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No longer the land of opportunity

By NICHOLAS KRISTOF
New York Times News Service

YAMHILL — We like to boast of America as the “land of opportunity,” and historically there is truth to that.

“We have never been a nation of haves and have-nots,” Sen. Marco Rubio once declared. “We are a nation of haves and soon-to-haves, of people who have made it and of people who will make it.”

That’s a lovely aspiration, the vision that brought Rubio’s father to the United States — and my father, too. Yet I fear that by 2015 we’ve become the socially rigid society our forebears fled, replicating the barriers and class gaps that drove them away. That’s what the presidential candidates should be debating.

Researchers have repeatedly found that in the United States, there is now less economic mobility than in Canada or much of Europe. A child born in the bottom quintile of incomes in the United States has only a 4 percent chance of rising to the top quintile, according to a Pew study. A separate (somewhat dated) study found that in Britain, such a boy has about a 12 percent chance.

By another measure, “inter-generational income elasticity,” social mobility is twice as great for Canada as for the United States.

Alan Krueger, a Princeton economist, has noted that in the United States, parents’ incomes correlate to their adult children’s incomes roughly as heights do. “The chance of a person who was born to a family in the bottom 10 percent of the income distribution rising to the top 10 percent as an adult is about the same as the chance that a dad who is 5 feet 6 inches tall having a son who grows up to be over 6 feet 1 inch tall,” Krueger observed in a speech. “It happens, but not often.”

I’ve been reflecting on this because of a friend in my hometown, Yamhill. Rick Goff was smart, talented and hardworking, but he faced an uphill struggle from birth; I wrote about him last year as an example of the aphorism that “talent is universal, but opportunity is not.”

And now Rick is dead. He died of heart disease last month in his home in Yamhill at age 65.

I visited him the day before he died, as he was pained and struggling to walk, and I keep thinking of his prodigious talents that were never fully deployed because, in the United States, too often the best predictor of where we end up is where we start.

Rick, who thought he was one-eighth American Indian, pretty much raised himself, along with his brother and two sisters. His mom died when he was 5, and his dad — “a professional drunk,” Rick once told me — abandoned the family. A grandmother presided, and the kids hunted and fished to put food on the table.

School might have been an escalator to a better life, for Rick had a terrific mind, but as a boy he had an undiagnosed attention deficit disorder and teachers wrote him off. In the eighth grade, the principal punished Rick for skipping school, by suspending him for six months. Rick was thrilled. By 10th grade he had dropped out for good.

Rick worked in lumber mills and machine shops, then became a talented custom painter of cars. After his hand was mangled in an accident, he survived on disability and odd jobs. His phone worked when he had enough money to pay the bills.

He married twice and divorced twice, raised children as a single dad, and was a loyal friend to everyone around. A few years ago, Rick was slowly mending from a serious illness, dependent on a crucial medicine. Then he abruptly weakened and had to be hospitalized.

It turned out that his ex-wife’s car had been towed and she had needed to pay a fee to get it back. So Rick had given her \$600 and skipped the medicine. That’s what put him in the hospital.

And, yes, that was for his EX-wife. Last year, I wrote a series titled “When Whites Just Don’t Get It,” about race gaps (the reaction was not entirely enthusiastic!). I also think that many successful Americans “don’t get” the income gulf.

Sean Reardon of Stanford University has calculated that the race gap in student test scores has diminished, but that the class gap has widened. A half-century ago, the black-white test score gap was 50 percent greater than the gap between the richest 10 percent and the poorest 10 percent. Now it is the other way around, with the class gap almost twice that of the race gap.

Consider that 77 percent of adults in the top 25 percent of incomes earn a B.A. by age 24. Only 9 percent of those in the bottom 25 percent do so.

Yet as Tim Wise notes in a forthcoming book, “Under the Affluence,” there’s an “increasingly vituperative



Nicholas Kristof

narrative of cruelty” to those at the bottom.

The musician Ted Nugent once suggested that the “takers” in society are “entitlement chumps” and “gluttonous, soulless pigs.” The conservative author Neal Boortz compared the poor to toenail fungus.

Sure, entitlements are a legitimate issue for debate. But if you’re troubled

by publicly subsidized meals, what about the \$12 billion in annual tax subsidies for corporate meals and entertainment? And if you want to see a real scam, how about those zillionaires who claim huge tax deductions for donating art to their own nonprofit museums, which aren’t even open to people dropping by?

I hear from people who say something like: I grew up poor, but I worked hard and I made it. If other people tried, they could, too. Bravo! Sure, there are extraordinary people who have overcome mind-boggling hurdles. But they’re like the NBA centers with short parents.

