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What we can learn from people in poverty

By Jo Kadlecek

Illustration by Kim Kauffman

Grandma Pearl was 61 years old when I first met her in the inner-city neighborhood we both called home. She didn't own a car or a house, hadn't held a job in years because of her arthritis, and relied almost entirely on government aid to pay for her rent, medication, and food bills. To those of us who had grown up on the suburban side of town, Grandma Pearl was "poor."

Poor woman, I used to think as I watched her run the tiny three-bedroom home where Pearl, her niece, her granddaughter, and visiting relatives lived. Her adopted daughter with her seven children lived next door. I lived across the street, wanting desperately to perform some praiseworthy act of Christian charity in the midst of this urban turmoil. I had a lot to learn.

I visited Grandma Pearl as often as I could, playing with the grandbabies who gathered around her feet. The role of baby-sitter fell frequently on her while her adult children went hunting for daily work. But she never seemed to mind. She had enough love to go around, she'd tell me as a toothless smile stretched over her wrinkled brown face.

"Baby," she would call to everyone who passed her porch, "my Jesus, He done good by me and I'se prayin' He be good to you, too." Friends stopped often at Grandma Pearl's. If they were hungry, she would cook; if they were discouraged, she would listen. If they needed direction, she would glance at her huge family Bible, the source of her wisdom verbally dispensed in bite-sized pieces of encouragement to "keep on; stay pure, Baby; and rejoice in the Lawd."

Rejoice she did, every day. In spite of her economic poverty, her failing health, and her difficult surroundings, Grandma Pearl rejoiced in Jesus. Many times she would wrap her soft, stiff fingers around my snow white ones and pray for me: "Girls likes you can't be too careful around here," she would whisper in my ear. "You need some angels, honey." I know now that each prayer of hers pushed back a bit of darkness on our often troubled block. And I soon realized that this "poor" woman personified the type of Christian neighbor I hoped to become.

When she died a few years later of heart failure, I was the only white person at her funeral. I needed to be there: Grandma Pearl had prayed for me and taught me about giving in the midst of poverty. Once I had hoped to help her family overcome their painful plight; instead, she helped me see my great need for the light of "her Jesus," a light that uncovers the poverty of a soul in need of grace.

Grandma Pearl's real poverty, and real faith, touches the identity of every Christian who sits in a world different from hers. She was a personal example to me of what it means to "love God and our neighbors." Yet we rarely view the "poor" as role models, as people who can make a difference in other people's lives like Pearl did in mine.

Could it be that we too often link a person's economic status with his worth and abilities? Are we so consumed with the American Dream of accumulating wealth, and of esteeming those who attain it, that we overlook the rich contributions many in poverty can, and do, make daily to their communities? What Pearl taught me was that economically impoverished does not have to mean impotent, incompetent, or incapable of giving the world great things. That's why I believe those of us who "have" can learn much from those who "have not." To think otherwise is arrogant and sinful. In fact, I've consistently seen the "poor" exhibit five Christian attributes worthy of emulating.

1. Generosity

As I have lived and worked in poor urban communities for the past seven years, I've been overwhelmed by the charity of many of my neighbors. People with so little are quick to include me at dinner time. Like Grandma Pearl, these friends give out of who they are. They know real wealth lies not in what you own but in what you give.

Consider the example of 87-year-old Oseola McCarty. Last fall, she surprised the nation when she donated \$150,000 to the University of Southern Mississippi to establish a scholarship fund for black students. The school often receives donations of this size, so what was the big deal? Simple: Miss McCarty earned the money from washing clothes for local residents during the past 75 years. Instead of owning a big house or buying new clothes, she saved her money because she just wanted to "help black kids get an education." Her gift stimulated a nationwide response of over \$33,000 in additional contributions. Her charity even sparked a letter from President Clinton for her "unselfish deed . . . a

remarkable example of the spirit and ingenuity that made America great.”

“I’m glad I paid my donation to them,” said the laundry woman who claims her only education is from the Bible. “If I had any more, I’d give it to them, too.”

A modern day Good Samaritan? Exactly. In Lk. 10:30–37, Jesus esteemed the Samaritan, a social outcast, as an example for living a lifestyle of charity. Samaritans were lower-class citizens primarily because they were despised by the Jews and rejected by the religious leaders of their time. But who was it in this parable who stopped to help the man beaten by robbers and left to die? Not the super-spiritual priests or the wealthy Levites, but a Samaritan. Jesus said to the experts of the law, “Go and do likewise.” And in Lk. 21:1–4, it was not the rich whom Jesus held up as an example of giving, but the poor widow who “out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.”

2. Work Ethic

Very often, those in great need know how to give in great proportions; they also learn to work hard. Contrary to popular belief, many caught in poverty are not lazy. They often have a stronger work ethic than those who are much better off. Paul tells us in 1 Thess. 5:12 “to respect those who work hard among [us].” Maybe that’s why friends who visit developing countries on short-term mission trips always tell me how impressed they are with these poor families “who give so much, have so little, and work so hard.”

