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The Emperor's New Clothes: After Welfare Reform

BY BERNICE POWELL JACKSON

Remember the story of the Emperor's New Clothes? Only one brave soul was unafraid to tell the Emperor that he was naked, as I remember it. Everyone else pretended that the Emperor was fully clothed. Well, while government officials are telling us that so-called Welfare Reform has been successful, the reality is that they really don't know what has happened to tens of thousands of persons no longer on welfare rolls. The reality that many who are working with the poor are telling us that the poor are now poorer and that while welfare reform may succeed in ending welfare as we know it, it is not ending poverty as we know it. They are telling us that the Emperor has no clothes.

Well over a million cases have been dropped from the nation's welfare rolls. But statistics from the U.S. General Accounting Office seem to indicate that the majority of the families whose benefits were terminated did not find work. The problem is there are just too many unskilled, untrained, poorly educated workers and too few jobs to match.

Take Wisconsin for instance, the state which has often been held up as the model for welfare reform. A study done by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee found that only 34% of those dropped from welfare rolls found full time jobs. Only one in six of the families cut off was now above the poverty line. In addition, people on welfare are required to drop out of education or training programs and take the first available job. That requirement ensures that these people

will forever be poor, whether on welfare or not.

Or take Massachusetts. One advocate for the poor who has worked with the poor and homeless for over ten years points to the reality that the overwhelming majority of the parents in the families she works with have no high school diploma and little to offer in terms of job experience or marketable skills. "These women have no chance of competing in today's job market, but the state expects them to become economically self-sufficient without any training or assistance," she said, adding that since the state is not providing job training for these women, the time limits are going to expire at the end of 1998 and these families will have nothing to fall back on.

Unfortunately, many Americans believe that the problems of poor families have gone away with the welfare rolls. Many Americans mistakenly believe that job training or preparation has occurred, when it usually has not. Some are merely given pep talks by their caseworkers or assigned to a brief "job preparation seminar" which tells them how to dress, and how to speak on the phone and then puts them at a desk with a telephone and a newspaper to try to get job interviews. Wisconsin State Senator Gwendolynne Moore calls the pretense of job readiness in her own state the "You Go, Girl" category.

Many Americans believe that all these folks formerly on welfare now have real jobs-that they just needed that extra push to get out in the job market. But look at welfare, the program by which

p e r s p e c t i v e s 'Supper Table Input'; What Was It? What Now?

BY PROF. MCKINLEY BURT

One would infer that the term refers to that situation where a young person would grow and be informed by a process of socialization which occurs around the family's evening meal.

Exactly! and at various times over the past decade, the pages of "The Portland Observer" have provided an opportunity for me to cite from firsthand experience the incredible warmth and nurturing to be obtained from such a routine daily event. That is if, in fact, this event is routine and is daily. And, generally, most of us assume that it was at some distant time -- but increasingly doubt the situation still prevails.

This fundamental change in our viewpoint and evaluations of childhood and early youth is not just some sudden apprehension generated by the recent screaming headlines generated by media pundits and 'experts', "More Slaughter In The School Yards... More Programs Desperately Needed For Disaf-

ected Urban Youth". And many, many more in the same vein. In fact, at the very moment I write here (8 am Thursday; 5/21/98), "breaking news" cites a high school slaughter in Springfield, Oregon.

I believe that if I am allowed to reflect back to my own childhood situation for a moment, I may be able to cite several contributing factors (even fundamental) which have greatly influenced the development of today's trauma and tragedy. More relevant to urban than suburbia.

In the segregated environs of central St. Louis, Mo., where I was born (1922), the same physical structure of the domicile housing the family unit was generally true for both the African Americans and the neighboring enclaves of poorer whites. That is, there was room to house some members of an extended family.

Quite often you not only had in residence an immediate household; father, mother

and their children - but such extended members as grandparents or aunts and uncles, varying with individual circumstances. And add those cousins who, made orphan in some manner, were "taken in" if at all possible, rather than turned over to some social agency. ("There was room at the inn").

Then contemplate, if you will, the riches and variety of the conversation and information that would flow back and forth across this "supper table". The broad knowledge and experience of many age groups and occupations reaches the ears of adult and child alike.

My own family consisted of a grandfather who was a railway mail clerk who travelled all over the South, a mother and aunt who were or had been elementary school teachers, and two elderly old-maid cousins who had been seamstresses in younger days. Then, there was 'cousin Freddy', for whom a room was kept for use between his gigs as an entertainer at clubs

round the country.

Then it should not be surprising that long before I reached High School, I was as familiar with the practices and terminology relating to many walks of life as I was with the place value of decimals. Mostly, a child listened and learned and when he did make inquiry - or was asked questions - he could always be sure of guidance that would enhance personal development and guide one to safe havens. If your big ears hadn't already picked up on that.

