

Winter 2011

The most terrible poverty

By

Edward F. Ansello, Ph.D.

Maybe it's the darkness of the days of this season, the never-fully-robust sunshine that we've had for some weeks, that's prompting these reflections. Whatever the cause, I'm seeing the cold in some lives. The Great Recession has awakened in many of us some awareness of poverty, our own or a neighbor's. Jobs lost, houses foreclosed, plans curtailed. With unemployment levels being at their highest in years, it's natural to feel that present times are bleak. Austerity has been named the Word of the Year by Merriam-Webster. Yet the perspective of age shows that these circumstances will pass, that the high tide of economic difficulties covering the sand of our times will recede. When it does, it will uncover rocks of poverty that have been with us since before this tide and will likely remain long after. Mother Teresa described this poverty: "The most terrible poverty is loneliness and the feeling of being unloved."

The wintry beginning of a new year seems an appropriate time to recognize both lives in such poverty and our peers working to connect with these lives and end the loneliness. It seems almost facile to note that money, either its absence or its abundance, may have little to do with the poverty of loneliness. Surely we all know people with the economic ability to camouflage their loneliness with possessions, just as we know others whose lean finances seem unrelated to their rich engagement with life and others. The causes of these realities have always eluded clear delineation or generalization. Therapists, preachers, musicians, merchants, and others have long explored, and sometimes exploited, our need to connect, offering explanations, pronouncements, and remedies from their varying perspectives.

It seems to me that Mother Teresa effectively reduced the poverty of loneliness to its most basic working part, the feeling of being unloved. How does one redress this feeling? My brief time in India, the locus of Mother Teresa's life's work, exposed me to deeply meaningful actions by individuals to help those in need, including the relentless effort over decades by a determined Brahmin woman in Andhra Pradesh to establish a compound for people with intellectual disabilities, a home in which to live and work safely with others. The actions of many individuals and groups here in Virginia and elsewhere give us similar examples, although I'd wager that some I'll cite do not think of their actions as works of love. Caring, private individuals and agency employees and volunteers in "direct" or "human" services, sometimes called service providers, regularly deliver what can be called love, the antidote to the poverty of loneliness. Let us recognize them and their actions.

Friendly visitor and telephone reassurance programs offered by many area agencies on aging, communities of faith, and local organizations reach out, through face-to-face visits or by phone calls, to people who may be alone; the outreach may be the only "touch" by another in a day or week of being alone. Some 30% of all older Americans live alone

physically, and unknown numbers of others are emotionally or socially alone. Therapeutic recreation programs of parks and recreation departments offer the chance for group fun and activities to individuals whose disabilities have limited their connections to others. Respite initiatives, such as relieving a family caregiver of his or her unceasing oversight of a loved one with dementia, may take an hour of the giver's time but help reestablish the recipient's connection to the outside world; clubs, congregations, health care organizations, and others often maintain lists of individuals in need of some respite or relief, and people step up unheralded to take on the role. Visitation organizations, such as ElderFriends, operated by Family Lifeline, screen, train, and pair volunteers with isolated older adults, in the hope of establishing a bond of relationship between them.

CARITAS in Richmond is a coalition of communities of faith that offers shelter and assistance to families and individuals in crisis; it began as an all-volunteer effort called "Winter Cots" in the early 1980s when that period's economic downturn and the wholesale discharge of mental health patients because of deinstitutionalization produced waves of homelessness; today some 15,000 volunteers and 150 congregations carry out the mission of CARITAS to touch others in crisis. Even purely informational efforts directed to people who may feel isolated and alone because of brain injury, domestic violence, geographic distance, joblessness, loss of a long-term relationship, or some other reason, can serve to lessen the feelings of loneliness and being unloved. We just have to recognize the depth of value of so many underappreciated actions by those around us, here in the tide of the Great Recession.

The act of helping another to feel loved rewards the giver as well. But let's acknowledge the essential importance of people in various forms of human services, whether volunteer or paid, individual or group, who reach out to others who are alone. Trite as it sounds, the connection to another is probably what being human is all about. At the risk of sounding like a character out of Charles Dickens, we each can benefit during this tough economy from reexamining our definitions of poverty.