

Seasons Such As These: The Persistence of Homelessness in America

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Hi Folks, thanks for inviting me here to talk about this very persistent and widespread global social problem – the problem of homelessness.

I have a postcard on my office door that reads like this: “If the world were a global village of 100 people, one third of them would be rich or of moderate income, two thirds would be poor. Of the one hundred residents of this global village 47 of them would be unable to read, and only one would have a college education. About 35 would be suffering from hunger and malnutrition and at least *half* would be homeless or living in substandard housing—that is, housing that lacks basic sanitation, protection from the elements and from disease carrying pests such as malarial mosquitoes or rats. Half the world’s people are in some sense homeless.

I have traveled to many parts of the world over the years and I have seen poverty-caused homelessness first hand. In Bombay, India I saw families living in giant sewer pipes. In South Africa, outside Kruger, the world’s most impressive wild animal preserve, I saw an entire village made from nothing but sticks and plastic bags. In Cairo, Egypt, I visited the “city of the dead” a huge cemetery filled with mausoleums that have been taken over by squatters—entire families were literally living in the tombs of the long-ago dead. Along the canals of Phnom Penh in Cambodia, a typical home has a dirt floor, no plumbing and a leaky roof. On the high plateau of

Mexico City where the air is thin and the smog thick, millions of poor peasants live in *barios* made of corrugated tin sheets, rusty nail encrusted boards and other bits of urban refuse. And these impromptu “suburbs” occur in Istanbul and Jakarta, Sao Paulo and Columbo. The world, it seems, is filled with people who have very little to call home.

We hear of large numbers of people becoming homeless on the evening news. An earthquake in Japan recently destroyed 3,000 homes. A bad monsoon season in Bangladesh flooded the low-lying river delta on which this country sits, leaving 40,000 wading in knee-deep water, their homes, their crops and all their possessions ruined in the flood. In Haiti, this season’s tropical storms caused a city of 100,000 to be utterly ruined by flooding and mudslides, killing thousands outright and leaving 90% of those remaining homeless. And here in the United States, Florida’s four hurricanes left hundreds with damaged and destroyed homes. Becoming homeless, it seems, is part of the human condition.

These forms of homelessness are caused by natural disasters and some are beyond our ability to control. Human-made buildings are no match for very severe earthquakes or hurricanes—though in Florida much of the damage occurred because many elderly and poor Floridians live in inexpensive mobile homes, not pricey hurricane-resistant houses. Likewise, the devastating mudslides in Haiti were caused mostly by deforestation. Impoverished Haitians had to resort to cutting down the forests that once blanketed their land to use the wood for cooking fuel—they could afford no other. So it is fair to say that even homelessness seemingly caused by natural disasters is often made worse because of poverty.

Unlike in poor countries, in America, homelessness caused by natural disasters usually results in temporary homelessness because most people have private insurance and a federal

organization called FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) to step in to help people get back into their homes.

Poor nations tend to have many people who are absolutely poor—by this I mean people who are entirely destitute, lacking even the means for bare survival. Homelessness experienced by people in the developed world has more to do with relative poverty—people lack sufficient resources to survive in the society in which they live. Most homelessness in developed nations has its origins in purely social factors such as unemployment or high rents. This is the type of homelessness occurring in America today.

Worldwide, there is a direct correlation between how poor a country is and how many of its citizens will be homeless or inadequately housed. Wealthy nations have proportionately fewer homeless people than other nations. That is, except in the United States. Given that America is the wealthiest large nation not only in the world but in the *history* of the world, we have relatively high rates of homelessness.

In the past dozen years, I've interviewed over 1,100 homeless men, women and children, listened to their stories and tried to figure out how so many become homeless in this wealthy nation of ours. According to the Urban Institute, last year an estimated 3.5 million of us—more than one of every 100 Americans, experienced homelessness in the course of a year. Close to a million of these people were children. And these numbers are likely to increase in the next few years unless the economy improves much more dramatically than seems likely at the moment.

