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CHAPTER 4

The ‘Situated Learning’ Reality of Generational Poverty: How It Impacts Navigation of One’s Life

Life is lived in common, but not in community.

–Michael Harrington, “The Invisible Land”
in *Four Horsemen*⁴⁸

Generational poverty is defined as having been in poverty for at least two generations; however, the patterns begin to surface much sooner than two generations if the family lives with others who are from generational poverty.

Situational poverty is defined as a lack of resources due to a particular event (i.e., a death, chronic illness, divorce, etc.). Unlike generational poverty, it is focused largely on monetary resources and can be a temporary situation. Individuals in situational poverty usually have other resources intact, including cultural and social capital, along with the ability to use formal register.

Generational poverty, in contrast, has its own culture, hidden rules, and belief systems.⁴⁹ A culture tends to be self-reinforcing—and includes a set of values transmitted from parent to child.⁵⁰

One of the key indicators of whether it’s generational or situational poverty is the prevailing attitude. Frequently the attitude in generational poverty is that society “owes me a living.” In situational poverty the attitude is often one of pride and a great reluctance (sometimes refusal) to accept charity.

What, then, makes generational poverty so different from the middle class? How is it that school is such an unsatisfactory experience for so many students from poverty?

Allison Boisvert, Justice and Charity Minister, Pax Christi Parish, Eden Prairie, Minnesota, goes so far as to say, “The generationally poor are usually as confined by their poverty as if they lived in a maximum security prison.”⁵¹

WHAT IS OFTEN PART OF THE REALITY OF GENERATIONAL POVERTY?

- Instability of housing
- Violence
- Food insecurity
- Unemployment/underemployment
- Unaddressed health issues
- Frequent exposure to addiction
- Predators (both inside and outside the group)
- Periodic homelessness
- Crowded housing/lack of personal space
- Incarceration
- Lots of time at agencies getting assistance
- Uneducated/undereducated adults
- Limited knowledge bases
- Death⁵²

To examine the differences, a case study will be used.

CASE STUDY: WALTER (Caucasian male)

The following was an actual court case heard in Houston, Texas, in March 1995. *Italicized type* indicates what came out in the trial; plain print indicates the kinds of comments that might be made by others in generational poverty. Names have been changed to protect the girl.

AS THE STORY WOULD BE TOLD IN POVERTY ... PROBABLY BY A RELATIVE OR NEIGHBOR

Well, you know Walter got put away for 37 years. Him being 48 and all. He'll probably die in jail. Just couldn't leave his hands off that 12-year-old Susie.

Dirty old man. Bodding's gonna whup his tail.

Already did. You know Bodding was waiting for him in jail and beat the living daylights out of him.

In jail?

Yeah, Bodding got caught for possession. Had \$12,000 on him when they arrested him.

Golly, wish I had been there to cash in!!!! (laughter) A man's gotta make a living!

Susie being blind and all—I can see why Bodding beat the daylights out of Walter. Lucky he didn't get killed, old Walter is.

Too bad her momma is no good.

She started the whole thing! Susie's momma goes over there and argues with Bodding.

Ain't they divorced?

Yeah, and she's got Walter working for her, repairing her house or something.

Or something, I bet. What's she got in her house that's worth fixing?

Anyway, she goes over to Bodding's house to take the lawnmower ...

I reckon so as Walter can mow the yard?? I bet that's the first time old Walter has ever broken a sweat! Reminds me of the time I saw Walter thinking about taking a job. All that thinking, and he had to get drunk. He went to jail that time, too—a felony, I think it was. So many of those DWIs. Judge told him he was egregious. Walter said he wasn't greasy—he took a bath last week!!! (laughter)

Bodding and Susie's momma got in a fight, so she tells Walter to take Susie with him.

Lordy, her elevator must not go all the way to the top!! Didn't she know about him getting arrested for enticing a minor???

With Susie blind and all. And she sends Susie with Walter?

She sure don't care about her babies.

Well, Walter's momma was there 'cause Walter lives with his momma, seeing as how he can't keep no job.

