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THE WORKING POOR

Invisible in America



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Chapter Ten

WORK WORKS

There's a lot of talent that's been layered over with years of maybe drug abuse or alcohol abuse or physical abuse, no telling what. But the layers have begun to peel off, and . . . oh, looks like a little diamond under there.

—Leary Brock, a former addict

At first, the job trainer noticed, Peaches could barely maintain eye contact when she spoke. She looked at the floor. Her words were sometimes too quiet to be heard, too halting to be understood. Her face was the kind that attracted photographers and artists who wanted to document suffering, for it bore the ravages of her childhood abuse, her adulthood of homelessness and prostitution. The hard look of hurt had been captured in a portrait drawn by an artist on a visit to a women's shelter where she lived.

Gradually during months of employment training, she raised her gaze and found her voice. A fledgling sense of competence and possibility stirred within. She began a journey of recovery, and once she was well along, she looked again at the portrait and was stunned by the face staring back from across a gulf of healing. "It was amazing to see what was there," she said. "I really looked heavily burdened. There was dark circles under my eyes. You could visually see the weight that was on me, my actual soul."

Peaches was fairly typical of those who enrolled at the Center for Employment Training, off Pennsylvania Avenue about three miles from the White House. Many were so ruined that they had to learn the basics of arriving on time, speaking to people, answering the phone, accomplishing a task, believing in themselves. To make that happen, the trainers had to find the light within each person and turn it on. Then, after four to eight months of instruction, every one had to be matched with a decent job.

Peaches sat at a computer, sliding the mouse, clicking, typing. The instructor, Dwayne Harris, leaned over her shoulder, gently prompting her to create a graphic heading on a document. "Now, click into your text box there," he said. "No, you don't want to do that. Delete your whole box. Now select that text. No, don't paste it. You want to put that cursor inside the box." Softly, kindly, he corrected and taught. Frustrated, she slapped the table lightly, and he finally took the cursor, made the box for her, and then talked her through the rest of the steps. "When did you last save?" he asked.

The trainees, or "team members," were all adults, but they respected an old-fashioned style of hierarchy by calling their instructor "Mr. Harris." He had come to this job after retiring as a sergeant with twenty-one years in the U.S. Marines, where he had learned lessons applicable here. "I had young marines that everybody's given up on," he said. "It was a challenge." It was a challenge he enjoyed. Like all his trainees, he was black, and he had close rapport with them. He was steady, demanding, and warmly supportive, creating in the large classroom the businesslike atmosphere of a real office where you were expected to come to work punctually, dress appropriately, apply yourself diligently, and produce. Random drug testing was done as well: One strike and you were out.

The job-training program had started as a simple soup kitchen. In 1970 the Reverend Horace McKenna, a Catholic priest, began to feed the homeless out of a dining room on North Capitol Street, and the organization *So Others Might Eat* was conceived. As each layer of problems was uncovered, *SOME* added a layer of programs. Many of those being fed were drug addicts, so in 1975 a treatment program was added. Even after treatment, many still found it hard to get decent housing and move into a productive life, so in 1988 a halfway house was created where recovering addicts could live for ninety days in a structured setting while they looked for work and garnered support from staff and peers. Housing remained a problem, so the following year a single-room-occupancy building was added for the

formerly homeless. Many addicts had trouble kicking the habit in the vicinity of their old temptations, and in 1991, SOME intensified drug treatment by creating a ninety-day program on a forty-five-acre retreat, Exodus House, in West Virginia. Most still lacked the skills to enter the job market, so in 1998 SOME turned an unused Catholic school into the Center for Employment Training, with courses in office skills, building maintenance, and nursing. Trainees were also taught how to write résumés, how to perform in interviews, and how to speak before groups of co-workers.

"Every team member has to experience a success a day," declared the center's deputy director, Scott Faulstick, in recognition of the patterns of failure that had brought the trainees there. "That's part of the motivational technique. Some have never touched a computer. Turning it on and getting into the program is a success. The first thing the building maintenance instructor has them do is build a toolbox. It's fairly simple, but it's a physical sign of their success. Then they get to more difficult things like soldering pipes and hooking up electrical outlets. There's a lot of fear. That's a major barrier. It's like, 'I've never been successful before, why should I be successful now? No one's expected me to be successful. No one's wanted me to be successful. No one cares if I was successful or not.' So there's a lot of fear about trying new things and breaking out of a shell."

One way to crack the shell was a morning routine of brief talks by team members, sometimes on prepared subjects they had to research, sometimes extemporaneously. A great deal of growing took place during the exercise. At first, the experience was excruciating: the awkwardness, the shame, the anxiety, the staring faces of strangers, the expectant silence in the room, the trainee's quiet conviction that nothing she had to say was worth hearing. Gradually, though, as a sense of community emerged within the team, as the problems and burdens of each were revealed as common to all, the eyes came up off the floor, the words came more clearly, the voices grew steady, the confidence built until adults who had failed again and again were beginning to succeed at a crucial element of life on the job: communicating with people.

Peaches remembered little speeches on the topic of self-esteem. "There was not a dry eye in the house, I mean from young to old, man or woman, I mean, somebody was saying . . . 'I know where you're coming from.' Just having a forum where you could let it out, and letting it out in a place where there's no fear. . . . Crying to myself didn't get it out."

One morning Mr. Harris called his trainees to the conference table for

impromptu presentations on less personal, office-related topics. "What does 'impromptu' mean?" he asked them.

"Spur of the moment," someone said.

He asked the group for a topic. "Communication between employer and employee," one suggested, and Mr. Harris illustrated with a concise, one-minute discussion of the utility of good communication in avoiding stress, removing barriers. Then he called on Della, a young woman in a purple and cream pants suit, and someone chose "dress code" as the subject.

She jumped in nervously. "The importance of the dress code in the workplace," she began, and then stopped.

"Don't just spit it out," Mr. Harris counseled. "Take a minute."