Twenty-five years ago in America, homelessness hardly existed. What happened that caused homelessness to go from being confined to a population so small as to be almost non-existent to a population that is more than one percent of the nation and growing?

First, I'd like to suggest some answers to this question.

Then I'll describe in general terms what is now in place to aid homeless people now. After that, I'll suggest *why* we have gotten where we are in dealing with homelessness. Finally, I'll suggest *where* we might go from here.

Homelessness grew in this country starting in the late 1970s. Before that, we hadn't had much homelessness at all since the Great Depression of the 1930s, when the cause of homelessness was clear – massive joblessness. In the late 1970's though, our society changed dramatically and for various reasons, our country did not adapt to the changes very well. We can think of homeless people like coal miners once thought of canaries. It was common in earlier centuries for miners to bring a canary into the coal mine with them. Because a canary is vulnerable to the lack of air more quickly than a person, the death of the coal mine's canary acted as an early warning sign telling miners the air was almost depleted and they'd better get out now. Likewise, homeless people are those at the bottom of society, the most impoverished Americans. When homeless people appear or when their numbers grow, we can conclude that at least some of the ways that the very poorest Americans used to make ends meet and find places to live are no longer adequate or working.

In the late 1970s, we experienced several dramatic shifts to our social and political structure that made homelessness start to appear.

I'll put these in four categories.

- First, the economy started to globalize which eventually meant a dramatic shift in the kinds of jobs there were for poor and uneducated people and a long slow decline in inflation-adjusted wages for those at the bottom of the labor market.
- Second, the family started to undergo drastic changes. The 1970s saw a tremendous increase in demands by women for social equality. This led to changes in the way we

work and live. For example, women entered the workforce in ever increasing numbers, women initiated divorces in large numbers, women could for the first time reliably control their fertility and because of these changes, they could control their destinies. Marriage became optional and so did being a full-time homemaker. Moving women's labor out of the home and into the paid labor market caused all sorts of changes to the fabric of everyday life. But not all our institutions and ways of living changed as quickly as women's roles. This led to some circumstances which affected homelessness.

- Third, starting with the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan, we began to lose the social consensus that had developed during the Roosevelt era of the 1930s and 40s and been refined during the Kennedy-Johnson sixties. From the 1930's until the 1980's a sizable majority of the electorate agreed that America's social safety net for the very poor should be expanded and solidified. After 1980, our nation started on a course of contracting public benefits for the poor. Homelessness increased in part as a result of this new trend in governance.
- Fourth, at the same time that wages (especially for low-paid jobs) began a long decline starting in the mid 1970's, rents were skyrocketing and housing markets were tightening. Some people were priced out of the housing market.

Other industrialized nations faced some of these same problems. Because they dealt with them differently, however, no other wealthy democratic nation has even a fraction of the homeless people America has. Let me explain these factors in a bit more detail.

The Jobs Problem

For most of our history, uneducated men, whether slave or free, could rely on physical labor for employment. After slavery ended in 1865, most Black Americans lived in the rural

South. Slavery had prevented almost all African Americans from getting an education and racist Jim Crow segregation laws and economic oppression combined to keep Blacks in the South from acquiring land. So most Black Americans originally worked as sharecroppers in the South following slavery—that is, they worked some white man’s land and owed him most of their crop, keeping the rest for subsistence. Once America industrialized, it was not surprising that many Black families decided to move to the northern industrial cities to work in factories. This was good work for men who were poorly educated. Though factories often paid Black workers less than white ones and used them as strike breakers when whites tried to unionize, factory work was still better than sharecropping. As the 20th century went on, Black men gained a foothold in industry and some even were able to, despite racism, join or organize unions. Thus over the decades, a large proportion of Black Americans became city dwellers because that’s where the decent jobs for Black men were.

