

POVERELLO NEWS



JUNE 2015

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*Now I'm tired and I'm old and I haven't
much gold,
Maybe things ain't been all that I planned,
But Lord above hear my plea, when it's time
to judge me
Take a look at these hard working hands*

—Lyrics by Don Robey

One of my quirks is that when I get an idea in my head for a picture I want to take, I can't rest until it's done. Sometimes this creative streak works itself into great photo essay; sometimes the pictures (under the advisement of wiser heads than mine) never see the light of day.

Recently I again got the obsession. In my semi-invalid state, I don't move around much. I sit on my perch in the dayroom, and do a lot more observing than I used to, and lately I've been noticing people's hands.

That old song quoted above was performed by several people, including Johnny Cash. We often judge people by their looks, their deeds, or their income. Maybe this song has something to say about a better way to view people.

Hands tell stories, and not in the way palm readers say they do. Calloused hands that are bent and inflamed, with embedded dirt and cracked skin, tell one kind of tale. Such hands can convey the fact that the person to whom they belong has labored long and hard in his

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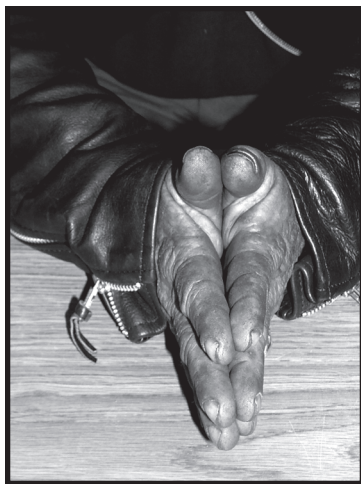
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or her life, and, as such, might be someone who is honest (because he/she chose to work rather than steal), self-reliant, and possibly wise.

An old veteran who used to regularly eat at Poverello House had gnarled, horribly twisted hands with swollen knuckles on all his fingers. The first thought someone might have had upon encountering this man would be that he had severe arthritis. That may have been an accurate assessment, but the main source of his deformities was not a naturally-occurring rheumatism, but rather torture that he endured during the Korean War. He was captured and the enemy smashed his fingers and broke his hands, among other atrocities. He talked freely about the ordeal, and denied that it had resulted in a lasting impact on his psyche, but then, you could always smell alcohol on his breath as he spoke. Perhaps his hands and his boozy breath revealed more about his inner demons than he ever would willingly acknowledge.



Conversely, smooth hands are like an unexpressive face: they convey little about the person, other than the fact that he or she hasn't spent much time doing manual labor. Such a person could have made a living at a computer job, as a bank teller, a retail clerk, or even conning others out of their life savings. There's really little that you can definitively read from such hands, other than the fact that the person hasn't been a mechanic, farm worker, or carpenter.

For someone like me, with a habit of making odd observations, Poverello House clients offer a wealth of information through their hands. Something else I've noticed is that the hands have changed over the years. In the 1970s, when most of the people we served were older alcoholics and heroin addicts, almost all of them had hard-luck hands, full of character. Nowadays, one can find more

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soft hands without much wear. Many of the addicts here have been using drugs since their youth, and survived by drug dealing, stealing, and other criminal ways of earning money. Unlike the drunks and junkies of the old days, they haven't worked in the fields or in construction. Their lives may have been horrible, but they have also been less physically taxing.

Reading hands is a deductive process that is prone to error. The generalities I just described could be way off. But maybe Johnny Cash was onto something. Perhaps when it's time to judge the homeless, the Good Lord will look at their hands, and see that in spite of their failures, many of them did the best they could with the lot they were given in life. I imagine that the merciful God I know will take into account the calluses, broken fingernails and leathery skin, and show some grace to many people who could never find it here on this earth.

Mike

The Poor and the Powerless

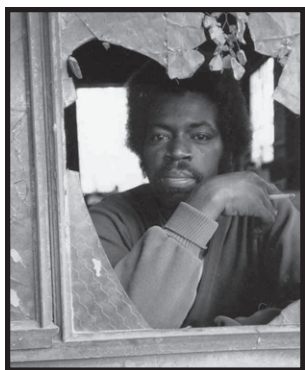
Bryan Stevenson is a Harvard-educated attorney who, instead of pursuing power and wealth with his law degree, chose to struggle financially for years in order to help death row inmates in the South. His reason was simple: time after time, he encountered men and women on death row who were either completely innocent or had been unjustly sentenced to death when their crimes fell far short of capital murder. He later expanded his mission to include people who were convicted when they were minors and given life sentences, and convicts with mental illnesses, whose conditions were not given proper consideration during their trials.

Mr. Stevenson wrote about some of these experiences in his book, *Just Mercy*. There is a common thread throughout all of the cases he's taken on: because they were poor, none of his clients had received decent legal representation, resulting in gross injustices being perpetrated by a legal system that was sometimes corrupt,

sometimes racist, but more often than not stubbornly unwilling to re-examine its mistakes in arresting, trying and convicting these prisoners.

Over the years, Mr. Stevenson has won freedom for dozens of people wrongly convicted, and has been able to help mitigate the harsh, unjust sentences of many others. His secret weapons are his brilliant mind devoted to helping the poor, dogged persistence, and an unwavering belief that the destitute and powerless have as much right to competent legal representation as do the wealthy and influential. His most recent triumph was gaining freedom last April for an innocent man who had been on Alabama's death row for *thirty years*. Mr. Stevenson worked on the case for sixteen years. Such is his level of commitment.

