

# ENDING GENERATIONAL POVERTY BI-CULTURALLY

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## Opening Words:

From “We Are The Decent People”, abridged from Wilfred A. Peterson

We are the decent people of the world. We are the majority, for men and women are essentially decent. We live in all nations, we live under all flags that fly. Decency is not determined by our economic status, our religion, the language we speak, the color of our skin, or the ideology under which we live. Human decency is a universal quality. We, the decent people of the world, sometimes have our voices drowned out by the shouts of leaders who misrepresent the things for which we stand. We, the decent people, carry enough weight to tip the scale of decency by our actions and if we make ourselves heard...We believe that this is a beautiful universe and that it is made for love and not for hate; for peace and not war; for freedom and not slavery; for order and not riot; for compassion and not violence; for happiness and not misery. We believe there is only one war to be waged in the name of human decency, and that is the war against all the common enemies of man—hunger, disease, poverty, ignorance, crime, and failure. ... We believe that the ultimate decency is to ...respect the dignity of all people as individual human beings. We, the decent people of the world, stand for the kind of life that will be good for all of the people of the world, all of the time, everywhere.

## Main Talk:

*Some of you know of my interest in genealogy. Knowing something about your family history, the culture from which you come, can be insightful.*

*My parents and I lived with my maternal grandparents until I was six. Both my maternal grandparents were Dutch immigrants. My grandfather was a school janitor for a nearby middle school. My grandparents never had a car and walked everywhere they needed to go. In addition to teaching me some children’s nursery rhymes in Dutch, my grandmother also gave me a clue as to why I focus upon be efficient with the funds. “Cheap” would be the word Charley probably would use. You see my grandmother once told me, with not a small touch of pride, that the only thing tighter than a tight Scotsman is a liberal Dutchman. With a Dutch mother and a Scots father, what would you expect? I’m a product of that culture.*

*The history on the Kinney side is quite different. We go back to 1675 in what is now Delaware. With lots of descendants over those 350 years, the family includes all three economic cultures; wealthy, middle class, and poverty. My great grandfather was a small time farmer and my grandfather was a mechanic in a paper mill, economically, middle class culture albeit lower middle class..*

*However, my great grandfather's brother went west on the Oregon Trail and built quite an empire in Oregon. He participated in writing the state constitution, built mills, railroads, and sent his kids back east to become doctors. His sons founded the Salmon fishing and packing industry and developed Astoria from a sleepy river town into a bustling port city. A liberty ship was named after his daughter-in-law, who became the first female Senator, Mary Strong Kinney. These Kinneys lived a different economic culture. They were wealthy.*

*Another branch of the family went from Delaware to Bracken County, Kentucky in the late 1700's. That north-central portion of Kentucky is hill and holler country pock marked by tiny specialty tobacco farms that provide work for those lucky enough to have work. These Kinneys to this day are yet another economic culture. Some have had many generations of poverty and they seem remarkably at ease in that situation.*

*My interest in genealogy led to my organizing Kinney Get-togethers every five years since the 1990's and a publication of a family history in 2000. (place book on lectern) We move the location of this gathering from one place to another choosing spots of historic significance to the Kinneys. The Oregonian branch attended enthusiastically. They shipped fresh Pacific Northwest salmon to share with everyone. They were eager to make connections with their newly discovered Kinneys. Those of us that are mostly middle class attended pretty well and enjoyed stomping the grounds of our ancestors. But no one from the Kentucky branch showed up. So we decided to have the most recent Kinney Gathering in Kentucky featuring the history of our Kentucky Kinneys. We rented Blue Lick State Park and Lodge, right in their back yard. Very few showed up in spite of being a 10 minute to maybe an hour's drive away from their homes. Those who did were extremely quiet and reserved, hesitant to mix with the other family members. They were from a different economic culture with different expectations and priorities as to how they looked at the world and their place in it. They didn't know these other Kinneys so most of them didn't come.*