"Part of the dress code in the workplace is to look presentable," she continued. "Don't just come in looking any kind of way." She fell into a long pause, put her hand to her cheeks, to her chin, searched desperately for more ideas. Mr. Harris did not rescue her. "I think," she said finally, "I look nice, and I just try to." She sat down to scattered applause.

"We're gonna work on that," Mr. Harris said. "It's not that easy."

There was no false praise in this room, but there was more support than Peaches had ever had in her life. She had arrived "dark and dirty and nappy and argumentative," she said, using some of the derogatory words ascribed to her as a child. "I would come here and wouldn't go to lunch because I couldn't afford to have lunch. I sat here hungry. And Shelley [the support adviser] took it upon herself to say, 'Wait, you can't function if you're hungry.' And she just went out, got some peanut butter and jelly and some bread. We made a sandwich. Because you can't function if you're hungry. That's going above and beyond . . . and that Mr. Harris, he walk with you and talk with you. He says, 'You got something on your mind?' . . . When I leave here I can get on the phone and say, 'Shelley, I come up against this,' or, 'Mr. Harris, I come up against this.' 'Mr. Faulstick, dog-gone it, how do I do it? I'm over here and I want to move laterally in this job, and I want to go to school, what do I do? How do I approach this?' I can always ask. It's family here. It's family here. Something that really I have not had. Something that a lot of people here have not had."

So, it was a healing process as well as a training process. "I still have some of those demons," Peaches said, "but I'm feeling much better." She held up SOME's latest newsletter. "I actually produced this," she declared. "This actually went to five hundred people. OK, I can do something. I created this."

The creation came out looking rather grand on her curriculum vitae, thanks to the wordsmithing skills of Kathy Troutman, who ran workshops on the art of résumé writing. She was white and middle class, but if trainees felt a barrier, she quickly lowered it by revealing that she was a single mother and a college dropout. "I don't recommend not going to college," she said, "but you have to survive." Around the table, heads nodded. They were with her.

When they organized their lives, she advised them, they should think about how it would look on their résumés. "It's important," she said, "to do community service and not do dumb things. And not work at McDonald's for four years. What are you going to do with that on a résumé? You learn corporate rules, service, sanitation—OK, do it for one year. Don't do it for four years." Flesh out every bit of education and experience, she urged. "SOME Center for Employment Training. Certificate, name of program," she dictated. "You have to describe the program, number of hours: 960 building maintenance and construction, 810 office skills. Classroom and hands-on training hours." She fed them the lingo, translating the mundane into the special, and suggested that they read the want ads to select the right vocabulary. "The more key words you can use from the industry you're going into, the more you seem to know about it and seem to be part of it," she said. Typing, for instance, became "keyboard skills." Remedial English became "business communication and interpersonal skills."

As Kathy teased out the details of their training and made a list of impressive accomplishments, they all began to sit a little taller. When she learned that the building maintenance class had been renovating the center, she got very excited. "This is a job," she declared. "Major projects. Write them down. 'Building a classroom. Tenant build-out. Tear out the walls, put up new ones. Electrical work to support office technology. Major renovation of an office technology classroom with special electrical and lighting to support computer technology.' You've got to learn to write down what you do." When she heard about the newsletter, she said: " 'Graphics. Publishing.' Let's call it 'desktop publishing.' In parentheses put 'Microsoft Publisher,' because that means you're really going to be a smart office automation person, not just inputting data."

Then, somebody uttered the magic word "team," and Kathy was delighted. "Somewhere we have to get teamwork in there," she declared. "Teamwork is so hot in the real world. So you're completing projects as a

member of a team. I like that. I like that. You can talk about that in an interview. They'll fall over."

The interview loomed as a nightmare. As trainees gathered for another workshop, a consultant named Pat asked which of them had ever been through a job interview. Half raised their hands, but half did not. She asked what words they associated with the experience. They said: fear, trickery, worried, confused, intense, inadequate, questions, and overwhelming. One man added: confident. He was targeted with skeptical looks.

"Sit a little taller," she told them. "Sit up straight." They did. Know about the job, she said, arrive at the interview on time. Dress neatly. Ask questions about the company's career possibilities, the job responsibilities. Answer questions by sticking to what's relevant about the job. They worried about gaps in their résumés, owing to stints on welfare, on drugs, or in prison. "Honesty is the code of the road," she advised, and gave them tips: Focus on what they could do right in the job, not what they had done wrong in the past. Then she took them through a drill using the questions they feared.

"Why should I hire you?" a trainee asked.

"I get along with people," Pat replied. "I am used to being a team player. . . . Don't worry about criminal history. You just focus on your background that applies to your job."

"Do you have any trouble with authority?" another trainee suggested.

"No." That's a confident answer. You're sitting up straight in your seat and you're saying, "No, I don't."

"Tell me about yourself."

"They really don't want your life history. 'Well, I would like you to know that I am a very good worker and I can do this job in a very responsible way.' You don't have to give a sermon for twenty-five minutes."

"Where do you see yourself in two years?"

This time a trainee answered. "I plan on getting myself more prepared to climb the ladder in this field and possibly move up the ladder within this company."

"Oh!" Pat exclaimed. "Music to the employer's ears."

And what if they were asked why they had left their previous employer, or why they had bounced from job to job?

"You have to think of something," she told them. "Let me make a suggestion: 'Yes, in my earlier years I had many terminations, but I am moving

forward to turn my life around. I have attended this program, I am basically a responsible person, a hard worker, and'—again, you have to be honest—I guarantee you will not be sorry you hired me.' But you see what you have to do? You have to have the mental confidence in your head."

