



The LEADERSHIP LOG

More than 40 years of informed opinion about issues facing elders today.

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From the Desk of James F. Seagle, Jr. President, Rogerson Communities



Growing up in a blue collar family with six kids, I thought I was just as good as anybody, even the very rich; I still do. But, there is a growing pressure in our society to deny kids like I was the feeling of equality. As we become more materialistic (and believe me this is happening), the brand you buy not only signifies the quality of the item but also implies the quality of the purchaser. This is a “bill of goods” that has been inflicted upon us by the advertising and marketing industries. The messages are cleverly constructed to undermine the sense of self and the sense of belonging, and the prescribed antidote to the lowered self-esteem is to buy that preferred product.

Watching shows like *Downton Abbey* (yes, I watched it) takes us back to times when a person’s worth in society was established by birth. The program was struggling with this notion as characters from the “underclasses,” the “help” keep showing their superior noble instincts. My ideas of nobility always have to do with how one conducts oneself in the world. Have you added to the success of a noble cause? But nobility in many societies of the past and some present was/is conferred upon people by accident of ancestry. Quite frankly, I don’t know which is worse, privilege by birth or privilege by purchasing power.

Both of these constructs are artificial, albeit, powerful and both, I believe, denigrate the society in which they flourish. There is an inherent devaluation of poor people. In any discussion of diversity, I am quick to remind that income diversity must be considered as a major area of concern. The volume of bigotry leveled at the poor is really unparalleled in this country, the possible exception being ageism. Discrimination based on sex, sexual orientation, disability, race, religion and ethnicity are all in need of continued attention; but, in the past half century, tremendous strides have been made to level the playing field in these areas. If you are poor and/or old, you are arguably less valued by our society than was the case fifty years ago. It really bothers me to write this. I don’t want to believe it but I know that it is true.

There is another very worrisome dynamic at play which will potentially push us into a period of substantial civil unrest. While wealth has become the “holy grail” of social achievement, and the things one owns are more important definers of social value than that which one contributes, the gap between rich and poor is increasing exponentially. The false hope of winning the lottery will only stave off the anger for so long. As a young adult, I watched the ghettos burn. If you think it was only about race, you are mistaken. This tremendous social upheaval came at the point where the “have nots” had had enough. Freely taking violence to the streets is simply another way of saying “we have nothing to lose.”

It’s time to recommit to the kids growing up poor; to the elders aging in poverty who need to have their value to society reconfirmed. This is no liberal rant either; we really do need each one of them to be successful, to be treated decently. No democracy has ever survived where upward mobility was simply a pipe dream and the gap between rich and poor was not bridged by a strong middle class. Our societal institutions once rigged the game based on sex and race; i.e., male and white. Boy oh boy did we discriminate. Now it’s the poor who increasingly suffer the negative bias. As we should have learned by now, that bias is very expensive, costly to the individual and devastating to families, and potentially bankrupting to the broader society. ■

James