Remember that disadvantage is less about income than environment. The best metrics of child poverty aren’t monetary, but rather how often a child is read to or hugged. Or, conversely, how often a child is beaten, how often the home descends into alcohol-fueled fistfights, whether there is lead poisoning, whether ear infections go untreated. That’s a poverty that is far harder to escape.

Some think success is all about “choices” and “personal responsibility.” Yes, those are real, but it’s so much more complicated than that.

“Rich kids make a lot of bad choices,” Reardon notes. “They just don’t come with the same sort of consequences.”

Rick acknowledged that he had made bad choices. He drank, took drugs and was arrested about 30 times. But he also found the strength to give up alcohol when he felt he was turning into his father. What distinguished Rick wasn’t primarily bad choices, but intelligence, hard work and lack of opportunity.

So let’s just drop the social Darwinism. Success is not a sign of virtue. It’s mostly a sign that your grandparents did well.

Meanwhile, more children in America live in poverty now (22 percent at last count) than at the start of the financial crisis in 2008 (18 percent). They grow up not in a “land of opportunity,” but in the kind of socially rigid hierarchies that our ancestors fled, the kind of society in which your outcome is largely determined by your beginning.

Now, that’s what the presidential candidates should be discussing.



Where are Sanders, Trump leading us?

Wyden says Sanders is ‘real,’ writer says Trump is P.T. Barnum

Bernie Sanders brought his phenomenon to the Pacific Northwest over the weekend. On Saturday his outdoor rally in Seattle was hijacked by Black Lives Matter organizers, but he subsequently drew a crowd indoors. In Portland, the insurgent Democratic presidential candidate drew his biggest crowd ever — 28,000 in the Rose Garden — 20,000 inside and 8,000 standing outside.

In the same week, the Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump dominated the party’s first debate by breaking new ground on the topic of misogyny.

Sanders and Trump are an interesting pair. Is Sanders akin to Eugene McCarthy in 1968, who forced President Lyndon Johnson into retirement? Is Trump a new version of Ross Perot, who drained GOP votes in the 1992 general election, or is he an updated version of George Wallace, who fed right-wing voters’ base instincts?

When asked last week if he were a “Bernie Sanders Democrat,” Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden said: “Bernie is real.” Therein lies the essential difference between the liberal outlier and the right wing bomb-thrower.

Sen. Sanders’ epic December 2010 Senate speech on income inequality is the bedrock of what the man believes. Sanders’ straight talk is a threat to Clinton, who has a hard time giving us a consistent story line.

In “Donald Trump’s Sales Pitch,” *The New Yorker’s* James Surowiecki likens Trump to P.T. Barnum, who understood that you have say increasingly outlandish things to get the public’s attention.

Neither Sanders nor Trump may persist as major party nominees. But they will assuredly change the course of history in 2016. Campaigns are the prelude to government. While Sanders’ rhetoric leads to substantive policy initiatives, Trump’s insults seem only to feed grudges.

Remember that disadvantage is less about income than environment.

Wildfire: It takes an engaged community

There is no remaining doubt this is a year for the record books when it comes to lack of rainfall. Recent wildfires are a vivid testimonial to dangerous conditions.

Pacific County, Wash., is now a federally designated primary drought disaster location. Clatsop County and Washington’s Wahkiakum County are eligible for federal benefits because of being “contiguous” to disaster areas. Roughly the northern half of Pacific County is classified as being in “extreme” drought, while the remainder of lands in the vicinity of the Columbia River estuary are in the slightly better classification of “severe” drought.

Despite minor showers and drizzle this week, it’s probably only a matter of time before the entire Columbia-Pacific region slips into the “extreme” category. We are still more than seven weeks away from the Oct. 1 start of the official new “water year.” More hot, dry weather is predicted for August, “and the long-term forecast is calling for a strong El Niño weather pattern to continue into next year. If accurate, this will mean another low snowpack and another year of drought,” according to state officials.

All this draws strong attention to the importance of local professional and volunteer firefighters in our counties. It doesn’t take any expertise to see that grass, brush and leaves are primed to burst in flames if exposed to any source of combustion. This can be a cigarette butt carelessly discarded from a passing vehicle, a spark thrown by a mower blade striking a rock, lightning or even the rapid oxidation of hay on a sunny afternoon. Fireworks and open campfires are other sources of obvious risk. Campfires must only be built in designated places, while fireworks are illegal this time

of year. Immediately report any violations to proper authorities.

Serious fires in our vicinity illustrate how fast an emergency can develop and how much we depend on a rapid, well-trained response by firefighters. On Aug. 3, a fire blew up near the northwestern tip of Fort Stevens State Park and a west wind pushed it into shore pines and driftwood. Firefighters from the Warrenton Fire Department and Oregon Department of Forestry quickly arrived and kept the situation from getting out of hand. On Aug. 9, Pacific County Fire District No. 1 and the Long Beach Volunteer Fire Department rushed to douse a grassfire that was threatening nearby buildings and forestland. Local departments have also dealt with other, less dramatic wildfires in recent weeks.