Black men’s access to decently paid employment increased dramatically in the post-WWII era, when America was manufacturing most of the world’s goods. From the late 1940s through the mid 1960s, there was still almost complete school segregation. Because schools for blacks were so inferior many men dropped out and got factory jobs instead. Even if they finished, they often had an inferior education which, combined with ongoing racism and economic oppression, made higher education merely a dream. But factory work was a reliable way to make a living and during the 50s and 60s there were decent paychecks available for men with a high school education or less. Now about four out of five Black Americans live in cities.

One place I studied homelessness was Westchester County, the county just North of New York City. In the 1960s, the U.S. Census tells us, one of every three black men was employed as a factory worker. Today almost no Black men in Westchester hold factory jobs. These decent-

paying jobs have disappeared overseas where wages are lower. To the extent that they have been replaced, these jobs have been replaced by lower-paying work in the service sector—often jobs that paid less than half of what these types of men used to make. The 1970s marked the time when wage-adequate jobs for undereducated men started to leave the country and as Bruce Springstein says, “they ain’t coming back.” By the early 1980’s we started seeing the effects of increasing joblessness and inadequate wage earning among urban Black men. In the urban Northeast, in places like Philadelphia, New York and Washington, DC, noticeable numbers of working age Black men came to be living in doorways and eating at soup kitchens.

The Changing Status of Women

Meanwhile, the jobs that *were* being developed in this country were basically of two sorts, both service economy jobs. This trend too started in the late 1970s. In one case there were complex jobs requiring a college education such as jobs in the finance, insurance, research, media or knowledge industries. More numerous were low-wage service jobs such as fast-food workers, nurses aid, telemarketer, hotel room cleaner. These jobs were mostly part-time and because of this and the nature of the work—caretaking or cleaning work oftentimes—these jobs appealed to women and were seen as appropriate for women by bosses and would-be employees alike. In fact, many of these new service jobs were housework types of jobs that women had once done in the home for free and were now moved into the paid employment force. There are now many fewer jobs than in the 1960s that undereducated men see as appropriate for them and that pay anything like a living wage. In part, we didn’t change our education system to make sure young men and women had the training they needed for good jobs in the new economy. And the many new service economy jobs that don’t need much education to perform also don’t pay enough in wages to make such jobs the foundational income for a stable family. Undereducated

men, especially urban minority men, often found themselves left out in the cold in the new service economy. Literally.

At the same time, women's social equality has dramatically increased. Women are working and no longer dependent on men for their livelihood. Mores have changed and being divorced or being a single mother is no longer stigmatized as it once had been. Starting in the 1970s many women sought divorces and others, especially poor women, no longer see marriage as obligatory or even advantageous. These changes helped to make poor families stripped-down entities where only those adults who could help the family survive economically were welcome. Increasingly, it was unemployed Black men who found themselves outside the family. Their wives or girlfriends just couldn't afford to support them on their own poorly paid jobs. And because social policy did not see these men as displaced workers deserving aid, the government didn't retrain, employ or provide for these workers either except in the most minimal fashion. So lots of young, working age mostly minority urban undereducated men were handed homelessness as a future. Although the exact numbers remain in dispute, by the mid 1980s, the ranks of homeless people had swelled from almost zero in the mid 1970's to at least 600,000 a decade later. And disproportionately, the homeless population at that time and still today is made up of Black and other minority men in their prime working years.

The Loss of Consensus on a Social Safety Net

What I mean by our prior consensus on the social safety net is this. In all but four of the 48 years between 1933 and 1981, the Democrats controlled Congress. Influenced by Franklyn Roosevelt's vision of what a national government was for and what it could do, for nearly 50 years, our government had pursued a domestic policy of gradually expanding the meaning of citizenship to include the assurance of survival as a human right. Citizenship during these years

