

The Inner Life of the Poor

MIKE ROSE

The poor are pretty much absent from public and political discourse, except as an abstraction—an income category low on the Socioeconomic Status index—or as a generalization: people dependent on the government, the “takers,” a problem. Neither abstraction nor generalization gives us actual people waking up exhausted, getting kids off to school; trying to make a buck; or, in some cases, past the point of trying. And if we lack images of living, breathing people, we doubly lack any sense of the inner lives of the poor. There are occasional journalistic profiles and some powerful urban ethnographies and fictional portrayals, but in general, the poor are invisible and silent. Because of the various layers of segregation in our society—from work to schools to places of worship—few of us reading this have opportunities to live and work closely with people who are at the bottom of the income ladder. We don’t know them. And because we don’t know their values and aspirations, the particulars of their daily decisions, and the economic and psychological boundaries within which those decisions are made, they easily become psychologically one-dimensional, intellectually, emotionally, and volitionally simplified, not quite like us. This fact has huge implications for public policy, education and work, and civic life.

There are, of course, times when the poor burst into public life more fully formed: trapped miners are interviewed, a farm hand or day laborer rescues a child, a Fannie Lou Hamer or Cesar Chavez has had enough. “I am sick and tired,” Hamer famously said, “of being sick and tired.”

I’ve been interested in the psychological diminishment of poor people for a long time.

My personal history as the son of working-class immigrant parents sensitizes me to it, and my teaching in low-income communities and my writing about education and social class has me thinking and thinking about it. Let me offer a portrait to get us closer inside this issue.

Joanie (not her real name) tended to my stepfather when he was in a board and care facility. He was cognitively impaired and could barely talk, but Joanie comprehended him and communicated with him. She had a really good way with him, fussed over him, and watched out for his safety with a hawk eye. But you might not get to see those qualities outside the facility. Joanie, a thirty-seven-year-old Mexican American, is a tough woman, walks with authority, dresses in loose sweats, T-shirts, windbreakers, and running shoes. She is wary and quick with invective if she feels wronged.

Ten years ago, she was taking classes at a community college and got a certificate in early childhood development, but soon found that she preferred working with the elderly. She enrolled in a for-profit occupational college and got a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) certificate, which put her in debt she’s still paying off.

Around the time she was finishing that certificate, Joanie got into a fight with another woman over some guy, and the woman grabbed a broken bottle off the street and slashed deep into Joanie’s right cheek. Joanie couldn’t afford adequate medical care, and the wound didn’t heal properly, leaving her with pain and sensitivity that continue to this day. Worse for Joanie was the disfigurement. She should just kill herself, a relative told her, for no man could love her. When I first met Joanie about five or six years after the injury,

part of the right side of her face was darker and redder than her lustrous bronze skin. A birthmark, I thought.

Officially, there are close to two million home health care workers in the United States, and who knows how many more off the books. It is one of the fastest growing occupations in the country. Most are female. Many are immigrants, particularly in larger cities, and there are significant numbers like Joanie, native born with varying levels of education. Their average wage is \$9.70 per hour, and their annual income is \$20,500. But the majority, like Joanie, do not have regular employment and move from one home or facility to another. It is hard work with limited, if any, benefits, and it is unsteady.

All the while I knew Joanie, she was dependable and upbeat, but it's only been in the last five or six months that she has slowly opened up about her life. It began when I started urging her to go back to school, to go to the community college she attended and get her records, so that we could see how far she was from an Associate of Arts degree. I'd pay for any cost. Her response was a mix of interest and reluctance: *It was so long ago. What would I do with those courses? It's such a hassle over there.* But she knew she needed to move beyond where she is now. *O.K. I'll do it. Yes.* Weeks would pass. More ambivalence. More resolves to go to the college. This kind of paralysis is familiar to all of us as we try to break a habit, lose weight, or get out of a bad situation. But when poor people do it, we have a tendency to give it a particular gravity, to make it an explanation for why they are poor.

During this period, Joanie started talking to me about politics. Maybe all this talk about going back to school triggered such discussion. She drew on her own history but also on liberal and left-wing media, Jon Stewart to Pacifica Radio. I had known Joanie for years and had no inkling of her engagement with social issues.

I didn't let up on those transcripts. *You need more security, Joanie. Do you want to still be piecing together a living day by day when you're forty-five? You're smart and so skilled with old people.* She'd agree, seeming more resolved—but still no follow through. What can seem so simple to

those of us who have crossed a line in the social order or who have always been on the advantaged side of the line can be almost insurmountable for people like Joanie, not because of weak character or laziness or any other of the easy explanations we hear, but because of despair.

