

Generations

A little space, a half gallon of milk

According to Michael Zweig's book, "What's Class Got to Do With It, American Society in the Twenty-first Century," poverty is a state of deprivation, or a lack of the usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions.

According to another source, most Americans will spend at least one year below the poverty line at some point between ages



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25 and 75. Now, that fact surprised me, but witnessing poverty at different levels doesn't.

I was blessed to have a very good life with a roof over my head, clothes and something nourishing to eat. My mom told me that when my dad came home after World War II and they got married, they had about \$25 between them. When I made my debut into the world, they used a dresser drawer for my crib. Dad worked a third graveyard shift at Grumman's and saved enough to move me, my brother and Mom from Queens, New York, to Long Island. My parents told us that our new, \$15,000, split-level home had been built on a potato field. All I knew was that I now had my own room and a backyard.

Although I didn't personally experience poverty, I sure witnessed it firsthand when, in 1969, I joined the Peace Corps and traveled to West Africa. I could tell you many stories about the tin shacks, grass huts, street markets, beggars and lepers, shoeless children, etc., but the one encounter that has always stayed with me is with an Indian man I met while in Nigeria. A friend had told me that the man had moved into a tin-roofed shack near where I lived.

One afternoon, I peeked into an open window and saw a man curled up and sleeping on the concrete floor with not a stitch of furniture or anything else in the room. He jumped up when he spotted me and, assuming it was my shack, begged me to let him sleep there. I quieted him down, reassuring him that he could stay, and he smiled.

"It is beautiful, no?" he asked.

"Yes," I said slowly, glancing around again and seeing nothing. "But, excuse me, you have nothing here."

"Ah, true," he said, "but at least I have space here for me! I am a very fortunate man."

I understood immediately what he meant. Back in India, his hometown was most likely heavily populated, and many people share whatever is available. Space is a luxury. I brought him pillows and blankets to add to his new home the next day. He protested at first and then finally accepted them.

Forty-seven years later, I approached a man standing at the meat counter of a Morganton Food Lion. In my cart were a can of expensive Planters cashews, a bag of fresh cherries and an \$8 coconut custard pie for my husband. As I reached for the top-round steak, the man next to me reached for a marked-down package of pork chops.

"Look at this price!" he exclaimed. "I can't remember the last time I had pork chops. They cut my food stamps again and my Social Security. But if I buy a quart of milk instead of a half gallon, I'll have enough."

"These are tough times," I said, shoving my cart of luxurious items off to the side.

"Yes, they are," he said, "but today, I'm going to make do and have pork chops."

I watched the man make his way over to the dairy and remembered the Indian man. He had wanted space, and this man wanted discounted pork chops. Simple pleasures, and in a perfect world, they should both have been able to have them.

I removed \$20 from my purse, walked over and handed it to him. He protested, but I smiled and said quickly: "I met a man once who only wanted space. Please take this. It's important to me."

I hurried out of the store, leaving my cart behind. It would be a hot-dog or hamburger night for us, but that would be just fine.

Poverty comes in many forms, but the most palatable form of all is when it no longer exists.

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