was expanded to include at least partially, the right to public support if one was elderly, a child or disabled, the right to health care, to food assistance, to unemployment assistance, and the right to shelter, along with the right to vote. Ensuring dignified survival for every citizen is what democracies mean when they talk about “providing for the social welfare” or “the welfare state.” Our slavery, Jim Crow, race-segregated past was partly responsible for why the United States was well behind European nations in making government protections available to those who needed them. Still, America gradually expanded the right to what we call “a social safety net” to protect citizens from bad times from the 1930s to the 1960s. In the 1960s, the Vietnam War and the subsequent collapse of the Johnson presidency deterred us from fully pursuing the expansion of the social safety net. Then came Watergate, which caused us to lose faith in our leaders, something easily converted into suspicion of government itself. Since the election of Ronald Reagan, the social safety net has developed increasingly large holes, and America has walked away from providing the kinds of protections we once provided to our poor and vulnerable citizens. During the Reagan years, public assistance levels were cut or allowed to stagnate, the states got more control, leading to unequal treatment across the nation, and bureaucratic hurdles to accessing benefits became much more widespread. By the end of the 1980s, family homelessness exploded and the numbers of homeless men also continued to rise.

In the mid 1990’s, Bill Clinton, in an effort to co-opt Republican issues, ended public assistance for poor families and replaced it with a temporary program run differently by each state that is time-limited and provides the average family with only half of what they need to even barely survive. Single men in many states get nothing at all. So these days the poor have almost no protection from poverty. While single men still form the largest group of homeless people, it is family homelessness that continues to be the fastest growing kind of homelessness.

The Housing Issue

Between 1973 and 1993, 2.2 million low-income housing units disappeared. Until the Reagan era, we had seen a gradual expansion of government built and owned low-income housing. It wasn't a perfect system and sometimes led to what were known as "vertical slums" – high-rise concentrations of poor people living in public housing. But they weren't on the streets. During the Reagan 1980s, some of these public housing units were abandoned or torn down, others, especially private low-income housing for single men, were gentrified and made into high-rent condominiums. Either way, the poor were out of luck. It is estimated that today we have 4.4 million fewer low-income rental units than are needed. Rents have risen dramatically in almost every urban area. So people double up, which leads to homelessness when people can't get along in an overcrowded situation.

Our government has gradually replaced much of the public housing once available to the poor with vouchers called Section 8. A poor person pays about 30% of their monthly income to a landlord for rent and the government makes up the rest and pays the landlord directly. This idea can work but only 1/3 of those who are eligible get Section 8 vouchers or any help from the government with housing. And not enough landlords participate in the program. Recently, the Bush administration announced plans to further decentralize this program and make it vulnerable to further, fairly dramatic cuts. Among those fortunate enough to be on the list for a section 8 housing voucher have a two-three year wait in some places. In the mid 1990s, there was a five-year wait in New York City. That's a long time for a little kid to wait for a place to call home. Just a few months ago, New York City government announced that it would no longer prioritize homeless families for Section 8 vouchers. So once a family is homeless, it will be even harder to get Section 8 and therefore, harder to find stable housing. New York is also, however, opening

homelessness prevention centers in several of the city's poorest neighborhoods. These offices will provide legal and emergency assistance to help the poor avert eviction. It's a start and it's the right direction, but it's not enough. And for those already homeless, it's a case of too little too late.

So to sum up, homelessness in the past two decades was caused by a contraction in the social safety net just as the nation was going through the economic upheaval of a globalizing economy. It was caused the shift in the types of jobs available to undereducated people, especially men. This and an increase in women's labor market participation resulted in a rise in single motherhood and a drop in men's participation in family life among the poorest Americans. And finally, there was a tremendous decline in low-cost housing and there remains a severe housing shortage for the most vulnerable Americans.

Today, there are really two main groups of homeless Americans. The first is made up of single minority men of employable age. According to the US Conference of Mayors, which keeps track of homelessness annually, single men make up about 40% of the urban homeless population. The other big group and the one that is growing most quickly is homeless families, which in cities constitutes another 40% of the homeless population. Typically these are minority single-mother families with two kids. At least one quarter of everyone who is homeless in America is a child. Other groups include single women without kids (14% of the population) and smaller numbers of older men (often veterans) and teens living on their own.

The assistance we provide for today's homeless people is very uneven. How you'll be treated once you become homeless depends on who you are, where you live and even on luck. Although there are committed citizens running programs for homeless people throughout the

country, there is no national or systematic program that ensures that people receive equitable treatment or even any help at all.