One day while I was watching Joanie play a board game with my stepfather, she turned to me and started crying, talking and crying. Her face hurt all the time, she said, and she was disfigured, and she'd never be able to fall in love. She knows she needs to get more education but doesn't know where... or how... or for what exactly. She has no money. She's on the outs with her family. She's treated like shit. "When you're shunned by society, it's awful. Nobody wants you." The pain and sadness poured out. I had pushed and pushed and tapped into deep hurt, a long history of trauma and assaults to the self that was intensified, embodied by her injury. She was both an outcast and physically unlovable. During the time I knew her, the damage to her face continued to resolve itself—the injury was barely visible—yet she still saw herself, felt herself, as scarred.

I won't go into detail about what I said to her and the various interventions I tried to help her find—except for one. A friend of mine was teaching a course at a local community college on Saturday mornings, and I put the two in touch and urged Joanie to attend. Joanie could walk to the campus.

It's a course for people who are coming back to school: a mix of advice, group counseling, and nitty-gritty help on navigating the system. For example, my friend would be able to access Joanie's earlier college records online and evaluate them for her. Joanie went. And went again the following week. She connected with the instructor. She made some acquaintances in the class. And she began to talk about having a "foot in the door" and finishing the college education she started so long ago. She wonders if she could become a social worker.

There's a lot that can go awry. Joanie might not be able to support herself, or might land a full-time job that makes school difficult. But what strikes me is how the simple act of walking onto that small campus twenty

minutes from her house and signing up for a class that provided no graduation credit, how that action had such consequences for Joanie, disrupted years of forlorn paralysis. “You lose hope,” she said. “You can’t expect anything.” But now there’s a pitch to her voice that I haven’t heard before. A life of hardship, a long history of insult and disappointment wears you out, can clamp down the desire to be competent, to grow, to reach right beyond what you can currently do. That is what happens to a dream deferred. But when it suddenly seems possible to extend your reach, well, that’s the fundamental experience of opportunity, and it can be liberating.

It shouldn’t even need to be said that one can find among people with significantly limited financial and material resources a wide array of thoughts and feelings. The content of those thoughts and feelings will differ person by person and may well differ on average from the thoughts and feelings of people who are financially secure—among the poor, there will be more anxiety about basic health care and putting food on the table. But in terms of the general architecture and categories of thoughts and feelings, we share a common humanity: we all feel sadness and pleasure, try to solve problems and make plans, take stock of what’s in front of us, find refuge in imagination.

While this claim may be psychologically true, it is not at all a social or ideological given. Historian Michael Katz has detailed the ways we in the United States have stigmatized the poor through our definitions of them (for example, as undeserving or morally weak) and through the policies we establish to provide assistance to them, such as our narrow and punitive welfare system. Appearance, race, language, and neighborhood are intimately involved in this construction of the poor as different and inferior. The poor, writes Katz are “strangers in our midst: Poor people think, feel, and act in ways unlike middle-class Americans.” The label “the poor” itself becomes a categorical term freighted with deficiency.

Part of the way we establish our shared humanity is by what we imagine goes on inside the head and the heart of others. If we

are separated from a group not only physically but psychologically, then it becomes all the easier to attribute to them motives, beliefs, thoughts—an entire interior life—that might be deeply inaccurate and inadequate. And it is from those attributions that we develop both our personal and public policy responses to poverty.

Because the invisibility of the poor is ultimately a sociological and political phenomenon, I am interested in places or occasions where poor people become more fully present, actors on the societal stage, and their thoughts and feelings play out in ways that can have a positive effect on the direction of their lives. Social movements provide such a space. Cultural projects do as well—in churches and community centers, women’s shelters, prison arts programs. And, in my experience, second-chance educational programs and institutions—literacy centers, adult schools, many community colleges—can also play this role. These are complex places, however; given the intricate relation in our country among social class, educational resources, and academic achievement, the adult school and community college reflect educational inequality and can contribute to it. A lot of students never complete a certificate or degree. But some institutions do better than others with similar populations, so the quality of governance, services, and teaching matters. These institutions are among the few places in mainstream society where poor people can become more publicly visible and display to their advantage multiple dimensions of their lives. As illustration, I’ll draw on examples from one community college I’ve been studying over the past two years—in fact, it’s the place where I directed Joanie.