All this worked. The Xerox Corporation needed motivated people to staff mail rooms and photocopying centers for lobbyists, law firms, and government agencies; signed up for a welfare-to-work program; got \$1 million a year in tax breaks; and hired four from this batch of trainees. Peaches was one of them. So was Wendy Waxler, the single mother whose daughter had cerebral palsy. The company trained them to operate and maintain equipment that could print, sort, and bind full-color reports. Their salaries started at \$8 an hour and moved quickly to \$10, with health insurance and other benefits. So dramatic was their turnaround that Xerox honored them (and itself) at various ceremonies, including one in Chicago where Wendy spoke with President Clinton in attendance. "He congratulated me on my speech and everything," she said, bubbling, "told me how much he liked it, gave me a hug and had me smile at the camera." She giggled like a schoolgirl. "The picture was all over Xerox, in the Xerox newspaper, in *Jet* magazine." She then accepted an invitation to take her daughter for a visit with Clinton in the Oval Office. Several years later, when her daughter's condition worsened, Wendy had to quit her job to manage medical care for the girl, who at age six weighed just twenty-five pounds. Wendy went back on welfare, but it wouldn't be for long, she was sure, because her training and good performance record propelled her into a school for computer technicians and website designers, paid by welfare. She was confident that she would soon have some real earning power.

Peaches was also pleased with herself, even though she still felt poor. "I'm a working welfare woman," she declared. "Yeah, I'm working, and I'm getting about as much as this woman sitting on her behind doing nothing. I'm a working welfare woman. I don't have enough money to go anywhere, do anything. . . . She's sittin' at home looking at soap operas, getting her hair done and her nails done." Peaches laughed deeply. "And I'm scrambling like I don't know what. I'm a working welfare woman."

The expenses of work, which for women include not only transportation but usually child care and new clothes, make the transition stressful financially. Still, Peaches found ways to dress fairly well in \$25 outfits from thrift shops, though they were out of style. She put aside enough money for an apartment. She started a little business on the side, arranging gift

baskets of silk flowers. She began to taste the refreshing breeze of freedom, and she let herself dream a little. "I can go to New York and see it if I choose to," she said with a wistful smile. "Let's do lunch, let's do dinner, let's go to—what is the place, oh, my goodness, I can't even think of it—the Kennedy Center. Whatever. I plan on going to the Bahamas. . . . By myself or with somebody, I'm going to the Bahamas, because I want to. New Orleans, because I want to. And not feel bad about it. And do it and be secure in the fact that I can do it . . . so I can enjoy myself and be a real person and have something to talk about besides who screwed who, who shot who, so and so's dead."

Contact with new, more successful people has been a boon of going to work, say many who have moved off welfare and out of stifling circles of indigence. Encounters with achieving colleagues can revive, broaden, and educate. Wanda Roundtree, for example, who made \$22,000 as a secretary in a Kansas City office, got unexpected advice on child rearing from her boss. "She says, 'Wanda, try this,' and, 'Wanda, try that. And don't hit 'em. Do this.' And I stopped hitting them and I started doing some of the things that she suggested, and it worked. And I was like, 'Wow! I like this!' She was like, 'Give 'em those.' She told me about the Rugrat books and the magazines and the *Sports Illustrated*."

Some employers awaken to surprising possibilities as well. Xerox found the ex-addicts and ex-welfare recipients who graduated from SOME's training center more reliable than walk-in applicants, said Beverly Smith, the company's local staffing and development manager, so she decided not to hire anyone who hadn't been through such a program. "They do the work-ready part," she said, "which makes the transition easier . . . to get them motivated and back in the mode of getting up in the morning." In her experience, training courses without the "soft skills" component graduated workers who let child care, transportation, and financial mismanagement defeat them on the job—"getting paid on Friday and by Tuesday not having transportation money," she observed. Hiring welfare recipients through the good training programs "has enabled us to have a larger pool of talent" and "has eased our training efforts."

Here was a key to moving people from welfare to work: Make the process beneficial to business. In many parts of the country, welfare reform stimulated cooperation between private industry and nonprofit organizations. Corporate executives were given a major role in a Kansas City effort that blended government and private funds, and combined business, anti-

poverty organizations, and city government to train people for the workplace. In Cleveland, to make sure the instruction focused on jobs that actually existed, the board of the Cleveland Center for Employment Training was dominated by executives from local industries that donated equipment and hired many of the trainees. In other words, the job training was meshed with the demands of the labor market. This may sound like common sense, but it has not characterized every government-funded program.

Success meant a symbiosis between the worlds of profit and nonprofit, a mutual benefit that sometimes looked like a healthy subsidy for private industry. An example could be seen at the edge of a tax-abated industrial park in rural Kentucky, where Jackson County Rehabilitation Industries, a nonprofit job-training enterprise, had contracts to make appliance cables for Mid-South Electric, a few hundred yards away. Impoverished white women from Appalachia sat at machines that cut brown wires into precise lengths and fastened terminals on the ends. Other women and men, sitting before big tilted boards bearing spools of wire, laced intricate telecommunications cables, tying them together with plastic thread the size of dental floss. A "clean room" encased in hanging clear plastic was being built in the hope of getting contracts from Lucent and Hewlett-Packard. Completed wiring would have been cheaper to make in Mexico but costlier at most other American manufacturers because Rehabilitation Industries had to cover only 70 to 80 percent of its expenses through sales; the rest came from government grants. The trainees, there for ninety days, got minimum wage and lower benefits than at similar jobs at private firms, where most of them would eventually end up working.

Such mini-companies, sometimes called rehabilitation workshops, have no need to pretend that they are a demanding workplace. They are. Since they don't have to make a profit, and they get government funding to put trainees in authentic working situations, they can often underbid profit-oriented competitors who are in the same business of assembling and packaging products for larger concerns. Everybody seems to win—except the small competitors. The large manufacturers save money, and the trainees train realistically enough to become desirable employees elsewhere.

There are downsides. The trainees are non-unionized, and they are sometimes sent with their low wages to do contract labor inside privately owned factories, which don't have to pay for medical insurance, vacation time, or other benefits. This adds to the practice of outsourcing jobs once

performed by full-time employees, which undermines benefits and depresses wages. On the other hand, as the corporations get cheap labor, the trainees get valuable work experience. In Chicago about 40 of the 250 workers in a Turtle Wax factory came from Options for People, a job-training program whose executive committee chairman, Denis J. Healy, was also chairman of Turtle Wax. As part of its contract, Options even sent supervisors to the factory to relieve Turtle Wax of the task of overseeing the low-wage workers who stacked boxes and performed other unskilled labor. It was a sweetheart deal for Turtle Wax, but it was also a good entry point for trainees from Options, many of whom became regular employees with opportunities for promotion. Options graduates made up more than half the factory's full-time workforce, and a couple of them moved up to middle management.