People like Bryan Stevenson are rare, but unfortunately, poor and powerless people are not. Homeless people especially are vulnerable to being abused by unsympathetic bureaucracies.



Homelessness almost always involves contact with the legal and social service systems. Many homeless mentally ill people end up incarcerated, and their symptoms go untreated while in jail. In welfare agencies, overworked social workers tend to dispense benefits without taking the time to find out what a homeless person's deeper needs are.

We wish that Poverello House had the answers for such situations. In some cases, we can intervene and make things better. Maybe we can take a schizophrenic to an appointment at County Mental Health, and thus prevent a psychotic break that might lead to an arrest. Perhaps we can get an addict into our drug treatment program so that he's not using food stamps to trade for drugs. Our goal is to do what we can, and continue to do so 365 days a year.

It's not enough; it never is, and never will be. Bryan Stevenson had to come to terms with the fact that he couldn't save everyone he represented, and that thousands of people he had never even met

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would never receive justice. Yet he has persisted, year after year, in his Sisyphean task of giving new chances to those who had been trampled by a broken, cynical legal system.

At Poverello, we too realize that there are so few who will be freed from the prison of homelessness as a result of our efforts. Yet, we continue to keep our doors and hearts open, spurred on by the thousands of volunteers and donors who make our mission possible, and the awareness that if we don't try to help, then who will?

The Father's Day Conundrum

For many of us, Father's Day is an opportunity to demonstrate our appreciation for the men who raised us, loved us, and gave us a solid footing upon which to begin our lives. For others, it is a day of mourning for the loss of that all-important parental figure, either through death, divorce or abandonment.

There is yet another category of sons and daughters: people who are utterly confused about how they should feel toward their dads. This confusion often fuels self-loathing, leading to destructive behavior and despair.

Founder Mike McGarvin's complex and damaged relationship with his father is in some ways similar to the relationships of many homeless people. Mike has detailed his father's alcoholism and abuse in his autobiography, *Papa Mike*. As a result of Lyle McGarvin's treatment of his son, Mike was left with a burning hatred, complicated by a feeling of complete incomprehension about his father's angry, senseless behavior.

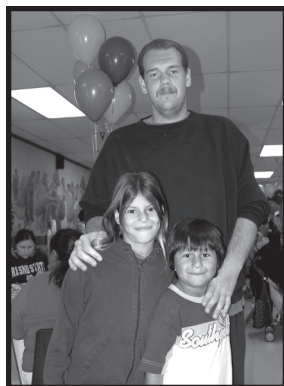
Recently, Mike shared that at the age of seventy-one, he has finally found a way of reconciling his feelings. If it's taken Mike seven decades to reach this point of acceptance about his father, imagine the difficulties that homeless people have in similar situations.

Years ago, Mike did an informal survey of men in our residential drug program. Every one of them said that they had been abused by parents. Allowing for the exaggeration and occasional lie of the normative drug addict, this is still an astonishing report. Although

strictly speaking, correlation does not imply causation, common sense would direct us to the conclusion that these men's addictions and homelessness were most likely linked to physical and psychological abuse suffered at a very early age.

For such people, Father's Day represents a devastating reminder that there is something huge missing from their lives, a void and emotional anguish so primal and significant that no amount of drugs or alcohol could ever completely numb the pain.

Mike found some healing by finding father substitutes, such as the priest Simon Scanlon, who gave him intangible gifts such as acceptance, guidance, and kindness. Homeless addicts and alcoholics often have to find similar father figures in order to achieve sobriety and leave homelessness behind. Many encounter such people in recovery programs or churches; many embrace God and discover the unconditional love that their own fathers denied them.



When we celebrate Father's Day, especially here at Poverello, it is with the realization that the world is full of both good and bad fathers. Part of our work in our drug rehabilitation program is to help our men deal with the brokenness caused by their fathers. In doing so, we hope to break the cycle of abuse and assist these men in becoming committed, wise, and loving dads to their own children. Maybe someday, Fathers' Day will be something these men can anticipate with excitement rather than dread.

June Wish List

Letter-sized copy paper * Canned vegetables & soup

To donate online, visit our website at www.poverellohouse.org

Remember, we now take credit card donations. Please see the enclosed envelope for instructions.

Poverello House

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FORWARDING SERVICE REQUESTED

Who Are We? A nonprofit, nondenominational organization that believes in the dignity of every human being. Our mission is to enrich the lives and spirits of all who pass our way, to feed the hungry, offer focused rehabilitation programs, temporary shelter, medical, dental and other basic services to the poor, the homeless, and the disadvantaged unconditionally, without regard to race, color, religion, national origin, age, sex or disability, through Providential and community support. We have been operating since 1973 and are governed by a Board of Directors, consisting of local volunteer business men and women.

Future Goals? To provide additional facilities for increased services.

How Are We Funded? Primarily through private donations from individuals, churches, businesses, and community organizations; and through United Way. Rules for acceptance and participation in the programs of Poverello House are the same for everyone, without regard to race, color, national origin, age, sex or disability.



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