Like many second-chance programs and schools, the college is a modest place, and it draws on one of the poorest populations in the region. As you begin to spend time on the campus and talk to people, one of the first things that strikes you is their raw desire to be involved and their pleasure at the opportunity. “I’m doing something better for myself,” one woman says proudly. A man who never finished high school observes that “this is the first time school has meant anything to me.” “From the first day on campus,” a second-year

student says, "I was in the zone, man. I loved it, and I'm still in love with it." I think of Zoe, a middle-aged woman I met during the first week of classes. She is lively and chatty but turns serious when she talks about the basic math course she has to take. This time, she says, she wants to learn math, really learn it. She waves her hand—blue nail polish, cigarette—across the campus. "I didn't know it would be this good," she says. "This is nice."

As students begin to invest in particular areas of study, this desire channels into occupational or academic fields. It's notable how often you'll hear the word "love" used, as in "I love welding." "I'd rather break my head on this [fashion design] than anything else." When I asked a young man what it is about physics that grabs him, he says he's captivated by "the wonder of it." As students get more courses under their belts and begin to acquire more substantial knowledge and skill, they develop a sense of competence and confidence, a kind of cognitive momentum that gets expressed both volitionally ("Nothing's going to stop me," the physics major says) and as intellectual curiosity and a desire for further mastery. After a field trip to a state-of-the-art welding shop, a student said he found all the new advances "overwhelming. . .there is so much more to know," but he adds quickly that the trip "motivated" him, for he "loves this stuff." "You will grow in a way," one woman muses, "that you never in your mind would imagine."

For some people, this return to school is intimately tied to existential goals. They talk of wanting to change their lives, to "do right by my kids," to "turn my life around," to "be somebody in this world." There is regret, reassessment, commitment. A man reuniting with his wife and daughter after prison writes, "Now I have something to live for and someone living for me." What is fascinating is that, in some cases, this commitment begins with an epiphany, a light bulb going on. The insight can hit in the flow of powerful events—a guy lands in jail for the umpteenth time, a loved one leaves you or dies, a seemingly stable job is torn away. It also can come while walking down the street or, as with one young woman, looking out across the retail store where she worked and imagining herself

still there in ten years. People say things like, "What am I doing?" "What's my purpose in life?" "Why did God put me on this earth?"

The existential dimension of schooling is powerfully illustrated through Sam, a mid-twenties African American man I've interviewed extensively. He was raised in foster care, bounced from one house to another, fathered a child at sixteen, got into trouble with the law, and spent several years in the criminal justice system. He eventually entered an occupational program at the college, got involved in student government, began tutoring on campus and working in a summer enrichment program for middle-school kids, and is now taking liberal arts courses and preparing to transfer to a four-year college. The tutoring and summer work with middle schoolers has so engaged him that he wants to teach or in some way work with people in need. There is much to say about the interior life of this young man, but I'll focus on his ongoing struggle to come to terms with a terribly impoverished childhood. He has sought family surrogates for some time, occasionally finding temporary solace with a relative, a girlfriend's family, teachers. "I've always wanted to belong somewhere."

His yearning for deep connection is profound, and as he has moved successfully through the college, this yearning has blended healthily with his achievement as a student, a tutor, and a member of student government: "It's like I have a big family, and I belong here." Still, as his day draws to an end, and he heads for home, memories and desires flood in: "all of my past insecurities of feeling inferior or not feeling wanted start to trickle in, and I become depressed and feel like, 'Why do I have to still be alone?'" He attempts to counter these feelings with cognitive-behavioral techniques that he found on the Internet. Two foundational questions consume him: how to be a man and how to create a good and meaningful life.

Growing up on the streets and on the football field—he was a standout athlete before his troubles with the law—the definitions of manhood he absorbed are ones he rejects now. He is methodical and thoughtful

as he fashions a new definition for himself, one that includes helping others, being respectful toward women, reuniting with his daughter (“Knowing that she’s depending on me, I have to work hard”), having the ability to make and fix things (something his trade has afforded him), having an effect on the world. All of this—human connection, coming to terms with hurt and loss, growing into manhood, doing meaningful work, making a difference—reminds one of Freud’s dictum about the key to the good life being love and work.

