

# Poverty: Detroit Style

Carol Schmidt

Just driving by, there is little difference between “The Castle” on the Lodge service down the street from the Detroit Committee to End the War in Vietnam offices, and the same kind of run-down building a few blocks away. Both might be photographed by a person just driving by for an exhibit on poverty in Detroit.

But the temporary poverty of a college student living off campus, of a white community organizer who moves into slum housing, is far different from real poverty, a poverty of alternatives, a poverty of thought, a poverty of expectations, not merely a poverty of money.

The poor can't be reached. They can't.

They live in another country and that country is also America, population 30 million with incomes less than \$3,000 a year, 10 million suffering from malnutrition.

Malnutrition can come to the college student who prefers potato chips to spinach, but it is a malnutrition quickly cured with a \$6.87 prescription of vitamins.

Malnutrition for the poor accompanies grits and grease and cornmeal, and it leads to dead babies and rotting teeth and constant sniffles, never to be remedied.

Bad housing for the college student is storing food in tight cans to keep out roaches and buying a space heater for the bedroom and pasting a “Che Lives” poster over the peeling paint, righteously reporting the landlord to the Health Department.

Bad housing for the poor is going without heat all winter, unable to afford a space heater or more blankets. It's being threatened with evictions when you dare complain to the landlord, it's rats scratching in the walls of your child's bedroom, it's wading through water on the bathroom floor every morning.

The poor can't be reached. You meet a woman and show some sympathy and she calls you with problems either ridiculous or hopeless almost weekly after that. You are irritated—you didn't mean to be that friendly. You feel guilty—if you don't help her probably no one will. You are naively shocked. Rubbish really isn't collected every week or two in the inner city?

You invite her to an open house and she hesitates in obvious discomfort, then admits she'd love to but has nothing to wear besides cotton house dresses. You assure her it doesn't matter, come anyway, but you are not surprised when she doesn't show, and the calls stop after that. You can't help being relieved.

The poor can't be reached. You stop to buy flowers along a dusty dirt road from a wrinkled woman with a sparse gray bun of hair, and a sparse gray muslin dress, whose mongrel dog with a limp sniffs at the strange city smells of your car.

Her farmhouse may have never felt the clean wetness of paint, the weeds indicated the lack of male help. The wind shifts and you smell the outhouse.

You leave the change from the 50 cents cost of the gladiolas on the weathered stand, and she ambles stiffly to the car to shove it back at you. You take it awkwardly and drive off quickly.

The poor can't be reached. You drop off a book at the home of the boy you've been tutoring every Thursday after school, and you feel the hostile looks at your car, your dress, your books, your skin. The 14 kids sitting on the steps don't move and you have to stumble through them up to ring the bell.

He accepts the book gruffly with 14 pairs of eyes on him and inside you see adults bedded on the couch, chairs and floor. He reluctantly explains at the next tutoring session that his auntie was burned out last July and she hasn't found another place yet, and his cousins from South Carolina are staying with him for awhile. The next time you have a book he might like, you wait until Thursday.

The poor can't be reached. The phone call is transferred from desk to desk at the social service Agency where you work and then it's your turn and you find out why no one else could help this person, whose dialect is so broad and grammar so bad that you honestly can't understand her. "I need help," she says plainly, and you know she does but the rest of the words are incomprehensible. You transfer the call to another worker.

The poor can't be reached. You spot the gang of 10-year-olds shooting marbles from slingshots at passing cars and you detour, returning 15 minutes later to park in front of the apartment building filled with students, the gang apparently gone.

You're halfway across the street when the gang spots you, marbles bulleting into your neck and arms and you run for the apartment and slam the outer door on them. Marbles splinter the glass as you frantically await the buzzer to let you in, and the kids grimace, "Gimme your money." You're not human at that moment and neither are they.

The poor can't be reached. The clerk in the dentist's office opens up a little and you find out about her four children, one of them retarded, about her husband who deserted her, about her boyfriend who wants to marry her when both can afford a divorce, about how tough it is financially to clothe the kids for school since their father gives nothing in child support. One day you find out her take-home pay, the sole support of five people, is \$47 a week, less than you struggle along on part time.

The poor can't be reached. You're in Washington, D.C. to visit a friend and you drop by the Lincoln Memorial site to visit Resurrection City, thinking about joining the massive march June 19, or whenever the Poor People's Campaign gets itself together. You've sent them \$5 and support the march wholeheartedly, if remotely.

You aren't let in, and in a way you're glad; you suddenly feel the remoteness. White middle-class Americans do not belong in this campaign, talking the pieties they have talked before in numerous "Black and white together-marches.

Poverty here is poverty straight. not intermingled with the cashmere sweaters of the temporary "blacks" who go home to suburbia after the march is over. There is little of the sophisticated, educated jokes and slogans you heard and mouthed the last time you were in Washington, to march on the Pentagon.

These poor cannot be reached, and their sullen silence and sudden visibility remain with you as you drive back to Detroit, hoping the Poor People's Campaign accomplishes something—mainly letting you erase those faces from your memory. There are so many more pleasant things to think about than poor people.

But the faces don't go away.



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