Homeless families fare somewhat better than other homeless people in part because there is a source of public funds—the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program—or TANF that can be used for those who have not been on public assistance before. Some states have other programs and, of course, there are private charities that run feeding programs and shelters.

I've been in many family homeless shelters in the past decade. The accommodations that a homeless family is offered by public or private organizations run the gamut from old Victorian houses where entire families share a room and the bathroom is down the hall, to seedy motels in dangerous neighborhoods. Though a very few homeless shelters come with efficiency apartments with in-room cooking, most shelters for families are makeshift accommodations that have been converted from some other use—typically a motel or hotel. Most facilities have many rules, some service provision and length of stay limits.

Single men fare less well. There used to be flop-houses or SRO (Single Room Occupancy) apartment buildings all over large American cities. SROs provided rooms a man could rent for a night, a week or a month at a sum all but the most destitute could afford. Most of these have been converted into hotels or apartments for the professional classes leaving poor single men with few options.

One homeless researcher, Kim Hopper, and his colleagues, call what poor urban men do to survive now “economies of makeshift.” The basic pattern is for men to rotate their dwelling options around, trying not to use any of them too often so it “wears out.” For example, a man will stay with his mother for a few nights, then maybe a girlfriend, then spend a few nights at a

shelter or out of doors and then start the cycle over again. There is nothing at all to be called “home” in these men’s lives.

We have responded to what has now become an entire generation of “excess men”—men not needed at work or at home—with the expansion of two kinds of institutions that, in men’s everyday experience, are not so far apart. The first is the expansion of permanent homeless shelters that lack any of the dignifying qualities that even the poorest flophouse dweller enjoyed—a lock on the door, a guaranteed space, a cot and a storage box that was yours night after night, the ability to come and go as you pleased, and to do as you pleased as long as that didn’t involve harming others. Instead, today’s homeless men are subject to myriad rules, bodily searches, gang sleeping quarters that are often unsafe and unsanitary. It is no wonder why many prefer to sleep outside in all but the coldest weather.

The second institution we’ve expanded to contain excess men is of course our prisons. Since the crack epidemic of the mid 1980s there have been skyrocketing numbers of young, poorly educated minority men imprisoned, sometimes for years, for drug-related crimes. This is no coincidence. The drug trade is the profession that has replaced manufacturing jobs for a whole generation of young minority men in some neighborhoods. And the increase in the rate of poverty for poor urban men creates its own conditions for cons and hustling, theft and burglary. When one is an outcast from mainstream society, one does what one must in order to survive.

The system set up for homeless families—because there are children involved—has been somewhat more humane than what we have offered single men. With the changes in funding and distribution of Section 8 vouchers planned by the Bush administration, homeless children seem destined for the same kind of uncertain and unequal treatment that has marked how we’ve treated the adult homeless population.

How you are treated once you become homeless, in sum, is dependent on whether you have children with you, your gender, and in what geographic location you become homeless. Some cities have fully developed homeless shelter systems, others are cobbled together and always operating in crisis mode. Rural shelters are harder to come by than urban shelters but urban shelters often are unsafe and unclean. As a nation, our current response to homelessness is characterized by unevenness, lack of equity, and unpredictability. Even though homelessness affects a sizable number of Americans we have no system in place to either treat homeless people in such a manner that they are quickly rehoused in more stable conditions nor do we have well developed procedures for preventing homelessness in the first place.

Aside from treating homelessness on ad hoc basis, we also tend to see homeless people as people who have individual character defects—such as drug addiction or poor work habits—that *caused* their homelessness. Although it tempting to view homelessness this way because there always are some homeless people who do have character defects, and social welfare organizations are often better able to provide services to treat personal problems than they are able to provide stable housing, this view ignores several facts. First, there have always been individuals with character flaws yet at times in our history there has been almost no homelessness. So obviously, something beyond personal attributes is at work. A more convincing argument is that basic institutions in our society such as the family and the economy have changed and our housing policies have not changed with them. In addition, the number of homeless people has been growing exponentially in the past few years. If we accept that it is the defects of individuals that cause them to be homeless, we would have to conclude that the number of people with character flaws has grown drastically in just a few years, an awkward argument at best. There is much more evidence to support the idea that persistent homelessness

in the United States stems from changes in the housing market, changes in the ability of some people to pay for housing and changes in the way people can or prefer to live with one another.