On the other hand, such job-training programs rarely train workers in their rights. The entire burden rests on the trainee to be good enough to get a job, not on the employer to be good enough to provide decent pay and working conditions. No true empowerment takes place, and the hiring process itself militates against the worker enjoying even a fleeting sense of leverage. Barbara Ehrenreich observes as much in Wal-Mart's hiring process. "First you are an applicant, then suddenly you are an orientee," she writes. "You're handed the application form and, a few days later, you're being handed the uniform and warned against nose rings and stealing. There's no intermediate point in the process in which you confront the potential employer as a free agent, entitled to cut her own deal."¹

Hard against the tracks and sidings north of the 59th Street railroad yard, Options for People turned a cavernous warehouse into a bustling factory, and its big-bellied director of training, Richard Blackmon, was busy spreading his zealous work ethic. "This is our contract packaging division," he explained, threading his way among stacks of cartons and barrels. "What this part of our program is designed to do is give people the opportunity to get their time schedules down, get used to working all day, get a baby-sitter in line, figure out transportation routes, to earn some money, 'cause they actually earn money while they're in this division: \$5.15. That's our training stipend."

At a workbench, men and women were sticking price labels on cans of air freshener, starch, and oven cleaner for a company called Personal Care, which would distribute the merchandise to dollar stores. "We basically put the stickers on 'cause the manufacturer won't do that," Blackmon

explained. "They'll make the cans but they won't put the sticker on. Something that simple." He stopped at another work station. "This is a project that we do for Dominick's [a chain of food stores]. Our chairman of the board is the former president and CEO of Dominick's, so we have a pretty good relationship with them. And they have in-store promotions. When they finish with the in-store promotions . . . they send us all the stuff that's been used for promotions, and we inventory it and repackage it for them and send them back to them so they can sell it. It's been out on display. You can see some of it is still loose, like this bowl and plates and stuff like that.

"This is an inspection job that we just finished for a company called Owens-Brockway. Now, what happened was they had these fancy bottles made up, and the problem with the bottles is that some of the writing and some of the placement of the language is off center, OK? Also, they had another problem. When you handle the bottles, on some of them the ink comes off. So what we did was a tape test on the bottles. We basically put a real sticky kind of a Scotch tape on it and pulled it off a couple of times to see if the ink came off. If the ink came off or it smudged or the bottle got damaged, we got rid of it. Basically took the top off and got rid of it. This is a good one 'cause it still has the top on. So we're gonna ship them back the good ones and ship them back the tops and get rid of the bottles that are bad. . . .

"Back over in this corner is where we handle our paint. We've got a longstanding relationship with Sherwin-Williams paint company where we help them recycle paint. When they have paint that's what they call old age, it's been sitting on the shelf two, three years and the solid part of the paint has separated from the liquid part, well, they ship it to us, we dump it in those fifty-five-gallon drums, and then they rework it. They can reuse it. So all this stuff you see over here is all the paint that we've dumped for Sherwin-Williams. . . .

"This is a project that we're doing for a company called Kendall Packaging. They actually make these legal storage boxes. And what happened was they forgot to put the buttons and the eyelets on the boxes. So what we're doing is we're putting the buttons on. We're putting that in the corner of the boxes and then we're tying the string for closing the boxes. . . . Now, they used to do this in-house, and they decided to job this out to us. We've developed a pretty good relationship with them. . . . We've got 150,000 of these to do."

Blackmon grew up on welfare in Chicago's Cabrini-Green housing

project, notorious for its drugs and violence; made his way through law school; worked in corporate law; and was then drawn to a law practice in juvenile court, mostly pro bono, which he gave up to train people at Options. He seemed to keep working his way back through symptoms into causes, trying to find the roots. "You don't walk off welfare," he said from personal experience. "I mean, you kind of have to run, scream, kick, holler, jump off of welfare."

He walked from the cartons and barrels and workbenches into a small classroom, and there he stood, a successful black man from the projects in front of seventeen failed black men and women who wanted to enroll in his ninety-day training program. He made sure they knew where he had come from. He bid them good morning and led them in a churchlike call and response:

"Everybody ready to go to work?" Murmurs of "Yes."

"Everybody repeat after me: I can make change."

The group responded softly, "I can make change."

"Oh, you can do better. Let's say it like you really mean it: I CAN MAKE CHANGES."

"I CAN MAKE CHANGES."

"Or I can make excuses."

"OR I CAN MAKE EXCUSES."

"But I can't make both."

"BUT I CAN'T MAKE BOTH."

Blackmon learned his coaching skills when he played fullback on a football scholarship to Southern Illinois University, and he gave his charges a pep talk as if he truly believed that they could surely win, no matter how far they were trailing at halftime. "What this program is about is helping you help yourself," he said. "We have absolutely nothing to give you. . . . This program is about waking up what's already inside of you, and getting you to see for yourself that there ain't nothin' nobody can do for you that you can't do for yourself." Then he showed them that they had already used what they had inside. "How you gonna tell me you don't have any brains if you've been able to survive in one of the toughest cities in the world? If you are thirty, forty, twenty, fifty years old, and you've been able to survive in Chicago, trust me, you have some brains."

The minimum wage they would be paid was worth more than their contempt, he insisted. "The minimum wage has power. It is a starting point. It's a starting point, \$5.15 an hour, forty hours a week, four weeks a

month, \$824. How many of you get \$824 a month in public aid? Nobody's hand is up. OK? So we ain't doin' too bad with the minimum wage, right? If you and your significant other earn the minimum wage, that's \$1,648 a month. How many of y'all get \$1,648 a month? We understand each other then, right? Don't knock the minimum wage. It's a starting point.

