse 34). Jesus answers us with a warning: “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind” (verse 39).
For those of us who are trying to express God’s love to homeless people, street people provoke in us the litmus test of the quality of our own eyes. We who proclaim to see are called to touch, in healing ways, the eyes of those who yet cannot.
Culture of Poverty

Some Positive Aspects seen in the COP

• The capacity of spontaneity, adventure, playfulness and sensuality
• The enjoyment of the moment
• Less repression
• Varied outlets for hostility
• Reduced aspirations and therefore less frustration
Question of the Day:

What Culture was Jesus a part of? The Middle Class? The Culture of Poverty?
He was . . .

* leading citizen in the “Culture of the Kingdom”

What does that mean? What are its implications for us? What culture are we indoctrinating into our clients?
Culture of Poverty

Formal attitudes towards those in the culture of poverty

The “Liberals” say that the COP is a self-perpetuating sub-society, that it is disorganized, pathological and that it must be eliminated and assimilated into the Middle Class through social work, psychiatry and societal transformation.
The Marxists believe that the COP is an oppressed, sub-society, exploited by the higher classes, and that the pathologies have their source in the entire system which itself is pathological. It is in the interest of the power people to maintain their advantage over the COP. The entire structure of society must be radically changed, and only by revolution.

Marx: society-economics-ideas
Weber: ideas-societies-economics
The “Functionalists” say that the COP is a part of a heterogeneous society and that it is an adaptive sub-culture. As such it has not only pathological features but also healthy aspects. It expresses itself in different forms from ethnic group to ethnic group depending on its history. We need to increase resources available to the poor, and alter the total social structure. Often the COP influences new social movements or is a barometer of such.
What is the Christian perspective of the Culture of Poverty people? Case study of the Samaritan woman. (John 4)

- Jesus went out of his way into the hood
- Jesus took time out, tired, sitting
- He was alone (no posse around)
- He broke gender distinctions
- He asked for help (water)
- He violated social norms (talking to a woman)
- He remained somewhat mysterious, sort of God-like
- He used accessible dialogue
- He used practical metaphors (“water” as spiritual life)
- He offered hope (not moral codes or institutional propaganda)
- He saw her in context
- He saw her inner conflict
- He connected her with her religious heritage
- He leveraged the encounter as a social event
Culture of Poverty

What is Love?

1. Insight: not idealism, nor cynicism, but realism
2. Outrage: getting mad at the things that get God mad. Example: The abuse of “religious authorities” who make access to God too complicated and legalistic
3. Identification: Incarnation, hospitality offered that invites the stranger into one’s soul
Culture of Poverty

Story of the Matas: The family that adopted three abused children

The work of Christianizing someone out of the culture of poverty is multigenerational. If God has the patience to reveal his plan for salvation throughout the generations, why do we think we can perfect it over night?
Bounded, Centered and Fuzzy Sets:

Bounded Sets define people by, “I don’t smoke, I don’t chew, I don’t go with the boys that do.” A checkoff list of do’s and don’ts.

Centered Sets focus on movement towards or away from Christ, the “center point of a turning world.

Fuzzy Sets combine both elements.
Shame versus Guilt:

Guilt is sin before God; Shame is failure towards other human beings.

The Church is the greatest “guilt-reducing” mechanism; but it may also be the greatest shame-inducing institution.

Our problem: we mix up the two.

How can we reduce “shame”?
Culture of Poverty

Metaphor of Train entering and coming through the tunnel.

What railway car goes through first?
• The cognitive: my knowledge and understanding?
• The affective: my heart and emotions?
• The behavioral: my conduct and actions?

All of these may move in different sequence and each one is a faith decision. Full salvation is when they all come out into the light at the end of the tunnel.
Additional Suggestions:

1. Quit disparaging the culture of poverty. Recognize that there are things in it that critique our own false middle class values.
2. Let people articulate their pain and pathologies within the culture. Don’t do it for them.
3. Help them to form their own goals. The goal is to move them towards the values of the Kingdom which may be much different than middle class goals.
4. Don’t look for “worthy” recipients of your services. There are none. Nor were you worthy of Christ’s attentions and salvation.
5. Don’t establish unreal goals in unreal time frames. Leave the Holy Spirit with some work to do.
6. Avoid excessive or manipulate “love”: nonlovers; flirts; seducers; rapists; smother lovers; legalistic lovers and true lovers.
7. Your suggestions
1 Corinthians 13: A Paraphrase for Those Engaged in Compassionate Ministries

• What if I could talk in theological lingo and revel in religious jargon, but did not have compassion for others? My message would be nothing more than a noisy thud or an offensive clatter. What if I could spin all kinds of future scenarios, could expound the sharpest of intellectual arguments, could nail all questions of trivia? What if I could muster up mental powers that would remove all obstacles, but didn’t have compassion? I would be a zero, a nada. What if I burned myself out trying to solve problems of the poor or got zapped in the effort, but did not have a spirit of compassion? It would be a total waste.

• Compassion is willing to wait a long time; compassion treats people as they would want to be treated. Compassion is not roused to jealousy, it does not try to outdo others. Compassion doesn’t bulldoze over those less fortunate; it doesn’t draw attention to itself. It doesn’t get riled up, nor does it take note of others’ failures. Compassion finds no joy in bad events but is euphoric when good things happen. It always seeks to build walls of protection around the vulnerable, confidence around the insecure, a positive attitude around the discouraged, and resiliency around those have felt repeatedly abandoned.
• Compassion is never a lost cause. Oh yes, peering into the future has its definitive limits; speaking piously and powerfully will come inevitably to an end. And all paradigms and theories of human care will be dumped into the garbage bin. These “tricks of the trade” are rather superficial compared to the complete agenda which is yet to be presented. All these will ultimately fade away.

• When I was a kid, I prattled like one. I thought in juvenile ways. I reasoned immaturely. When I matured, I dumped these childish characteristics. Likewise, I admit that, in our present historical stage, what we see are confused, limited perceptions of reality and human need, but that one day, these things will become as transparently real as seeing each other’s face and the soul behind it. Right now, I don’t quite get it. But then I will, completely, even as others will, as they see the real “me” behind my face.

• Yes, there are the three pillars that will endure forever: faith, that is, to be convinced about that which is ultimately important in life; hope, that is, to anticipate and work towards its fulfillment; and compassion, that is, to embrace it with love and practical care. But when it is all said and done, compassion is at the very heart of it all.

Offered for discussion by Fletcher L. Tink, Nazarene Compassionate Ministries, International.
“Every meeting is a divine encounter.”

St. Augustine

“Every meeting is an exchange of gifts.”

St. Augustine