

## “... At Least We Are Together”

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If you choose poverty, can you be called “poor”? To have choices is the luxury out of reach of “the poor,” isn’t it?<sup>1</sup>

A man of about twenty-four, in a pea-jacket, cords, torn white running shoes half tied with Christmas string so that bare feet and ankles show, no mitts, no scarf – at five above zero – lives somehow in among a community of welfare recipients. He has a common law wife. There are three children with them. At least one of these is receiving shelter and love freely at random – the baby of a friend who went away, who may turn up soon, who may be ill just now... This family is without protective toughness. They refer to the hard-bitten young ones round about as “street children.” The tenants round about look askance at them, aware of the odd confidence, the resourcefulness, the open look, the differentness. The young pair seem to have chosen this way of living. But perhaps they too are coerced by circumstances, with no choice open except to make it seem a choice, that is, to refuse to see themselves as poor.

But do “poor people” see themselves as poor? If you say “the poor” and mean yourself, you are taking political action; and taking political action is exerting energies beyond the circle of necessity. The luxury of expending extra energy according to choice is out of reach of “the poor,” isn’t it?

There is one man, missing one member but having still one skeleton and one pair of wicked blue eyes and one lifetime almost behind him, who makes this point in his own way, as he shucks off his over-walked second-hand shoes at the start of a winter’s day – another pair can be worn indoors all day. He mutters to himself and for anyone passing his chair, “wet...heel broken...shocking shape...give them to the poor people...” The term “poor people” is part of his comic vocabulary, because it is solemn terminology for “them.” The way “they” use the term is yet another attempt to squelch him that hasn’t worked, and won’t.

But what of the Maritimes mother who says, “I know what it is to be pore.” She still has a sense of her own dignity. Her husband works. He still provides. His work has changed; an accident left him disabled for the job he had when the family was launched; and he has since dragged an increasing number of children and his wife and one ailing grandparent hither and yon, crossing half the continent in pursuit of ever less satisfying work. By now his wage pays far less than public funds would provide if he had no

work. The one good effect for them of Ontario's affluence is that there is somewhere to take the children in medical emergencies. They suffer severe want, and increasing exhaustion. But they still have spirit and can expend it, not in anger nor in jibing humour, but in flair, like letting the boys have a dog (which they know would not be allowed if the public housing authorities were able to find accommodation for so large a family). Almost, they retain choices. They lived for a few months across the street from a mother so lonely and bewildered and overburdened that people shun her and her endless, fruitless outcry or her harping on any momentary distraction. The mother from down East made friendly overtures, and remained kind. "She likes to come in and talk, and I don't mind. Lots of mornings she comes in for coffee before six. Yes sirree, before six. I don't mind the way she keeps coming. She tries hard, but it's no good, pore thing. And I know what it is to be pore."

Is it because this mother is from the Maritimes that all her hardships have not broken her spirit? Just as, in the Thirties, people knew want without losing dignity (it could happen to the best of people and did and the common experience ruled out categorical judgments)?

The twenty-four-year-old father keeps afloat by skimming survival's droplets off the fat vat somehow, too peaceable to insist on public income and unable to find anyone who will pay him for anything he can do. The old man receives his pension, but is too infirm to manage it. The Maritimes father still works.

"What should be done to help?" is the quick response to discovering their situations. But there are other situations to consider first.

The mother of one family receives an income from the government geared to costs of food and shelter. Much has been done when basic security is assured this way. Yet the state describable as "poverty" remains. Why? First, there is the father of the home, far advanced in alcoholism. He is "separated" but homeless and when he turns up he is usually taken in. Humanly and financially this creates stress, and the secretiveness about it mars relations with the social worker who goes with the income. Then there are the day-to-day worries, e.g. the children's dress, especially at the stage when styles begin to matter to them. In this particular culture, nothing second-hand builds anybody's morale at that stage. The children's entertaining can be frightening too: frugally planned groceries meant for several days can melt away because a fast-growing boy brings his equally ravenous friends home on a Saturday night. It is bitter to have to grudge him that. As the son approaches sixteen, stress increases. If he drops out of school then, the mother loses the income for his care. Focus is thrown on

money just when that im-priority [sic] will hurt most. Once all the children are grown, they are expected to become self-supporting. Yet none has known at home a safe model of what working for a living will be. Some become homeless, hiding out on all but the ones their own age in the same spot. The apparent toughness of the streets can go along with extreme timidity, lack of acquaintance, uncertainty. Only the home district feels safe – and the jobs are outside. The nearest seem most feasible. But a chasm still separates here and there, us and them. One boy spent a whole autumn nerving himself to apply at a carwash, and the closest he came was walking past it, on the far side of the street, with his mother along for company. The mother's nerves were bad too. She had kept going through the years of lonely work and worry, longing for the day when the children would all be "turning out all right" and on their own, the time to rest at last. But between the last "child" and "old age" comes the hardest, loneliest patch of all. To receive retraining you must have been employed for two consecutive years somewhere in your life. The alternative is to drudge on at housework without human incentive and among strangers now, for survival.

