



THE ANTI-POVERTY SOLDIER

By Clarence Hightower, Ph.D.



Community Action

The dehumanization of humanity

Poverty is not a partisan issue; it is a human one.

June 22, 2017 | Vol. 4 No. 25

To get away from poverty, you need several things at the same time: school, health, and infrastructure - those are the public investments. And on the other side, you need market opportunities, information, employment, and human rights.

- Hans Rosling

The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.

- President Franklin D. Roosevelt

As I scour various media outlets these days, I frequently notice analogous quotations that state something like “Medicaid is not a partisan issue, it is a human issue.” That particular example comes from Linda Rosenberg, President and CEO of the National Council for Behavioral Health.

However, someone could, as several already have, replace the word Medicaid with words such as public education, healthcare, the environment, or even poverty. But as ideological squabbles and partisan posturing continue to ascend to absurd levels in our nation, I can’t help but be reminded of sociologist Daniel Bell’s 1960 classic *The End of Ideology*.

Bell’s premise was that in the emerging post-industrial world the dominant ideologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries such as socialism, liberalism, and

conservatism will give way to more pragmatic solutions to social problems. In spite of Bell’s intellectual influence, as *The Economist* notes he “could hardly have been more unlucky with his timing,” adding that “If the 1950s was a graveyard of ideologies, the 1960s proved to be a breeding ground.”

And, to that point, it would seem that ideological attachments and the subsequent divisions intensified for the better part of the next half-century. Now there was a time when someone might articulate their ideological bent or party affiliation based on a particular set of principles or values. However, I am not sure that is the case anymore. It appears to me that our political discourse has devolved into nothing more than tribal mentalities or an “us against them” approach. Principles are easily ignored or altogether discarded in favor of “whatever is required to help ‘my team’ win.” So again, something like poverty is no longer seen as a human issue, but as a “minority” problem, an “urban” problem, or a “liberal” problem.

In the most recent episode of the CNN documentary series “United Shades of America”, comedian W. Kamau Bell visits several towns along the Appalachian Valley in eastern Kentucky. Among these towns is Beattyville, which has the third lowest median household income in the nation and was recently given the distinction as “America’s poorest white town.” As Bell interviewed Beattyville City Councilmember Missy Begley as they walked along Main Street, passing the storefront of Middle Kentucky Community Action Partnership, I thought about what had come of this town.

Like all the towns Bell visited, Beattyville’s economy was historically based on coal-mining and has since

been decimated. That said, just about every one of the laid-off coal miners that Bell interviewed admitted that the coal industry was essentially gone forever. These former miners also agreed, by and large, that coal was not good for the environment anyway. They just needed a job. Then one of them said something I won't soon forget. He mentioned that for more than a century towns like Beattyville helped power this country from coast to coast. And while coal may be a thing of the past, that doesn't diminish the service and sacrifice that coal miners made in the advancement of America.

Today, however, it seems as if they and their contributions have been forgotten, which is relatively comparable to urban hubs such as Detroit, Flint, South Bend, and Sandusky, where the auto industry once ruled. Or other Rust Belt manufacturing centers in the Midwest and Northeast, where American workers helped generate billions upon billions of dollars for American corporations. What has become of those communities in 2017?

So that is why poverty can never be a black/white issue, a liberal/conservative issue, or an urban/rural issue? It is all of those things and more. More than anything it is a human issue, and for that matter, a human rights issue.

The poet Kahlil Gibran famously proclaimed, "Spare me the political events and power struggles, as the whole earth is my homeland and all men are my fellow countrymen." Disregarding the patriarchal language of his era, Gibran spoke to something greater than himself; the love and care of others. And the love and care of others is nothing more than a matter of conscience, compassion, and character. When we tolerate poverty and dehumanize the poor, we diminish ourselves as well.

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