*Yet all are people of this book (show book), sharing an extremely exceptional thread of connectedness in the context of the 300 million folks in our country. The three economic cultures had trouble relating to one another at a very basic level.*

*There was Alfred Kinney of the Oregonian tribe. His father, a New York City doctor, died young in part due to mustard gas attacks in WW I. Alfred's widowed Mother had told Alfred that he was a descendant of a famous doctor in Illinois named Samuel Kinney and was also related to the wealthy Kinneys of the Kinney Cigarette Company of New Jersey, who had founded the town of Kinilon and built the Kinilon Mansion near where Alfred and his mother lived at one time. I got to be good friends with Alfred, but he was terribly upset when I revealed to him that our*

*common ancestor, Samuel, was not a doctor but just a simple farmer in Illinois and DNA work has proved the Kinney's of New Jersey were not related to us at all. Who you know and who you are connected to is an important characteristic of the Wealthy Culture and also to those wannabes who have had sufficient contact with the wealthy to want to mimic that trait. The middle class culture has tagged that tendency "name dropping."*

*Then there was Brian Kinney of Kentucky. Brian had been able to go to trade school and become a shop teacher in a local high school. Brian had predicted that about 100 of his Kentucky kin would attend and there were less than a dozen. He revealed that he now has trouble relating to his cousins, aunts, and uncles for a number of reasons. It sounded like he no longer fit within his family culture of poverty.*

*Alfred, of the wealthy culture, founded an electrical and electronics company with many manufacturing sources in China. Among my middle class culture of 24 aunts and uncles, two went to college, a nurse and a minister, and the rest were, well, just middle class, each married for life, just regular folks. Among the Kentucky Kinneys of more meager means, there are a number of substance abusers, three suicides, multiple divorces, and other signs of stress and problems with coping, that they seemed unable to escape. But they sure enjoy fishing along the banks of the Licking River. Yet, they are all my family, people of this book.*

Similarly, our community has these three economic levels, here all in one book, our local phone book for our four counties (*place phone book on lectern*).

Many UU churches have initiated or at least supported community programs to assist those in poverty. We are working toward the same with the Fellowship having voted to enhance nutrition, socialization, and preparation for school among the very young in generational poverty. It is a part of our UU character to be compassionate as we recognize each of us is a member of the interdependent web of life, especially the interdependent web of human life. It has not been easy for UU churches to be successful in their projects to combat poverty. And that shouldn't be a big surprise. The demographics of UU's is such that we are typically devoid of any real experience of living in poverty. We are more likely from a different economic culture.

I would like to credit among many studies on this subject, particularly those of Ruby Payne, who has devoted a good portion of her life to helping people like us understand generational poverty. She has all the credentials one would expect of an author of valued books on establishing a framework for understanding poverty. I think you will find a few surprises and maybe even a revised perspective that will be helpful as we move forward together toward establishing our Faith in Action niche.

Poverty occurs among all races and in all countries. Economic class is, of course, a continuous line without hard boundaries between the three categories: poverty, middle class, and the wealthy. Generational poverty is poverty over two generations or longer, different from

situational poverty which is more event driven (death, illness, divorce, sudden job loss, economic catastrophe, etc.). There are hidden rules that are different among those in generational poverty, middle class, and the wealthy that we bring with us based upon our individual history. Although our personal economic circumstances may rise significantly, many of the patterns of thought, social interaction, cognitive strategies, etc. remain with us. Schools and businesses operate from middle class norms and use the hidden rules of middle class. Studies have defined that the hidden middle class rules become a barrier and the hidden rules of generational poverty become a trap from which escape can be almost impossible, although some youngsters do successfully escape in the right circumstances. Verlane Mack, who runs the Head Start organization in the Middle Peninsula, points to these upwardly mobile youngsters as proof that ending generational poverty is a reasonable goal. Verlane, an Alabama native, is from that culture.