Ain't his other brother there?

Yeah, and him 41 years old. That poor momma sure has her burdens to bear. And then her 30-year-old daughter, Susie's momma, at home too. You know Susie's momma lost custody of her kids. Walter gets these videos, you know. Those adult videos. Heavy breathing! (laughter)

Some of them are more fun to listen to than look at! (laughter) Those people in the videos are des-per-ate!!

Anyway, he puts those on and then carries Susie to his room and tells her she wants him—and describes all his sex-u-al exploits!!

Golly, he must be a looooooooooover. (laughter) He should be shot. I'd kill him if he did that to my kid!!

Then he lets his fingers do the walking.

Kinda like the Yellow Pages! (laughter)

I guess he didn't do anything with his "thang," according to Miss Rosie who went to that trial every day. And Susie begging him to stop so many times.

Probably couldn't do anything with it; that's why he needs to listen to that heavy breathing! Pant! Pant! (laughter) What a no-count, low-down creep. I'll pay Bodding to kill him!!

Bodding says the only way Walter is coming out of jail is in a pine box.

Don't blame him myself.

Yeah, Miss Rosie said Walter's momma said at the trial that the door to Walter's room was open, and there ain't no way Walter could have done that. That she is a good Christian momma and she don't put up with that.

Oh Lordy, did God strike her dead on the spot, or is she still alive??? I'd be afraid of ending up in eternal damnation for telling a story like that!

Miss Rosie said her 12-year-old nephew testified that the door was closed and his grandma told him to say it was open!!!!

Ooo! Ooo! Oooo! That poor baby tells the truth? His grandma's gonna make him mis-er-a-ble!!!

And then Walter's momma tells that jury that she never allows those adult videos in her house, leastways not that she pays for them!! (lots of laughter)

I bet the judge bit on that one!! How is Walter gonna get videos except for her money? Mowing yards? (more laughter) No, I bet he saves his pennies!! (laughter)

All these years she has covered for Walter. Guess she just couldn't cover no more.

Remember that time Walter got drunk and wrecked her car, and she said she was driving? And she was at the hospital at the time with a broken leg. And the judge asked her how she could be driving and in the hospital "simultaneously." And she said that's just how it was—simultaneously—she had never felt so excited in her life. (laughter) Who turned Walter in?

Well, it wasn't Susie's momma. She was busy with Skeeter, her new boyfriend. I hear he's something.

Remember that one boyfriend she had? Thought he was so smart?

Speaking of smart, that Susie sure is. Her blind and all, and she won the district spelling bee for the seventh grade this year. I hear she's in National Honor Society, whatever that is.

Wonder if it's kinda like the country club. Instead of playing golf, you just spell!!!! (laughter)

Susie calls this friend of hers who tells her mother and they come and get her and take her to the police and hospital.

Some rich lady, not minding her own business, that's for sure.

Well, it was a good thing for Susie, 'cause that momma of hers sure ain't good for Susie. She don't deserve a kid like Susie. SHE oughta be the one who's blind.

Ain't that the truth. Way I see it, she already is. Just look at Skeeter!! (gales of laughter)

What actually happened was this:

Walter was the uncle of Susie, a 12-year-old, very intelligent, blind girl. Walter was Susie's mother's brother. Bodding was not Susie's biological father but a stepfather. Bodding and Susie's mother got into an argument over a lawnmower. Susie's mother sent Susie to her mother's house (Grandma) so that Walter and Bodding wouldn't get into a fight. At the house, Walter takes Susie into his bedroom, shuts the door, and molests her.

Knowing that her grandma will take Walter's side, Susie waits until the next day when Walter takes her and her two cousins to the Houston zoo. She makes a phone call to a girlfriend. The girlfriend's mother comes and picks her up at the zoo. The girlfriend's mother reports the incident to the police who pick up Walter.

In the meantime, Bodding has been arrested for having \$12,000 in cash on him and drugs. When Walter gets put in jail, Bodding arranges to have Walter surrounded by men, and Bodding beats him up before jail security can break up the fight.