Sure, there are some welfare recipients who “leech” off the system, just as there are many wealthy and middle class individuals who cheat the government by not paying taxes. But most experts call the “poor” hard-working people who have simply come on hard times.

My friend Edith, a widow raising six kids, is a good example. She is a second generation welfare mother who was forced to drop out of high school because of family and chronic health problems. But that doesn’t stop her from working hard every day. She oversees her children’s daily chores, works two days a week in her church’s food pantry, and volunteers regularly at her children’s schools and the local rescue mission. She also baby-sits for her neighbors who couldn’t otherwise afford day care while they work. Edith doesn’t have the skills, the health, or the options to get the kind of work that could support six children. Yet, she dreams of getting “a real job someday.” In the meantime, she says, “I try to set a good example for my children by working hard every day and by helping people.”

But perhaps America’s migrant workers reflect this work ethic best. From sunrise to sunset, they work in atrocious conditions, performing jobs few Americans want, only to go home to shacks crowded with family members. (Most suburbanites like me wouldn’t last a day in the fields where they work!) Still, they say, life in America is better than “back home.” In fact, many actually send money to relatives in their home country.

3. Community

Former Virginia Secretary of Health Kay Coles James writes in her autobiography, *Never Forget*, about growing up poor in government housing projects. She tells of never going very far from home because all her neighbors knew her name and would tell her mamma!

Many families in poverty have a strong sense of community: Neighbors watch out for each other and extended family is a priority. In my white suburban background, most of us stayed in our backyards, far apart from each other and our relatives.

“Don’t talk to strangers,” I was taught. But to the urban poor especially, “strangers” are potential friends, members of the same community. When a dilapidated inner-city home of an elderly woman was literally crumbling, two young African American men walking by risked their lives to pull her to safety. When children in one housing project weren’t doing well in school, parents organized an after-school study hall. And when my own home got broken into, several neighbors dropped what they were doing to encourage me and help me clean up the mess.

This type of community I have seen so often in urban neighborhoods sets a good example for all Christians. In 1 Tim. 6:17–19, Paul exhorts Timothy to “command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, . . . [but] to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.” Notice he didn’t tell Timothy to command the “poor” to be rich in good deeds, probably because they already were “generous and willing to share.” They live community, and so have taken “hold of the life that is truly life.”

4. Perseverance

Many who have to struggle with the daily pressures of poverty also have the opportunity to develop perseverance. Paul understood this principle: “We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance” (Ro. 5:3). As one urban teacher told me, her low-income junior high students are the most resilient, accepting people she knows: “They just never quit.”

Consider, too, Mrs. Hobson, a widowed mother of three living in one of the poorest states in the country: Mississippi. All her life she has known want. As an adult, she cannot afford a car and there is no public transportation in the high-crime neighborhood where she lives. Yet, she is a model to her neighbors

and friends at church. Why? Because each morning for the past several years, Mrs. Hobson has left her house at 6:30 a.m. to walk five miles downtown to her maintenance job at the city water department. When she gets off at 5 p.m., she walks back home. Then she studies for nursing school, and encourages her children to study, too. One friend calls her “one of the most persevering people I know. No obstacles seem to discourage Mrs. Hobson. A lot of people in this neighborhood wouldn’t have taken a job so far away with no car—but it never stopped her.”

Yes, perseverance historically has produced good fruit: Francis of Assisi gave up his wealth, entered a life of absolute poverty, and birthed the order of Franciscan Monks that continues today. John Bunyan, born into a poor family, produced the Christian classic *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Mother Teresa so identified with the “poorest of the poor” that thousands of people have been helped through her ministry. Though Jerald January was born into a poor urban family in Detroit, he persevered in his faith and today heads the U.S. urban arm of Compassion International, a ministry helping thousands of children in poverty around the world.

5. Great Faith

Without question, those in poverty experience pain, suffering, and injustice that many of us could not endure. But somehow from their poverty is birthed great perseverance and greater faith. Missionaries throughout Africa and the Middle East are reporting incredible miracles among Christians there. These people, they say, are not distracted by the woes of wealth and so can believe God for great things. Many even pray for Americans because of our great materialism! “Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?” (Jas. 2:5).

I am not saying that all people living in poverty are great role models in their communities, just as I would never suggest that all Christians are good witnesses to the unbelieving world. But more often than the media reports, those who are “poor” exhibit exuberant charity, a strong work ethic, an integral sense of community, unswerving perseverance, and rich faith—qualities I long for.

Jo Kadlecik is a freelance writer living in New York City. She wrote this article because “too often we think only those with big bucks can make a lasting impact on our culture. I have seen many ‘low-income’ heroes make incredible contributions.” Jo recently co-wrote *Resurrecting Hope* (Regal, 1995) with John Perkins.

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