"How many in the room right now got \$500 in a savings account? One person, two people got their hands up. How you gonna be grown in Chicago with kids and responsibilities and you can't get your hands on \$500? Anything could happen. One of the things that you're gonna learn through this program is the importance of saving money. I'm gonna show you how you can save \$10 a week so at the end of the year you have \$500. We got to talk about it. You have to save some money. See, the key to saving is not saving a whole lot at one time, just saving a little bit over a long period of time. So we got to talk about that."

He wanted them to rally to their own cause: themselves. "This program is about change. It's about changing your life for the better, and if you don't want that, this is not for you. This is not for you. We can't help you, because we have nothing to give you. Everything you need you already got. We just here to help you recognize that. We just here to help you recognize that."

It took only a few minutes with Ricky Drake to see how smart he was. He flipped through his thick black loose-leaf notebook to explain the math and geometry and engineering diagrams, then took me on a tour across the metal floor of Cleveland's Center for Employment Training, an old factory filled with equipment donated by manufacturers that needed skilled workers. He could run every olive-drab lathe, every drill press and precision grinder. He handled the micrometers and calipers, the tools of his new machinist's trade, with dexterity. He was two-thirds of the way through a six-month course, a bull of a man charged with so much drive and newfound expertise that it was hard to imagine that he had ever done anything except excel.

He had, though. Here was his short version of his life: "I came from a family where my father was very strict, and when he disciplined us he had a wooden slat for the boys, one long, one short. And eventually that affected me, and the [military] service thing affected me. And I had to

address those problems. And thinking spiritually and with God, I began to say, 'Well, I can do something better than this and just get ahold of it.'"

As he grew up black and poor, his opportunities did not strike him as dazzling. He was "a little rebellious," so in 1968 he ran away and joined the army. When the army learned that he was only sixteen, they asked and got his father to sign a permission form, and Ricky went off to the Vietnam War—twice. He worked as a cable splicer, field lineman, and radio operator, which brought him an odd sense of freedom and independence. "I should have made a career out of it," he said. He conversed with monks, experimented with Buddhism and yoga, and also with marijuana and cocaine to the point where he had to be put in a military hospital for detoxification. In 1973, when he returned to "the world," as GIs in Vietnam used to call home, he found nothing more than scattered jobs that seemed to evaporate as each one's trial period was about to end. "Just before you hit ninety days, no job," he said, "and you go back to the labor pool. They might not have anything in there, and then you might go be a laborer. You might go work on a truck delivering or something, or the next day come down there they just need somebody to do electrical maintenance. It was over and over, over and over. Then when you go apply for a job, what experience have you had? If I had two months of just menial labor and stuff like that, that's no experience." His affinity for drugs and alcohol overwhelmed him.

Several months after he showed me around the Center for Employment Training, I visited him at home, in a faded Cleveland neighborhood, once middle class. On a corner stood his brick, two-family house, which he and his wife had bought a decade earlier for \$40,000. They had nearly lost it because of financial problems. It looked run-down in a comfortable way. When I arrived, Ricky came outside, crossed the street to two young women who were talking, and gave one of them a dime for a cigarette—the sign of a man who was pretending to have quit smoking, I told him. "How did you know?" he asked with a grin.

He had just painted his living room, which was very dark, heavily curtained. He had installed a ceiling fan and was sanding and refinishing the floors. He planned to put a bathroom in the basement. He was getting things together, taking control of himself, but he had worries. He worried about his son, twenty-five, with no job besides belonging to a rap group that had just made a CD but was now disintegrating. He worried about his

daughter, eighteen and unmarried, who had a five-month-old; toys and a booster seat were in a corner. He worried about his other daughter, twelve, who had a short attention span and behavioral problems in school. He was determined not to worry about himself.

"I tried the devil," he said. "Drinking, alcohol, drugs, womanizing, you know, it just got so bad, and then I knew the next thing I'd either be dead—someone would kill me or I'd kill somebody, and I didn't want to live that type of life. . . . As you're growing up, you try things for kicks and stuff, but you're supposed to get mature enough to move on and, you know. You try beer, or you try a joint, or you try a cigarette, you know, but as you grow up, those are things you try as you're growing up. These are phases you go through, and you're supposed to become mature enough to move on and learn from mistakes. Some people learn quicker than others. . . . You have choices."

The choice he finally made took him to two sources of salvation, as he saw it: God and work. "Before, I was in different churches: Catholic, Islam, Lutheran. I've studied Masonary," he added, putting his own twist on the word. "I've studied theology, philosophy." For the last couple of years, he had found a place in a Baptist church. But work seemed his most devoted passion. After the job training, he got a starting position for \$7 an hour as an apprentice machinist at a plant that made parts for lawn mowers, snow blowers, and the like. "They might make just a piece of it, a catch, a lever, a spring," he said. "They send it back to my department, we might just drill two or three holes where it has to take a specific tolerance, and you may have to de-burr it or you might have to ream it, stuff like that." A year later he was making \$8.50 in a steel plant operating a machine that slit metal coil. As a trained machinist, he had a skill to sell, and in the depth of the recession in 2003 he had risen to \$9.50 with another steel company that was sending him to school in hydraulics and industrial maintenance. If he stuck with it, he could eventually earn twice as much.

But it wasn't just the potential pay that was making work work for him. It was the process of repair that had begun. He now had focus. He took courses at a community college to upgrade his skills. He got up every morning at 4, caught the 5:40 bus for work, arrived at the plant by 6:30 so he had a little time to read before his shift began at 7, then spent most evenings in classes until 9 or 10.