In the trial, the lawyer for Walter states that Susie liked Walter's advances because she didn't report the assault until the next day at the zoo. Susie had no way to get to safety at Grandma's, so she had to wait until the next day to report it. Walter was sentenced to 37 years in prison.

NOTE: Many middle-class readers of this story have been offended at the humor involved and the seemingly crass acceptance of the situation. Actually the humor is a way to mask the deep pain and disgust for what happened.

WHAT PATTERNS ARE OFTEN PRESENT IN GENERATIONAL POVERTY?

NOTE: The following items constitute patterns; they certainly wouldn't apply in every household of generational poverty.

- Background “noise”:** Almost always the TV is on, no matter what the circumstances. Conversation is participatory, often with more than one person talking at a time.⁵³
- Importance of personality:** Individual personality is what one brings to the setting—because money is seldom brought. The ability to entertain, tell stories, and have a sense of humor are highly valued.

- ❑ **Significance of entertainment:** When one is merely surviving, then respite from survival mode is important. Indeed, entertainment brings that respite.
- ❑ **Importance of relationships:** One has only people on whom to rely, and those relationships are important to survival. One often has favorites.⁵⁴
- ❑ **Matriarchal structure:** The mother has the most powerful position in generational poverty, especially when she functions as a caretaker.⁵⁵
- ❑ **Oral-language tradition:** Casual register is used for just about everything.⁵⁶
- ❑ **Survival orientation:** There tends to be little room for the abstract and minimal discussion of academic topics; most conversations center around people and relationships. A job is about making enough money to survive. A job is not about a career (e.g., “I was looking for a job when I found this one”).⁵⁷
- ❑ **Identity for men tied to lover/fighter role:** The key issue for males is to be a “man.” The rules are rigid, and a man is expected to work hard physically—and be a lover and a fighter.⁵⁸
- ❑ **Identity for women tied to rescuer/martyr role:** A “good” woman is expected to take care of and rescue her man and her children as needed.
- ❑ **Importance of nonverbal/kinesthetic communication:** Touch is used to communicate, as are space and nonverbal emotional information.⁵⁹
- ❑ **Ownership of people:** People are possessions. There’s a great deal of fear and comment about leaving the neighborhood/culture and “getting above your raisings.”
- ❑ **Negative orientation:** Failure at anything is the source of stories and numerous belittling comments.
- ❑ **Discipline:** Punishment is usually about penance and forgiveness, not change.
- ❑ **Belief in fate:** Destiny and fate are the major tenets of the belief system. Choice is seldom considered.⁶⁰
- ❑ **Polarized thinking:** Nuanced options on the continuum are hardly ever examined. Just about everything is polarized; it is one way or the other. The concept of “gray areas” seldom enters the picture. These kinds of statements are common: “I quit,” “I can’t do it,” and “He’s just plain no good.”

- ❑ **Mating dance:** The mating dance is about using the body in a sexual way, as well as verbally and nonverbally complimenting (or criticizing) body parts. If you have few financial resources, the way you sexually attract someone is with your body.
- ❑ **Time:** Time occurs only in the present. The future doesn't exist—except as a word. Time is flexible and not measured. Time is often assigned on the basis of the emotional significance and not the actual measured time.
- ❑ **Sense of humor:** A sense of humor is highly valued, as entertainment is one of the key aspects of poverty. Humor is almost always about people—either situations that people encounter or things people do to other people.
- ❑ **Lack of order/organization:** Many of the homes/apartments of people in poverty are unkempt and cluttered. Devices for organization (files, planners, etc.) scarcely exist.⁶¹
- ❑ **Living in the moment:** Being proactive, setting goals, and planning ahead are not a part of generational poverty. Most of what occurs is reactive and in the moment. Future ramifications of present actions are seldom considered.⁶²

Even in telling me some of those stories that involve a great deal of humiliation at the hands of hospital or welfare personnel, she usually manages to find something that's funny in the madness of it all and keeps on saying things that make both of us laugh [in describing Mrs. Washington].

—Jonathan Kozol, *Amazing Grace*⁶³