I could write a companion essay on the inner horrors of poor people’s lives—and we get a glimpse of those horrors in Joanie’s story. Poverty wreaks terrible psychological damage—depression, fear, fury—and the result can range from withdrawal to violence to self and others. A number of the people whose lives are represented in this article grew up in—and, in some cases, still struggle against—this harsh psychological and social reality. But here I offer an account we hear much less frequently, a multidimensional story of motivation and intellectual engagement, of existential deliberation, of achievement that leads to the shaping of one’s future.

How do we create the conditions in our institutions—or create new institutions entirely—that will enable more poor people to have the opportunities experienced by those we just met? I’ve been using the community college as an example, but what I’m going to write has relevance to other public institutions as well.

If they are truly *public*, then our institutions should be run with a deep knowledge of the motives, aspirations, cognitive capacity, and inner and outer barriers of the full range of the people they serve. In the case of the community college, such knowledge would affect the scheduling of classes and services, the distribution of financial aid and emergency loans, the provision of day care, the training of staff and faculty, the function of the library and the provision of Internet access, and more. Effective colleges are responding in this way. Some of these accommodations would require

new resources, but others would involve a redistribution of current resources and, perhaps more important, a change in institutional vision.

A deep knowledge of poor people’s lives would also lead to policy that connects institutions to each other, creating a network of assistance. Many students need help with food and shelter, or health care, or transportation. Their development is limited as well by the fraying of the social safety net. It is not uncommon that students have to take leave of their studies to support parents or siblings financially or help them during a health crisis.

But I think the fundamental thing that increased understanding of the inner lives of poor people could yield is a redefinition of certain public institutions themselves as places in an unequal social structure that address some of the injuries, both physical and psychic, wrought by that inequality. Again, I’ll use the community college as an example.

It is instructive to look at the demands for change being made of the community college. It is an institution under scrutiny, and justifiably so, for its generally low rates of completion of certificates or degrees and for its poor record on transfer to four-year colleges and universities. There are calls to do something about the high percentage of students who are held for remediation in English or math by improving the quality of remedial instruction (a good thing) or by restricting enrollment of low-skilled students—a troubling alternative. There are also calls to amp up the academic side of the curriculum, emphasizing the transfer function, with a possible diminishment of occupational education. And some are questioning the modern mission of the community college itself as a comprehensive, open-door institution. The college is trying to be all things to all people, from providing enrichment classes to the general community to occupational courses for displaced workers to a lower-division education for those headed toward the baccalaureate. The community college cannot do all this well, the critics say, and therefore needs to trim and focus its efforts.

I agree with much of this criticism—we absolutely need to improve the quality of

remediation and the rates of transfer—but I'm also reminded of something Michael Harrington said about discussions of poverty and inequality: "In America, we are always having the wrong debate." In the community college policy debates, we pit the comprehensive, open-door college against a leaner, meaner institution, or the academic function versus the vocational, or conceive of remediation as de facto antithetical to substantial education. What we should be talking about instead is the need to define the community college as an uniquely American institution that, at its best, can provide a public, mainstream, widely distributed institutional space—there are about 1,150 of them in the United States—where people with limited resources and opportunities can begin to direct their lives and find expression for their hopes and abilities.

The importance of the community college and other second-chance institutions is certainly recognized. More than a few of Barack Obama's speeches are delivered from community colleges, but the discussion of them is always in economic and functional terms. They are places where people will learn "twenty-first century job skills." The courses mentioned, always and unerringly, are technical ones: science, math, engineering, and the occupational offspring of them. There is nothing wrong with an economic, practical focus. The people attending these courses—just like the people we've heard from in this essay—desperately want to better their

economic prospects. The problem is that both policy deliberation and political rhetoric stop there.

I have yet to find in political speech or policy documents any significant discussion of what benefit—other than economic—the community college might bring. There is no talk of literature or the arts, of political science and sociology, of world culture—nothing beyond the technical. There is no discussion of the kinds of intellectual growth and reflection we witnessed at the college I visited, no sense that the education the students are receiving—from English and physics to nursing and welding—sparks emotion, aesthetic response, reassessments of one's ability and identity.

Our era's technocratic tunnel vision is in play here, but I believe something else is going on as well, and that is the pinched understanding of the inner lives of poor people. The intersection of a reductive, technocratic orientation with the aura of deficiency that surrounds the poor not only dehumanizes our public institutions but makes them less effective. To have a prayer of achieving a society that realizes the potential of all its citizens, we will need institutions that affirm the full humanity, the wide sweep of desire and ability of the people walking through the door.

Mike Rose is on the faculty of the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies and the author, most recently, of *Back to School: Why Everyone Deserves a Second Chance at Education*.