He did not seem to have time to speak respectfully to his wife, Delores, at least during my brief visit. Even in front of a stranger, his tone was brusque,

condescending. When she came home from her job as a food service worker in a hospital, her head was bound in a red bandanna, her frail frame draped in a black leather jacket; she wore white slacks. She sat perched on the edge of an overstuffed couch, and offered her view of Ricky's reform. In the worst time, she said slowly, they had been separated for two years. Then, from the bottom, he came back, and every step of job training was like the rung of a ladder upward. "When a person as he is could support his family," she explained, "then it kind of calms him down and puts him in a better position. That program was the best thing that happened to him." How did she explain his turnaround? "We knew that we had to get back on track with God," she said. "As we came together with God, then God started telling him what he had to do for his family, and then He started telling me what I had to do for my family and my husband." Didn't she give Ricky credit? "We give all the credit to God. We can't even take no credit for the job, for the training, because the way he found the training, it was by God's grace, and the way He bring us together and bless him with the job and then gonna take him another level where he can really make what he really want to make to take care of his family. Yeah." I told her how impressive Ricky had been giving me a tour of the Center for Employment Training.

"Really?" she said, a lilt of surprise in her voice.

Ricky didn't argue. "I take one day at a time, I talk with God, I talk with Him when I go to sleep, I talk with Him when I wake up. I say, 'God, you know the situation I'm in. Help me and keep me straight.' . . . And then He say He help fight off the devil. Now, if you don't put yourself in that situation, you don't have to be fighting too much. If you don't stand around the corner with dope addicts, you won't be tempted. You know what I'm saying? So I know that helps. At first I was hesitant, but as I kept going and going, I relied more and more on Him, and then I was able to put my life in a structure where it was just me and Him, one-on-one. And I didn't have to put my confidence in Joe Blow or nobody."

Leary Brock had been playing hooky, and her mother knew it. On that particular day, however, she left Anacostia High School on time, after the last class, and began to walk home through the struggling black district beyond the southeastern shore of Washington, D.C.'s grimy Anacostia River. It was less than a mile to the small house owned by her parents. A man named Earl was following.

Leary's name was pronounced le-REE, like a small bird singing, and her spoken words sometimes had the rhythm of poetry. She had a fervent gaze, and her light skin, like her mother's, distinguished her from most other African-Americans in her neighborhood. She was restless against the confines of school, family, community. She wanted to defy, seek, and wander, and so she crossed boundaries. "I used to try to interest her in taking law," said her mother laughingly. "The reason I told her she'd be a good lawyer is 'cause she's such a big liar."

Earl, in his late twenties or early thirties, had been hanging around outside the school. He had been watching Leary. On this day, he pulled his car up beside her, jumped out, grabbed her arms, twisted them behind her back, and shoved her inside. He hit her, drove her to Washington's red light district on 14th Street, and forced her into a grubby rooming house. "I remember this big, fat greasy Italian-looking dude signing him in and giving him a key," she said years later. "He tied my hands to a bed top, told me I could scream as loud as I wanted and nobody would help me." She did, and he was right. As he raped her, she heard laughter. If she told anyone, he promised, he would kill her and her parents, and she believed him. "I was pretty damaged goods." Then he actually drove her home.

Leary did not tell, not then. She was afraid both for her parents and of her parents. She was sure that she would be blamed by her mother, Velma, who knew that she was cutting school and suspected that she was doing drugs. A wall had gone up between them, and more than thirty years later its remnants still divided their recollections. "She probably was in drugs to make her act the way she was acting," Velma speculated. "She started going around with a white boy, and sometimes they get in drugs real early, and I think that was happening."

"No," Leary declared.

"She must have not been just coming from school, because she would have told me," Velma insisted. "She knew that I would be upset, because she was where she wasn't supposed to be." No, Leary countered: Although she cut a lot of classes, she hadn't that day. And if she had told her mother about the rape? "Oh, it's hard to say now what my reaction would have been," Velma admitted. "I might have been so mad at her for not being where she was supposed to be—I don't know, really."

"I thought it was my fault, of course, you know the scenario," said Leary. "When I had my miscarriage because of the rape, she wouldn't even

come." Her father did, though. He spoiled her, Velma complained with a smile.

Leary then made a choice, and like many choices that teenagers make, this one seemed less momentous than it turned out to be. Instead of finishing school, she moved to New York City. "I had every opportunity to do it another way, and I chose to run," she observed years later. "I was running away from my mother's scorn."

In Manhattan, selling magazines door-to-door, "I ran into some people that invited me to stay with them, because they knew where I was going, what this thing was leading to. . . . That family was what introduced me to a world I did not know before. . . . These people was doing hard stuff, you know. They were sniffing. See, at that age, you take a young girl to an after-hours joint where everybody's sitting around with these black lights—you remember the sixties with these black lights?—and people bringing you the drugs on a \$20 bill. Oh, man, you know. I'm like, what is this? And I'm seeing how classy people are dressed and whatnot, not knowing of course, at that age; that that was not class. But that was my beginning. That's when I took my first snort, in that club. I'll never forget it. From snorting, I went to skin popping, from skin popping to mainlining. Heroin. At least two or three years." The drugs helped her "escape the ghosts."

Her parents traveled to New York to try to rescue her, but not until she got pregnant did she want rescuing. She would not do drugs while carrying a baby. "I came off of it cold turkey," she said. "I was twenty by then, and I came home. I tried to clean up my life and did the right thing." She was relieved to hear that Earl could do her no more harm; he had been killed by his wife. "She didn't do no jail time."

Leary's old neighborhood in Washington was a bad place for kicking the habit. "Somehow or other, I started getting back into the same group, because you know once you've been in that lifestyle, that lifestyle is a habit," she said. "Those are the people that you have to eliminate from your life. If you don't want a hot dog, you don't go around a hot dog stand, 'cause the aroma's gonna get you—or you're gonna run into somebody who's gonna buy you one. So that was how it was in my life: on and off, on and off. I would stop for years and then get around people who were in that lifestyle and go right back into it." When she went back into it in Washington, she discovered a new pleasure: crack cocaine.