When homelessness first became a “new” social problem in the early 1980s, we may have been ignorant of one of its major causes—job dislocation—and therefore might have had some justification to treat it as an emergency. But today, job outsourcing has become a fact of life in the global economy that has emerged over the past few decades. We know that there is a mismatch between the types of workers we have, their skills and their wage needs and the types of jobs we have available in various specification locations. We know that rents are too high compared with wages and affordable housing is scarce. Yet we still haven’t come up with a plan to deal with nearly predictable rates of homelessness. It has become all too obvious that the ways we are dealing with the “canaries” of our society—society’s vulnerable people—are not working—one look at the growing number of homeless people tells us that. Yet we aren’t inventing new ways to help people live honest, productive lives.

Here are a few items that provide a sketch of what needs to be done.

First, we need to prevent homelessness by preventing eviction.

Second, we need to expand the Section 8 program and reduce wait times for vouchers.

We need to expand the pool of landlords interested in taking them, and if there are not enough, we need to make the government the landlord of last resort.

In the short-term we need to revitalize the systems of SROs and rooming houses that provided cheap accommodations for single men.

In some cases we need supportive housing for people for whom poverty is only one of their issues. Again, there is a severe shortage of appropriate housing.

More long-term, we need to expand permanently subsidized housing. In some European countries the majority of the country's housing is owned or subsidized by the federal government. When housing is viewed as a right, these are the kinds of policies that come forward.

These are just a few government inspired social policy solutions that would help to stem the tide of homelessness. They only deal with housing and not with the educational problems and long-term joblessness that produce impoverished individuals and neighborhoods. There is much more that needs to be done if poverty in our nation is to be truly addressed.

We won't pursue any of the policies I've listed above as a nation in the short-term future, even though they would really help.

Why won't we do what needs to be done about homelessness? Right now, we are distracted by war and terrorism but more generally the problem is that our history tends to undercut the kinds of responses to poverty that really work. Only once in our history, starting with the Roosevelt era and continuing during the boom economic times of the 1950s and 1960s, have we tried a different path. And that path was born of the desperation of the Great Depression and died with the economic challenges brought by the globalizing economy.

America's history has caused us to mostly view poverty and homelessness as a problem of deficient, defective and, often, immoral, *individuals* rather than as a social responsibility or a moral travesty for which there needs to be a *collective* response.

Our attitude toward poverty and homelessness stems from the special religious nature of our history. Especially right here, right now in the aftermath of an election that apparently hinged both on "values voters" and on the state of Ohio, it seems important to review the rather unusual (compared to other Western nations) origins of our values and how they come across the years to

influence how we deal with homelessness in the here and now. So let me take you back to our nation's origins for just moment to see if we can identify core American values that today still shape our social policies towards the poor and homeless.

Following Max Weber's still brilliant analysis of the historical conditions that shaped the nation let me briefly explain how our special history set up an ideological predisposition in America to be suspicious of helping the poor. As many of you probably know, some of the first white people to gain a foothold in America were followers of John Calvin—the Pilgrims or Puritans. These Calvinists followed the doctrine of predestination. Predestination was the belief that God, being all knowing, already knew if each individual was going to be among the saved or among the damned. The awareness that God already knew one's fate caused feelings of depression and social isolation among followers of Calvin. To combat these feelings, the Calvinist religion advocated keeping oneself constantly busy. Good Calvinists were supposed to find their avocation or "calling" as they termed it and then work at that calling incessantly from before the dawn until they were too tired to work any more each and every day. To work was to glorify God. A life of constant labor kept one from having the time to feel doubt that one might be among the damned. It also kept a person from engaging in vice of any sort such as dancing, drinking, card playing or non-reproductive sexuality. Demonstrations of godly virtue such as hard work wouldn't change a person's fate, but they were thought to be indications that a person was among the saved. Aside from avoiding vice and working at a calling incessantly, a good Calvinist also practiced asceticism, avoiding all unnecessary consumption of goods.

