

Voices of Generational Poverty

My Story . . . and Why It Matters

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I grew up simultaneously rich and poor. Rich because my father's passion was farming, dairy farming, to be specific. Our old family farm, barn, house, and grounds were overrun with cows, pigs, chickens, dogs, cats, and other assorted creatures. While I, in no uncertain terms, didn't appreciate the four-legged animals that shared our living space, they did provide us with an abundance of eggs, milk, and meat.

I was also rich in another way. Though neither parent valued education, my mother loved to read. And obviously, her time was at a premium, with a large farm family, and few modern amenities to make domestic life easier. But she read whenever she could spare a bit of time.

Value of Reading

While we had nine children, Mom always said we had three families of three children each, because of the manner the nine of us were grouped throughout the twenty-one years she and Dad had children. Mom shared her love of reading with the three youngest of us by either reading to us, or telling us stories, every night.

She also took us to the tiny red brick public library in the center of the quaint village near our farm. A trip to the library allowed each of us to find books we enjoyed. I used to check out as many as allowed, and how I wished I could keep them.

Additionally, each of the three of us was given a fifty-cent allowance when the "milk check" arrived twice a month. When Mom shopped at the local grocery

store, I went to the adjacent newsstand to peruse the comic books, the only books for children it sold, and the only books my fifty cents could buy. I'd search through the comics to find one Mom would approve of, usually settling on the latest Archie edition. I would devour it on the way home and treasure my growing pile. *These books were mine.*

Effects of Generational Poverty

I was a child of generational poverty on both sides of my extended family. The Great Depression permanently scarred both parents, but particularly my mother. Until the day she died at 100 years old, Mother wove tales to anyone who would listen about the dandelion soup her mother used to make to have something hot to serve her family.

On my father's side, the story was less severe. My grandfather was a railroad engineer who managed to stay employed throughout the Great Depression and was able to secure a job for my father as well, if only my father would accept it.

Neither parent valued education; in fact, it was openly devalued. Furthermore, my father didn't allow his six sons the option of following their passions, as my grandfather had done



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for my father. Instead, each was expected to quit school and be farmers, and were openly ridiculed if they didn't want to.

I had seven older siblings to do most of the hard physical labor. But also cursed because I was tormented by those seven older siblings. Blessed because I was a girl, and my father didn't expect me to devote myself to farming. Cursed because females were to take care of their husbands and children, the only definition by which women were measured for success. I remember my mother's mantra well—*family takes care of family*. And she used it on many occasions, to defend myriad situations.

Saving Graces

So how did I turn out to be an active wife, mother, PhD, teacher/librarian, author, writer, speaker, and consultant?

- An aunt who cared about me as an individual always affirmed and encouraged me to be my best and achieve.
- I was a natural born student academically, who thrived in the school environment.
- I had a strong desire to achieve, which unlike my parents and siblings, was combined with a sense of planning and preparation.

Years later, I realized that my “otherness,” distancing myself from familial patterns, and my lack of close ties with family helped, rather than hindered, my independence.

Many researchers who write about generational poverty haven't lived that life. I liken this situation to an oncologist whom you consult upon being diagnosed with cancer. They may be the best educated, know anatomy and physiology and the disease backward and forward. They may be completely knowledgeable about the treatments, and which are best for you. But they have no idea how you feel.

For more children, digging themselves out of generational poverty is nearly impossible because of the often-insurmountable obstacles put in place by institutional racism, sexism, ageism, and the ties of family and community that suck them back in.

What often keeps children in generational poverty is not the lack of supports that researchers such as Ruby Payne reveal are needed (though they are needed), but it's the child's inability to turn their back on everyone and everything that they grew up with. It's emotionally too difficult. What professionals, who predominantly come from middle class backgrounds, who now work with these children, need to understand is that conditions are well beyond their control, and they are beyond one's control.

Serving Youth Living in Generational Poverty

Many classroom teachers, librarians, social workers, and other professionals in the United States were raised in middle class homes, fortunately for them. According to the Children's Defense Fund, nearly 20 percent of school age children in the United States are being raised in poverty.¹ If we as a collective group of professionals don't understand these children and their families, how can we operate with the needed attitudes, resources, and partners to meet their needs?

As librarians, we need to know that we can't truly understand how children and teens living in generational poverty feel, and we can't impose our judgements, beliefs, or expectations on them or their families. Instead, here—in a nutshell—are lessons I've learned both from being a child of poverty and having provided library services for children from preschool to grad school over the last thirty years.

- Be present and respectful
- Honor their stories, skills, and knowledge
- Keep their trials and challenges in mind
- Reach out to families and ask what they need
- Ask what they really want in life, not what do you think you deserve, or often what they think they deserve
- Encourage them in their desires and provide opportunities for their choices
- Help them realize that these opportunities may never come their way again
- Don't impose your values and wishes
- Show hope and help them understand there is no one more important than them, and their needs come first
- Provide excellent literature that reflects and inspires

This is just the beginning of this conversation, and this is just one story, mine. We must talk about the power structures that hold families in generational poverty and why the cycle continues. We need more stories, more voices, and more activism. Here's my invitation to connect with me and forge forward. &

Reference

1. “Child Poverty in America 2017: National Analysis,” Children's Defense Fund, September 12, 2018, <https://www.childrensdefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Child-Poverty-in-America-2017-National-Fact-Sheet.pdf>.