

# Forgetting the Unlearned—Again

Walter Wangerin Jr.

The debate regarding whether or not citizens should invest their own portions of the Social Security fund—the public and the congressional debate—spends much attention on the stock market: will it sustain the speculations of private investors, truly increasing the monies upon which they will retire.

The debate spends time, too, on which is the more accurate date for the effective depletion of the Social Security fund, the earlier date of the Republicans or the later date of the Democrats.

But neither side, nor any voice I've been able to hear, has spoken on behalf of the multitude of people—generally poor, often surviving on minimum wages, though working just as hard as any high-paid professional in this country—who don't know how to work the stock market. Don't know the basic mechanics of the game, let alone the subtle shiftings of the market.

What will they do, should we each be responsible for our little piles?

They will have to pay someone else to oversee the investment—and will therefore lose the money they might have saved.

Or they will do nothing and at retirement suffer the consequences.

When I worked in the inner city (1974 until the late 80's) I watched as the Reagan administration withdrew funds from such important services as the LSO, Legal Services for those who could not pay for lawyers. LSO was the only organization willing to bring suit against landlords on behalf of the poor, to protect their rights, their possessions, properties, working relationships, dignity. The office in Evansville, IN, had two full time lawyers when I entered inner-city ministry. These lawyers did not make what their colleagues did, but they had a position of reasonable income which allowed them to follow their hearts and genuinely serve others. But during the 80's the money dried up. Finally the office was left with one paralegal and two secretaries. A crucial service was taken away from them: they lost voice in the legal structures of the community. (I'm not speaking of criminal court, where the court appoints lawyers; I'm speaking of the plain business of living for those who lack status and personal authority.)

The poor have no money to hire lawyers. They have neither the time nor the education to pursue necessary legal matters on their own. Truly: it is much harder work to survive as one poor than as one with a middle-class income. And it's even worse when the poor person works full time for unskilled wages: please, just imagine all the time it takes to stand in line, to fill out forms, to apply for services from such organizations as Women with Infant Children, for food stamps. There is no insurance; there are no family doctors or dentists happy to serve at a phone call; the car is old and breaks down (if there is a car, if there's an

agent willing to insure the car); getting to the children's schools (often at great distances because of busing) presents profound difficulties.

When people who are well-heeled, well-educated, well-involved, comfortably a part of a working community; when certain people who exercise power and political clout; when folks completely ignorant of the fierce necessities of poverty say: "Let the American people take care of themselves," they crush the poor—and they don't even know what they do. By its very nature a successful society separates itself from the poor, is mildly embarrassed (if not roundly offended) by the poor, tends to blame the poor for their poverty. Such a society—by its very nature—alienates the poor, isolates them from resources and opportunities and basic relationships, and thereby makes their lives more difficult than would plain poverty alone. Within such a society the poor find themselves imprisoned by everyone else's success, locked behind the bars of society's attitudes: society becomes a wall without doors, and social animosities guard the walls against escape.

Now, then: to these who lack power, powerful people are again saying, "Go it alone. Handle your own little (Little!) portion of the social security funds."

And again the powerful people say so by saying nothing.

Under the grand principle of individual independence for the American citizen, government neglects those who are already suffering a killing independence, those for whom there are fewer and fewer agencies and services upon whom they can depend. Government smiles a fine oblivion of those who do not fit its categories.

How can the poor, the strapped, the exhausted, the uneducated play the stock market as if their old age depended upon it?

No, the entire country is not made in our middle class, money-tending image. Nor should it be. But government, ignoring the differences, cancels the differences in public discourse, support and approval. When power assumes a population to be variations all of one image, it either places the "different" on its own procrustean bed, cracking and breaking the differences into one shape, or else it consigns the "odd" to the ragged edges of society, there to scavenge and to survive on scraps.

All her life Rozaline Hildreth worked hard. She raised her children essentially alone, since her husband traveled and soon became a feckless father. Then she raised a good portion of her grandchildren. Alone.

I knew her as a parishioner of my inner city parish, a raw-boned woman of bent height, long-faced, mordantly witty, her body born to labor, her heart faithful, but her posture often weary, weary.

She did well by her children. One of her sons, John, became an extraordinary organist and a teacher of music—a man I had met when I was in college, whose skill had dazzled me then.

But the woman who worked to raise money, was by the last decade of her life also working to raise her great grandbabies. Is there anyone anywhere who, having

raised a single set of children, does not know the daily physical, emotion, spiritual, and mental cost of the job? Now, triple that. And extend the job into old age.

How can the government now contemplate forcing Rozaline to break from her double full-time labor to learn the stock market, to play the stock market, potentially to lose the support of her old age to the stock market?

I need not add the long list of names of good and faithful people whom I know personally, but whom this debate in the halls of government seems to neglect. Rozaline had a crack intelligence, human insight, experience and wisdom. She was not stupid. But neither had she time to acquire this particular slot of knowledge, handling money in the market.

Government exists to protect its citizens: against hostilities from without as well as against the hostilities of certain thoughtless elements within its borders.

Citizenship is not defined by income, nor by social status, nor by means of some most acceptable image. Each citizen ought, by citizenship alone, to receive equal protection. This is axiomatic. This is ethical. But when societies and governments are moved more by wealth than by the principles of the office—or else alert only to a particular, acceptable image in its citizenry—their very language lacks words to name and to involve the poor and the "different." We become a nation which condones and confirms an inequality at our root.

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