The data helps define poverty's condition: Regardless of race or ethnicity, poor children are much more likely to suffer developmental delay and damage, to drop out of high school, and to give birth during the teen years. They are more likely to be in single-parent families. Those living in families with a female householder and no husband present experience a poverty rate of 50%, more than five times the rate for children in married-couples families which hovers below 9%. Poor children are seven times more likely to be victims of child abuse and neglect.

The cultural differences are complex, but let's take a look at a few.

Possessions: For wealthy, one of a kind items, legacies, pedigrees. For the middle class, things. For those in generational poverty, it's people. The attachment to "your" people is strong. Charley taught GED in Warsaw awhile back that included how to read a map. When your priority is to your people, usually defined geographically as pretty close together, you don't have either a need or interest to go beyond the familiar. Nearly all of us here this morning have traded that attachment to our people for things and, for now, we are now each others new people.

Money: For the wealthy, to be conserved and invested. For the middle class, to be managed. For those in poverty, to use, to be spent.

Personality: For the wealthy, personality is for connections. Financial, political, social connections are highly valued. For the middle class, for acquisition and stability. Achievement is highly valued. In poverty, personality is for entertainment. Sense of humor is highly valued.

Social Emphasis: For the wealthy, emphasis on social exclusion. For the middle class, emphasis on self governance and self-sufficiency. For poverty, active social inclusion of people you like.

Destiny: For the wealthy, the obligation of the elite to serve. Noblesse oblige. For the middle class, belief is in choice. The future can be changed with good choices now. For poverty, belief is in fate. Cannot do much to mitigate chance.

Love and Acceptance; For the wealthy, tends to be conditional and related to social standing and connections. For the middle class conditional also but more achievement based. And for poverty, based upon whether the individual is liked.

Family structure: Most of us know that for poverty, family structure tends to be matriarchal. For middle class, patriarchal. And for the wealthy, it depends upon who has the money.

And there are more cultural markers but that is sufficient for us to grasp some of the distinctions.

We all have a set of resources to draw upon. The characteristics of an individual's resources are what makes the difference.

Financial Resources: while important, does not explain the differences in success with which individuals leave poverty nor the reasons that many stay in poverty. That's why just giving money doesn't usually change long term outcomes.

Emotional Resources: provide the stamina to withstand difficulty and uncomfortable emotional situations and feelings. Emotional resources are the most important of all resources because the ability to step away from one's upbringing, break with one's situation while entering a new and uncomfortable one, and persist and stay focused while learning a new set of hidden rules becomes proof that emotional resources are present.

Mental Resources: simply learning to process information and use it in daily living. If one never learns to think clearly, sorting good decisions from bad or making cause and effect connections does not come easily. Also, if an individual can read, write, and compute, that person can access information and become somewhat self-sufficient.

Spiritual Resources: a belief in a purposeful life and that worth and love contribute to that purpose. This powerful resource helps us recognize that we are not hopeless and useless, but rather capable and having worth and value.

Support System: a who to go to when help is needed, whether that help is help with homework, is help due to sickness, is help for emotional needs to buck up your spirits, or for when funds are short.

Relationship / Role Models: All individuals have role models. Is that role model nurturing, appropriate, successful, gender matched? It is largely from role models that a person learns how to live emotionally.

Knowledge of Hidden Rules: crucial to whatever class in which the individual wishes to live. Hidden rules exist in poverty, in middle class, and in wealth, as well as ethnic groups and other units of people. Hidden rules are about the salient, unspoken understandings that cue the members of the group that this individual does or does not fit. For example, three of the hidden rules in generational poverty are: The noise level is high (the TV is always on and

everyone may talk at once), the most important information is non-verbal, and one of the main values of an individual to the group is an ability to entertain. Generally, in order for a child to successfully move out of that class into middle class, it is important to learn from someone that can model and teach middle class hidden rules. To preserve ones family ties and home culture, a child needs to become the equivalent of being bi-lingual, fluent in both cultures. Our schools and businesses operate on middle class hidden rules. Children are lightning fast learners of languages and cultures compared to adults for very specific reasons due to brain chemistry that I would be happy to explain at another time.