The Calvinists brought with them to America an ideology that has been passed down in somewhat mutated but still mostly recognizable form to today's Americans. It is from the Calvinists that we get our "Protestant Work Ethic"—the belief that hard work in and of itself is a

moral good. It is also where we get our belief that those who are not working are morally suspect and should be looked upon with suspicion, rather than, for example, sympathy. This has been especially true of how we have viewed unemployed working age men in this country but it is also increasingly being applied to women, even mothers with young children. Moreover, the Calvinist belief system contained the suggestion that poverty is a choice—that one could have chosen to live a Calvinist life of hard work and moral rectitude instead.

We've lost the resisting self-indulgence aspects of the Calvinist way of life over the years but we've very much retained the idea that work is a moral good and that the poor are prone to vice, are slothful, and, since they don't work as much as one "should," are immoral. The attitude that defines poverty as an individual failing—really, a failure to engage in the Protestant work ethic—is still very much held by Americans today, despite the fact that that majority of the poor are children. Interestingly, most middle class Americans also strongly stress a Calvinist *lifestyle* of self-denial for the poor, one in which pleasure or consumption play little part. For example, many middle class people tell me they won't give cash handouts to homeless street people because they might spend it on drugs, alcohol or cigarettes. That is a very Calvinist attitude that has come down to influence our behavior toward the poor today.

Let me briefly contrast the Calvinist attitude with three others that were prevalent at the time the Calvinists began their influence on the American belief system. The first was held by Europe's many remaining Roman Catholics and most non-Calvinist Protestants as well. The second was a product of the noble/peasant system in Europe. The third attitude was held by the Native Americans into whose land the Pilgrims intruded.

Though the Reformation had changed Europe profoundly by the time the Pilgrims came to America, the Catholic Church had been the major social institution in Europe for 1,000 years

and it was, and still is, very influential. Catholicism has quite a different attitude about the poor. First, human poverty was viewed as an inevitable consequence of human life, caused by human imperfection. Second, the poor were seen as more innocent, less sinful than others of us and therefore, of special interest to God. A Catholic could gain grace by being generous to those who have less. Charity to Catholics was seen as part of one's religious duties and taking care of those less fortunate was viewed as a sacred obligation and a social good. Many of the other Protestant sects also held to these values. The liberal tradition in social welfare still in evidence in today's American social welfare university programs and many of its nonprofit institutions stems in large measure from this value system. And so do many European social policies toward the poor.

A related attitude towards the less fortunate was developed in the more secular institution of feudalism as it played out for about 500 years in Europe. The noble/peasant manorial system was one of reciprocal obligation. Peasants farmed for the enrichment of their lord. In turn, the lord provided housing, a garden plot, common lands for grazing and hunting, protection, lifetime employment and support in old age for his peasants. This system of *noblesse oblige* or the obligation of the wealthy to see to the care of the poor also helped to form the ideological foundations for the approach to poverty taken by the social democracies of Europe. Although these tendencies have been muted in recent years, still today in Western Europe, a bottom-line social safety net is achieved through the Robin Hood-like redistribution of resources through progressive taxation.

The Native American attitude toward poverty was quite a bit more radical than either of these other intertwined ideologies. At the time of the Pilgrims, Native American groups survived through hunting, gathering and in some cases, subsistence farming. Hunting and gathering societies take a communal approach to resources. If they are plentiful, all benefit more or less

equally. If they are scarce, all go hungry together. There simply was no poverty in the modern sense because there was no economic class structure in Native American groups. Lest you think these are values of the past, in the world today there are many people—such as in the Middle East, for example, that still define themselves as members of tribes (or large extended families). At least among themselves, tribes or extended kin networks often collectivize resources and distribute them if not equally, then in such a fashion that the vulnerable members are protected from abject poverty. In this framework, a radically social, rather than individualistic attitude is taken toward the distribution of resources in a society.

