

A Deep Hunger Exists  
UUF

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October 18, 2015

“When you look around you, it is easy to feel hopeless. Things always seem to be getting worse, not better. Even those of us still working for a better tomorrow can have a bad day, week... when all seems lost.” These are the words of Archbishop Oscar Romero. He says, we have a choice.

“Do you dedicate yourself to an impossible cause? Or do you look after your own, making do as best you can?... You must dedicate yourself to an impossible cause. Why?... Because solidarity is a form of tenderness. Because the simple act of caring for the world is itself a victory. Take a stand – not because it will lead to anything, but because it is the right thing to do. We never know what can or can’t be done; only what must be done.”

Poverty, oppression and hunger have no doubt been around for millennia. They are not likely to be resolved any time soon. In fact, solving these problems isn’t necessarily yours or mine to do.

But how can we in good conscious, ignore the plight of so many? How can we live a life of value if we are blind or unconcerned for those in need? How can we engage in behavior that is oppressive, or do things that continues to propagate poverty and hunger?

While these issues are not ones we’re obliged to solve, they are issues we are obligated not to ignore---if we truly believe in the interconnectedness of all existence. “Because solidarity is a form of tenderness... because it is the right thing to do”, as Romero says.

While *solving* these issues may not be our primary dedication, each of us can do little, simple things that just might make a difference. And even if they don’t make a difference, it may well be, simply, the right thing to do.

When was the last time you smiled and said hello to a homeless person? When was the last time you treated a homeless person as a person with inherent worth and dignity? These are acts of tenderness, these are acts of solidarity.

You don't have to give money. You don't have to feed someone or take food to a food pantry. Although those things are good to do. Eye contact, a simple smile, acknowledging another human being, may, even if only for a moment, help alleviate a sense of hopelessness. It may warm someone's heart.

I think we are obligated to recognize the existence of poverty and oppression. I think we need to talk about it around the kitchen table and with friends. We need to vote for people who care about these things. We need to support programs and policies that are designed to make a difference.

And we need to have an enlightened, educated, humane understanding of issues of oppression, poverty and hunger. It seems insane to me to cut unemployment compensation, to minimize the duration of public assistance based on the notion that doing so will encourage people to get a job, to be self-reliant, to not be "the takers".

In this country if you have a criminal record, even arrested in some cases, it's gonna be hard to find a job. There's a movement out there to "band the box", the box you check if you have a criminal record; some employers ask if you've ever been arrested.

If you've been convicted on a drug charge—a half ounce or ounce of pot might do it, you can't live in public housing. Federal law denies certain benefits to people who've been convicted of drug offenses in federal or state courts. These benefits include Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), food stamps, federally assisted housing, postsecondary education assistance, and some federal contracts and licenses.

Lets look at poverty. In 2015, if you make \$24,250 and are a family of four, you are considered to live in poverty. If a family of two and you make \$15,300, you're poor, and if you are single and make \$12,000 you live in poverty. So you can be employed and still be in poverty. If you make \$5.76/hr and live alone you may qualify for federal assistance. If you've got a family of four, you need to make more than \$12.65/hr to avoid poverty.

On the other end of the income scale, you are in the top 25% of wage earners if you make \$67,300/yr. You're in the top 10% if you make \$113,800; you're in the top 5%, and this may surprise some people, if you make \$160,000. Now for that renowned group of the 1%er's. They make \$380,400 or more.

Here are some data from the Current Population Survey (CPS), 2015 Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC), the source of official poverty estimates. It is a sample survey of approximately 100,000 households nationwide.

- In 2014, the official poverty rate was 14.8 percent. There were 46.7 million people living in poverty.
- For the fourth consecutive year, the number of people in poverty at the national level hasn't changed.
- The 2014 poverty rate was 2.3 percentage points higher than in 2007, the year before the most recent recession.
- Poverty rates went up between 2013 and 2014 for only two groups: people with a bachelor's degree or more, and married-couple families.

The poverty rate in 2014 for children under age 18 was 21.1 percent. For people aged 18 to 64 was 13.5 percent, while the rate for people aged 65 and older was 10.0 percent.

Poverty and hunger is a very real issue in our country. It exists all around us. There are people, entire families, living out of their car, or on the street and we don't know who they are when we see them at the mall or in a classroom.

The poverty numbers I sighted earlier very likely do not include the homeless on the streets, in the parks and under bridges in virtually every community in the country. I'm amazed by how many there are...the ones that are visible. No matter where I go, I see them. And there must be countless more that we don't see.

We're almost at the time of year when many communities send out teams to count the homeless. No doubt some counts come at the same time as the Audubon society does its winter bird count. Many birds can be counted by simply looking out our windows at the feeders in the yard.

If only, we cared as much for humans. Police wouldn't kick the homeless off of park benches and downtown streets. They wouldn't give them a bus ticket out of town; we wouldn't work so hard to keep them out of sight of the "good people" in the community.

Poverty, oppression and hunger often go hand in hand. Our culture's tendency, all too often, is to blame the victim, to blame the poor, the unemployed. In this culture of rabid individualism, which lives by the myth of the self-made man, if you are poor, uneducated, unemployed, it must be your own fault. It must be because you are lazy, or simply choose to be one of the "takers". And we happily feed the birds!

Our faith requires more of us. Our faith calls for us to stand on the side of love, to demonstrate compassion. It asks us to care about our fellow citizens, and undocumented immigrants. It asks us to recognize the worth of the weak and needy, as well as the strong and powerful.

Can we, as a people, as UUs, not see the correlation between what our faith asks of us and what we're taught the biblical Jesus asks of Christians? The bible tells us that "we" are well served, that "we" benefit from demonstrating a preference for the poor, the needy, the oppressed.

This may be a poor analogy, but it seems to me, doing good, being compassionate, standing on the side of love, is like the aphorism, killing two birds with one stone. While doing good works may not get you into heaven...it does have dual benefits. It has a positive impact on the world around us and it helps to feed our own souls. Go cook up something your soul will enjoy.