I had learned to avoid fights and confrontations, now my grandfather handled his mortgage and taxes, how to negotiate rather than to rant and rave and generally, I was being socialized, painlessly. I do not believe that an immersion into the NET and computerized games and related programs can restore the social structure and mutual respect that developed around the "supper table input" - whether the diners are truck drivers or janitors.

Getting Our Health Back

BY DR. LENORA FULANI

Long-simmering public dissatisfaction with the quality of health care provided under the nation's managed-care programs has burst out as the hot political campaign issue of 1998. According to the New York Times, congressional and gubernatorial candidates from both parties and in at least twenty states are calling for sweeping reforms that will strengthen the hand of patients in their battles with HMO's. However, the likelihood of significant reform is slim, because both parties are so deeply indebted to the insurance lobby for campaign contributions.

In his first term in office, President Clinton placed health care reform at the top of the national agenda. This was the signal to the insurance

industry political action committees to once again open the floodgates of political contributions to members of Congress, to hijack reform and insure that any changes to the system would preserve the financial interests of the insurance companies.

According to figures compiled at the time by Citizen Action, the insurance lobby spent more than \$2 million a month during the debate, to slow down or kill the reform. Political action committees associated with these lobbies contributed \$26.4 million to campaigns from January 1993

to May 1994, with the biggest donations going to members of congressional committees that would draft health care legislation. In conferring this largesse, the insurance industry was truly non-partisan: recipients ranged from the Utah Republican Orrin Hatch (\$267,141) to the California Democrat Dianne Feinstein (\$235,755).

If history is any guide, the health insurance industry will once again try to channel this latest reform "movement" into some sort of new restructuring that will benefit their

own bottom line, if not necessarily the health of Americans. It's worth remembering that HMO's were once considered a reform." The Nixon Administration embraced them as an alternative to strong, grassroots demands for national health insurance. In 1973, Congress passed the HMO Act, which required companies with more than 25 employees and a health coverage plan to offer at least one HMO as an alternative.

The most severe casualties have been in the field of preventive medicine.

Vanport Memorial Dedicated

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

lodged in dwellings ranging from single family homes to medium-sized apartment buildings, Vanport City was created to house workers building "liberty ships" in the Kaiser shipyards. Inadvertently, it changed the complexion of Portland. Some 20 to 25 percent of the population was African-American, and the percentage was higher in northwest Portland's Guild's Lake housing project. Overall, the war worker influx pushed the city's African-American population from 1,931 in 1940 to 15,000 at war's end.

By most accounts the housing was segregated, with African-Americans concentrated on Cottonwood Street, but the community had an integrated school, shopping center and social activities such as a girl scout troop. Regina Flowers, who lived in Vanport as a child, says "Henry Kaiser just saw people as workers. It wasn't a perfect place, but if you came from a segregated society, as most of us did, you'd be stupid to expect things to be all hunky-dory. As a ten-year old, I didn't spend time worrying about it."

Others did. With the war over and black workers' services no longer needed, they were a problem and their city was in the way. Many civic leaders, including mayor Earl Riley and senator Wayne Moss, wanted the area to become an industrial park.

The "problem" was solved by nature in May, 1948. A sudden rise in temperature melted a heavy winter snow pack in Montana and British Columbia, sending the Columbia River flooding toward Portland. According to PCC researcher Linda Elegant, there was a small break in the levee surrounding low-lying Vanport in mid-afternoon of May 29, starting a slow flood that sent



Birdie Lee and Gary Ann Taylor in Vanport just before the flood in 1948.

people fleeing. Then, at 4:30, a 600-foot section collapsed, bringing in a wall of water 12 feet high.

Estimates of those drowned range from 14 into the hundreds.

Floating objects thought to be bodies later turned out, in many cases, to be logs. North Portland resident Alta Mitchoff recalls that the day after the flood many of her Vanport friends were missing, but almost all later turned up. Most agree with Flowers, who says, "Nobody really knows."

The flood was so convenient in eliminating Vanport that to this day some suspect that the levee's collapse was done deliberately. Certainly, its construction was poorly done. The Army Corps of Engineers originally planned to lead a discussion at the anniversary entitled, "Les-

sons Learned From Vanport." They eventually decided not to participate.

The African-American survivors, now housed in temporary shelters or as guests in private homes, were encouraged to leave town - some say they were offered money to go - or to resettle in the Albina area of inner northeast.

Many of those who remain in Portland are looking forward to the reunion. "We've stayed in touch all our lives," Flowers says. "Most of us are at retirement age now, and our children are curious about what happened there."

Another survivor, Frank Brummett, says that life in Vanport was "a wonderful and joyous experience for me, and a godsend to my parents."