This highlights the ongoing need for fire-suppression training, funding and public support. Though no society can afford to be permanently prepared for every disaster scenario, here in this usually moist place we will have to be especially vigilant as the prospect of long droughts elevates the risk of life-threatening situations.

Aside from supporting local firefighters, we all can help improve safety by keeping flammable vegetation away from homes and other structures, developing Community Wildfire Protection Plans and avoiding potentially risky behaviors. Report fires immediately, since early intervention is key to keeping them manageable. Keep a hose or fire extinguisher handy when working outdoors.

We’ll get through this. The rains will return. But for now, we need everyone to pay close attention. Fast reporting and action can save property and lives.

‘Black Lives Matter’ and the GOP

By CHARLES M. BLOW
New York Times News Service

Only one candidate in last week’s Republican presidential debate was asked to directly address the Black Lives Matter movement, and that candidate was Gov. Scott Walker. Moderator Megyn Kelly asked Walker:

“Governor Walker, many in the Black Lives Matter movement, and beyond, believe that overly aggressive police officers targeting young African-Americans is the civil rights issue of our time. Do you agree? And if so, how do you plan to address it? If not, why not?”

Walker responded with an answer about sufficient training of officers “not only on the way into their positions but all the way through their time” and about “consequences” for those who don’t properly perform their duties.

Both the question and the answer focused an inordinate amount of attention on police conduct and not enough on revealing that they are simply the agents of policy instituted by officials at the behest of the body politic.

This deficit of examining systems exists all across this debate. It fails to indict society as a whole, as I firmly believe it should. It puts all the focus on the tip of the spear rather than on the spear itself.

Look at it this way: Many local municipalities experience budgetary pressure. Rather than raise taxes or cut services in response, things that are often politically unpalatable, they turn to law enforcement and courts to make up the difference in tickets and fines. Some can also increase the number of finable offenses and stiffen the penalties.

Officers, already disproportionately deployed and arrayed in so-called “high-crime” neighborhoods — in-

variably poor and minority neighborhoods — are then charged with doing the dirty work. The increase in sheer numbers of interactions creates friction with targeted populations and ups the odds that individual biases will be introduced.

Without fail, something eventually goes horribly wrong.

We look at the end interaction, examining the officers for bias and the suspect for threatening behavior, rather than looking at the systems that necessitated the interactions.

Society itself is to blame. There is blood on everyone’s hands, including the hands still clutching the tax revenue that those cities needed but refused to solicit, instead shifting the mission of entire police departments “from ‘protect and serve’ to ‘punish and profit,’” as Mother Jones magazine recently put it in a fascinating article on this subject.

Is it a coincidence that many of the recent cases involving black people killed by the police began with stops for minor offenses?

This “fiscal menace,” as the magazine called it, is added to a system often already addicted to ever-improving crime numbers — a statistically unsustainable condition — and a ballooning prison population. To maintain the momentum, cities needed to crack down on lower and lower-level crimes, sacrificing more and more lives — largely poor and minority ones — to feed the beast. Public safety gave cover for a perversion of justice.

In another moment during the debate, Kelly asked Ben Carson about race relations in America and “how divided we seem right now.” She continued: “And what, if anything, you can do — you would do as the next president to help heal that divide.”



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First, before the answer, I have a nit to pick with the question. The framing of the state of race relations as a “divide,” to my mind, creates a false impression, an equivalency. It suggests a lateral-ness. But this discussion is about vertical-ness, about hierarchy. It is about whether state power is being used disproportionately as an oppressive

and deadly force against minorities — particularly black people — in this country.

Carson responded with a prelude that seemed to label those demanding justice and equality “purveyors of hatred” seeking a “race war,” an outrageously exaggerated use of incendiary rhetoric.

Then he said: “What we need to think about instead — you know, I was asked by an NPR reporter once, why don’t I talk about race that often. I said it’s because I’m a neurosurgeon. And she thought that was a strange response. And you say — I said, you see, when I take someone to the operating room, I’m actually operating on the thing that makes them who they are. The skin doesn’t make them who they are. The hair doesn’t make them who they are. And it’s time for us to move beyond that.”

This was an eloquent exposition of the absurdity of race as a biological construct but also an absurdly elementary avoidance of racism as a very real social construct. I wish it were that people could all simply “move beyond that” at will, that they were able to simply choose to slough off the cumulative accrual of centuries of systematic anti-black negativity. But, that is not a power people possess.

That is why when people respond to “Black Lives Matter” with “All Lives Matter,” it grates. All Lives Matter may be one’s personal position, but until this country values all lives equally, it is both reasonable and indeed necessary to specify the lives it seems to value less.

All Lives Matter may be one’s personal position.