I bring up these other examples to suggest that the way America views poverty or homelessness is not the only way to see these social problems. Instead, it's *our* way because of our specific history as a nation, a history that has brought with it an attitude of moral reproach towards the poor. America, in part because of the effects of the Protestant Work Ethic on our cultural values, became a firm believer in the idea that one's class standing was the direct result of one's efforts. It has often blinded us as a people to seeing structural inequality as a cause for poverty and homelessness instead of individual deficiency. And when we are so blinded, it becomes nearly impossible to construct social policy that will deal with homelessness effectively. Although there are many good people, both people of faith and secular humanists, who are doing what they can to minimize the effects of homelessness, their combined efforts have only enabled individual homeless people to survive. The faith-based initiatives that the Bush administration has suggested as an addition or replacement for traditional social welfare services only potentially add another hurdle—accepting religion—to the demands that the poor must accede to in order to access the paltry services that we offer them. Will some individuals find permanent housing or recover from drug abuse as a result of using these services? Almost

certainly. But other homeless people will simply take their place. We will not end homelessness in America through these or any other programs that demand character reform in exchange for housing because individual-level reform does nothing to solve the twin problems of inadequate housing supply and insufficient wage-adequate employment opportunities. At the same time, these programs redirect public funds into private organizations, leaving even less ability for our government to act in the substantial way that is required if we are to find a way to curtail homelessness.

One more element must be added to my argument that it is our values that are preventing us from ending homelessness. Though this hasn't always been the case, in recent decades (not coincidentally, the same decades during which homelessness has increased exponentially) Americans have bought into the neoliberal fiction that competition and markets are the solution to all of our social problems. This is demonstrably *not* the case for either of the main problems that cause homelessness to continue—tight, high-priced housing markets in some urban areas and inadequate employment for the least educated. Few are building rooming houses for the poor on expensive real estate in Manhattan when condominiums for the professional classes are in short supply. Employers continue to press to pay the lowest wage to maintain profitability, even though many sense that their employees can't live on the wages they are offering.

It is only the federal government that has the ability to act on the scale required to solve homelessness as a social problem. In fact, homelessness is just the kind of problem that democratic governments *can* solve if they are willing. For the foreseeable future, our government will not solve this problem (and wouldn't have under a Kerry administration either).

Speeches are supposed to end on a hopeful note, offering the audience something uplifting to take away with them. When speaking about homelessness in today's America, it's

hard to be upbeat. We have normalized homelessness, it is no longer shocking, no longer something a nation as great as the United States would never let happen. It's here, it's going to be with us for a long time to come. In the last two decades, we've constructed an entire bureaucracy around emergency shelters and treatment of those who inhabit them. There are many stakeholders now who, though they wouldn't like to admit it, have a vested interest in seeing homelessness continue. And because we are headed down a very different road politically now than the one we were on during the days of welfare state expansion, it is very doubtful that our policies towards homeless people will change dramatically—at least in the near term.

But there is always hope and here's what I suggest you do if you agree with me that homelessness is a terrible calamity in a country as wealthy as ours. Change *your* mind about homelessness. Educate yourself about it. And start believing that together we *can* solve this social scourge because we surely can. But it will take a turn toward a more community-based vision of what this nation is all about and what we can achieve together if we only muster the will. I teach college students every day. And lately, I've noticed that America's young people are starting to take their civic responsibilities seriously. If we pull together, if we demand that decent housing become a right, not a privilege in this wealthy nation, we can eventually end homelessness. It will take a lot of work and a lot of will. I have a lot of confidence in your generation and in mine. Things look pretty bleak, here at home and around the world right now. But change can happen. Together, we can start rebuilding this country and make it a place of justice and equality. Let's start today. Thank you.