The introduction came from a co-worker at a school for the mentally and physically handicapped where Leary taught food service skills. It was not a bad job, and she was good with young people, she thought. Her prospects were limited without a high school diploma, and her work record was fragmented by her repeated binges on drugs. But here she was doing well—until her associate, whose husband sold cocaine powder, invited her over one weekend. “We were sitting around having drinks just chit-chatting,” Leary recalled. “A thing came over the news about crack cocaine, and I said, ‘Why do people do that?’ Curiosity killed the cat. She said, ‘Yeah, it’s really something up there in New York. I’ve had it once or twice.’ And she said, ‘You want some?’ I said, ‘No, I’d be afraid to take it.’ She said, ‘There ain’t nothing to it.’ She went back in the back. Before the night was over she had gone through \$1,200 of her husband’s cocaine powder, trying to make this crack. We wound up having to go out on the street and buy it. That was the beginning. I can pinpoint. That was the beginning. Then it was like every weekend. I had it to the point where I kept the demon at bay for a whole week, but on the weekend I had to be at her house, you know, ‘cause I was beginning to get this desire, my brain was wanting it.” She was in her thirties, unmarried, with four children by four different men.

“I called it the terminator, that crack cocaine, because it didn’t have any physical hold on you. It’s a mental hold, a psychological hold, a habitual hold; you don’t physically need it. It hits a portion of the brain that has never experienced this sensation before. And when it’s awakened, you can’t put it to sleep. I’m serious. It’s ability that you didn’t know you possessed. Now you can become a fast thinker, you’re motivated to do this, that, and the other. This is only an allure, because this portion of the brain is not functioning on that level, but it’s being stimulated at that level for fifteen or twenty minutes, and then it’s really a crash. Oh, no, no, no, no. The brain wants to go back there. All right? It wants to feel that sensation again, and it will make you forget sleep, food, clothes, anything that you normally would do. It just slams that shut. You have to go *THERE!* It’s worse than a physical addiction. . . . It stripped me totally of who I was. It held my spirit in bondage, begging to come out, and it couldn’t. It arrested every part of my life and then began to terminate it. *I no longer existed. It did.*”

She started being late to work, then absent. “They saw a change in my

behavior and they figured where there is a problem, ‘Let’s let her go,’” she said. “I’m glad that they got me out of there before I committed a crime.”

She did commit a crime, many times. “I sold it for a little while, me and this Italian guy,” she said, “and then we went to Pennsylvania. Believe it or not, I stopped for a whole five years, because the Amish that I lived around, they were able to give me herbs and things that were soothing enough to my lifestyle.” She worked two jobs, and felt safely removed from the world of crack. “Little did I know. That stuff is everywhere,” she said. “It’s everywhere. I’m serious, man, I’m telling you. It may be around the corner—I’m sure it is right around the corner from the Vatican. It raised its ugly head, and with this Italian guy, when we put our two heads together, we were dangerous. We drove to New York, to 143rd and Broadway, bought us a package and started our own business.”

Leary bounced relentlessly back and forth between drugs and jobs, often mixing both together. “The weekends started to overlap into Monday, and then Monday into Tuesday,” she recalled. “Next thing you know I turned around and it was Thursday and I hadn’t been to work. . . . I came on home to my mother’s and father’s.” She used what she had learned about horses from the Amish to get work as a groomer at a Maryland race-track, where she thought the careful state regulation would keep narcotics out. “Little did I know, the drug is everywhere,” she said. “I’m thinking I’m running away from it.”

Her methods of financing her drug use became an index of decline. “At first, I had money in the bank,” she explained. “I had friends. Oh, I lived the high style. I didn’t know nothing about the street life until much later on. I was always catered to and given stuff. I’d be sitting around with bundles of the stuff, you know, traveling up and down from here to Florida. I was gone, I was doing things, I was a mover and a groover, and it was, again, the glamorous life—the life that I had seen when I was younger I was seeing now. That was a trap. The devil is so, so clever, OK? He disguised it with all this glamour and all this other stuff going on. There’s so much coming at you, you don’t see the snakes slither in. . . . When the money ran out, when the friends ran out, I had to do it on my own. And because I had a networking ability, I was able to get with people who was trying to be incognito about this drug. . . . I was their go-between. That was one way I was able to make my supply. They would give me the money ‘cause they could not go out and get it, and I would go get it for them, and

I would get a portion from the drug dealer, a portion from them. I believe because I wasn't larceny-hearted, is why I'm still alive." She once had a near miss when dealers burst into a rival's apartment where she was staying, started shooting, and hit her in the back. Ultimately, she turned to prostitution for her drug money.

Mostly, Velma took care of Leary's children, as so many grandmothers do in such families, and when Velma's grandchildren had children, she took care of those great-grandchildren as well. Velma was bone tired, and sometimes angry about the generations that passed their burdens to her, but she also had an iron spine. She admired obstinacy, drawn from her earliest childhood memories in the hard South. Her grandmother and her grandmother's sister, who were born in slavery, used to reminisce about the steely resistance of their aunt, Leary's great-great-great aunt. "The slave-owner would tell her to do something, and she said she wasn't gonna do it, and he would beat her and beat her, and she said she still wasn't gonna do it, and so he'd put her down in a cistern, a well," Velma recounted. "She never would do it. She was just that stubborn. Just let him beat her."

In its own way, Velma's journey had been as daring as Leary's, propelling her out of the familiar into the adventurous, though with far different consequences. One of eight children on a sharecropper's farm in Alabama, she left in 1940, in her twenties, and made her way alone through Tennessee to Washington, where she found a good husband, a good job in the printing section of the Agriculture Department, and a place in an undergraduate class at Howard University, although she never finished. Her husband, Horace, was an electrician for the Veterans Administration. Leary, even at age fifty, imagined that he had worked in the White House.

Off drugs and on, Leary appeared and disappeared, and each arrival seemed worse than the last. "It got to the point that I wouldn't even allow her in the house," Velma declared, "and she would somehow break in the house. I called the police and explained it to them. . . . She'd come in the house to sleep. So the police told her she had to leave 'cause I didn't want her here. . . . I said, 'No, if you're foolin' with that you can't stay here.' It was hard to do, hard to say it. It hurt me to see the police leadin' her away and all."