Let's focus a bit on these hidden rules that might help us with understanding and respecting these cultural differences and why being bi-cultural is not easy.

Discipline in generational poverty is about penance and forgiveness, not about change of behavior. The typical pattern for discipline is that mother, the most powerful figure in generational poverty as "keeper of the soul," will verbally chastise the child, or physically beat the child, then forgive and feed the child. The hidden rule about food in poverty is that food is equated with love. People outside of poverty often misunderstand the role of punishment in generational poverty. Individuals usually have a strong belief in fate and destiny, therefore to expect changed behavior after punishment is, in many if not most cases, a false hope.

The line between legal and illegal is thin. A lack of resources, far beyond just financial resources, means that the individual may need to spend periods of time in jail for crossing those lines because he/she does not have the emotional, mental, spiritual, or role model resources to avoid it. And jail is a part of life, even predestined, and not always seen as bad. In middle class culture, jail time is to be avoided at all costs and jail is thought to change behavior, rather than just a cost of living, a penalty for doing something contrary to some law.

Extra money results in being besieged by others. One of the hidden rules in poverty is any extra money is shared quickly or spent on entertainment since there is a clear belief that one will never get ahead. There is the story of a Texas Elementary school faculty that got together to purchase a refrigerator for a family with students in the school who lacked that critical resource for quality food preservation. Shortly after the delivery of the refrigerator, all of the children from the family were absent from school for a week. Upon their return, the teachers learned the family had sold the refrigerator and went camping for the period of time the children were gone. The hidden rules of generational poverty of immediately spending extra money and highly valuing entertainment had set the family priorities. In poverty, people not things are the priority possessions. People can rely upon one another. A person does not want to be left out in the cold for refusing to share. Middle class leans toward possessions being the priority.

Survival trumps many other considerations and that perspective is communicated to the children. If mother's car breaks down, mother may decide her best path forward is to let an old boyfriend know of her dilemma. Values are important but they don't put food on the table. With no other emotional resource and by the hidden rules of generational poverty, she might get her car fixed and have an entertaining evening out on the town as well.

Knowledge of language and its use is part of each child's learning process. In formal English, the pattern is to generally get straight to the point. In casual English, the pattern can typically be to go around and around and finally get to the point. This casual English is the language a child first acquires. Formal English is the language of the larger society that we subsequently learn and must be able to use to function in the larger society. Formal English, referred to as secondary discourse, is critical as it is also the organizational pattern of information. Acquisition comes from having significant relationships with individuals with those skills. Children who make the transition earlier do much better in school as they can organize and logically communicate their thoughts. In the oral-language culture of generational poverty, the transition needs to be specifically taught since lacking significant relationships with a person with those skills it does not follow naturally as it does in middle class culture.

Those who learn which hidden rules, which cultural differences apply in which situations, can become bi-cultural, in a sense, bi-lingual. Just as the savvy among the wealthy recognize that name dropping, revealing that your favorite restaurant is in Rio, or discussing the pros and cons of the various models of Lear jets brings derision, not admiration, among the middle class, those from generational poverty need bicultural skills to reap the advantages and security of the education and business world operating under middle class hidden rules. And that happens best at the very earliest ages.

I've told some of you about the little girl neighbor of ours in Germany. She was about 3 ½, maybe four. Her father was an auditor with General Motors, an American. Her mother was German. The family had just come from an assignment in Portugal. The little girl would wander into our home to talk to me. If I started in English, she would continue in English until she got stuck on a word and switch to German. We would continue in German until she perceived I was struggling and she would switch to Portuguese. When she saw my completely blank look, she would switch back to German, or maybe English. The cultural equivalent, being able to automatically function in either culture, taught through socialization and preparation to enter our educational system, can be the key the children of generational poverty need to give them the opportunity to do well in school and beyond, to live a healthier, safer, more productive life.

And that is what our Fellowship's three Niche sub-committees are working on—figuring out the best way to make that happen for the children of our book.