When ill health intervenes, a disability pension replaces the family allowance, perhaps. Many are more than reconciled when the doctor at clinic gives them the paper that means security for good. But this turns out to be a harsher circumstance than the others! You are now cashiered out of society. You have enough for a small living space, but nothing to do and nobody to do it with any longer. There are the "recreational agencies," but they are a poor substitute for a lifetime of individually developed tastes and interests that might have been able to flower now. There are human contacts when you spend cash, but the spending runs out before the next cheque when you count on it for company. The clinic is still good for a little action. But waits between the dates on the appointments card can be very, very long. And every so often the doctor "puts you in," a time of both relief and terror. The attention and the liveliness of a ward are good; underneath lurks a fear that this time it is the cancer. Everybody knows that pain can be the cancer.

Ill health gets beyond range of clinic care in many cases, too, so that for some this troubled bright spot exists no more. The addicts are likely to be rejected by hospitals who know the pressure of priorities and the inadequacy of their resources for such long-term need. These people's disability pensions draw the vultures, monthly, around them. In between they live somehow, and are glad to co-operate with your wish not to know more. Chronically psychotic persons who harm no one but themselves also live

in this half world. “The disability” runs out of the sack in any one of a hundred ways: a down payment on a fur coat made to a stranger on the sidewalk, in one case; probably not because the con wasn’t spotted, but rather because the friendliness of the encounter was worth far far more at that point than a month’s money. Such a person suffers out of hospital in preference to the miasma of yesteryear’s hospitalization (as it lingers in memory).

So much “help” – surely it comes out somewhere! Yes, but the people in “poverty” somehow frustrate the “help.” It is unbearable to see, we grow angry, we say things such as “some people do not want to work.” Everyone made in the image of God wants to be active and involved positively with others. Everyone marred with the first parents in the garden knows what it is to shrink from the sweat of his brow, from her travail. If the balance between the wanting and the shrinking is destructively tilted, there is more than “laziness” involved. Such cruel over-simplifications as some-people-do-not-want-to-work express the anger of the person unable to help. Blaming is a common way of oppressing the oppressed. It creates the appropriate response of “poverty”: ‘I am no good’; ‘I never made it’; at best, with residual dignity, ‘You wouldn’t understand.’

Just as the victim-type makes the victimizer inevitable, does the “helper” somehow help create needy ones? “There is no doctor without patients,” writes György Konrad<sup>2</sup> “no judge without accused, no priest without the faithful. Around each profession which deals with people, a set of partnerships evolve.” He is introducing the periodical excerpt of his novel – the title could be translated **The Social Worker**, or **The Visitor**. In the previous chapters, he tells his readers, the social worker who is the narrator “tries to clarify at least in part the insoluble conflict of his situation: the clashes between personal and impersonal loyalties, between moral theory and actual practice; and finally some – to him – important factors in the relationship of the T to others.” A focal incident is precipitated when an “ineffectual” man, a lawyer and a mystic and a misfit in society, kills himself and his wife, and it comes to light that there is a “hidden, deformed, undeveloped child” left alive. The social worker can find no instant agency to help; none of the neighbours consent to take it on even for the interim. It is late. “What if I stay?” the narrator asks himself, counterpoising the horrible, total need and emptiness under his eyes and his own professional office and home life. He pictures what would then come about... “The imaginary experiment ends sadly; the two of them seem to unite in isolated unconsciousness, in a vegetative but mutually hostile loneliness...” Another of his clients becomes the momentary solution. Her ravaged

childhood is sketched in, her twisted and amoral present life, her irrepressible bouncing back into a fantasy of tomorrow's better day. When the social worker arrives so late, wanting to place the child with her so that he can escape his own life again, she mistakes him, believing that at last the long acquaintance and his apparent friendliness are to be translated into companionable settling down together – at least for the night. He extricates himself with pain and awkwardness, leaves the repulsive and helpless ward with her, and in the end returns to all that had been cast in the balance during the episode, to live out his work life:

Let the little children come, bring me all those left behind in hospitals...let them come with their numbered underwear and their distracted eyes from the institutions;...let them all come, with their patients and threatening poems of revenge, and let them come, the eternal underdogs, whose ribs are pressed by the same steel spring for years on end;...let them all come, whoever want to come, one of us talks and the other listens; but at least we are together.

Here, from behind what we used to call the iron curtain, is a familiar world. It is well to have the spokesman from over there fill in the meaning of the much-distorted statement of Jesus, "the poor you have with you always." Only a person who had done his utmost always at all times and had faced this point of tension would be able to see exactly how the statement was made. But such knowledge is a point of beginning, surely.

Hope is transcendent. Without hope nothing can be attempted. With hope each life breathes, just a little anyway, and each energy finds structural force and turns to follow through with as many channels of right direction as there are persons touched with the Life who is in, and beyond, known need of every kind forever.

## Notes

- 1 The fulcrum where God keeps poisoning a person's living choice is another matter—clearly known only by Him, and imparted by Him. No degradation of circumstance, even severe impairment, can so degrade a person as to rob him of that kind of choice. But our corporate sin is very great, as we demonstrate in society by inhibiting some people's social choices. This is the why of corporate social action by the church. Contrition is only the first step. The evils of oppression go on. And we must go on "working out our salvation," i.e. experimenting and exploring to find the Way here too to go and sin no more.
- 2 Gyorgy Konrad, *The Visitor* tr. Mari Kuttna, two chapters from the novel *Iátogató*, 1969, in *The New Hungarian Quarterly*, 11.38 (Summer, 1970): 109-122.