Her father never quite gave up on her, Leary remembered. The last time she saw him, she promised that someday he would be proud of her, and he told her that he was proud of her now, "as though he saw in the

future," she recalled. "All he wished for me was that I would be happy and safe," Leary said, "and that was a profound statement: happy and safe. If you look at it, if you're not safe, you're unhappy. If you're not happy, you're in unsafe territory."

Then, at a time when she was out on the street doing drugs, her father died. One of her daughters found her and took her the news.

"She got the word that he had passed, and when the funeral was gonna be and everything," Velma recalled, "and she put a note in the door that she would be coming by to go with us. And so you know the funeral cars can't wait for you. So we went on, and to my surprise, people at church told me she was there. . . . She just stayed back in the back and left before we went out."

"That was my spirit," Leary countered. "I couldn't go. . . . Shame. Guilt. He was my best friend. I had to deal with my own grief the way I knew how. That was the beginning of the turning point for me." You have to hit bottom before you come up.

Several months later, in the haze of a high, she spotted an undercover cop in an unmarked car, walked up to the driver's window and said, "Look in your computer for Leary Brock."

"You Leary Brock?" he asked.

"Just look in your computer."

He did and found two outstanding warrants: failure to appear on solicitation charges, and on felony drug possession.

"Are you Leary Brock?"

When she answered yes, he called for a female officer as backup. "I was in jail during Easter," Leary said.

Having stepped into the maw of the judicial system, Leary had placed herself in extreme jeopardy. She could not afford a lawyer. She had no defense, anyway, because the charges were true. She was black, addicted, homeless without the friends or connections or even the know-how to beat the rap or make a savvy plea bargain. When she stepped into the courtroom, she was sure that she was going away to a perverse salvation from the drug-infested streets.

She got salvation of a different kind, perhaps by some random quirk of chance, perhaps because she was finally ready for a different outcome. The District of Columbia had begun an experiment. Instead of jailing first-time drug offenders (meaning the first time they were caught), those who showed judges a spark of hope were sentenced to treatment programs,

monitored closely with unannounced urinalysis, and helped into support groups and job training. Leary's Legal Aid lawyer recommended her, and the judge agreed to send her to a center on Martin Luther King Avenue. She became one of the program's first beneficiaries, so grateful that she would long remember the name of everyone who helped her along the way—the lawyer, the judge, the counselor, each member of the center staff, immortalizing them all in a biographical sketch that she composed. "Drug Court was the turning point in my life," she wrote. "Ms. White was the first counselor to greet us. Her voice and tone was calming and embracing, not what I expected." Leary emerged from "this unreal world I had been living in for so long," as she put it. "During this time my true self emerged with a thirst for life and living that I am still quenching even now."

Once she came to, she saw clearly how bereft she was of the skills she would need to hold a decent job. She took a course to become a certified nursing assistant, worked a little in the medical field, but found herself drawn to the keyboards and screens and gadgetry of the computer world that seemed comfortable to everyone except her.

So it was that Leary Brock walked a couple of blocks from her mother's house and entered Mr. Harris's class at SOME's Center for Employment Training. She put her hands on computers, spoke before the group of strangers, doubted herself and took pride in herself, achieved a small success every day along with many frustrations. Something was happening inside her that had never happened before, some growing sense of competence and drive. "My metamorphosis," she called it.

She had polished her résumé, had gone through the interview training, and had sent her applications. Interview appointments were being arranged, and as she sat by a computer in the classroom, she tried to grab her anxiety, wrestle it to the ground, and make it work for her. "I am afraid, and I'd be a fool not to be," she said. "It's a dog-eat-dog world out there now. I learned that in a seminar. She let us know, they all let us know, your interviewer is not your friend, OK? So don't get friendly with 'em. Don't put your guard down. . . . But you can't let that discourage you. Everybody should have a little bit of fear. That's gonna make you do a better job. That's gonna make you have more determination so that you can face the fear, OK?"

The critical interview came with Xerox, at its offices in Arlington, Virginia. "Beautiful building!" Leary exclaimed. "From the sidewalk going up the steps you're on marble, OK? And when you get in there it's so classy.

Now, look, I've been to some really classy bathrooms, all right? Never with a decanter of mouthwash, never with a hair spray, and a HUGE bottle of Alpha Keri lotion—after you wash your hands, you know, soften them up. The place is very classy, and it shows that they care where their employees work. They look out for your little comforts. Like mouthwash, that was going above and beyond the call of duty there. But people do need it, you know, so they're making sure that they got it! Just go to the bathroom, you know? Freshen yourself up!"

Xerox was hiring to fill its contracts to run mail rooms, do photocopying, and print color reports for firms in Washington, and trainees from SOME's center looked attractive. "The interview was very calming. It was very comfortable," Leary said in surprise. "I talked so strongly about team playing and about being excited with the opportunity that the company could offer, because I'd researched and saw how they were involved in the community and how they had did this and that." The interviewer seemed impressed. "She said the difference between us and the other training programs out here was like night and day because people were coming there from these programs only interested in the hours, 'What is the pay?' You know, I never brought that up. You understand? I never questioned her as to what none of that was at any time. So that let her know that my first interest is becoming a member of Xerox. And whatever Xerox had to offer me I would be gratefully inclined to go with because I, knew about the company."

Xerox hired Leary, along with Peaches and Wendy Waxler, and everything about the job seemed to delight her: the classes on the machines, the pension plan and stock options (which she didn't quite understand), the potted plant her co-workers gave her when she arrived. She was first assigned to the copying room of an insurance industry lobbyist. A month later, when she joined her fellow graduates at a SOME reunion, they were all bubbly and excited, like kids who had just come back from a visit to a firehouse. They puffed themselves up into postures of one-upmanship, strutting and bragging about their responsibilities, their access to inside information, and their clients' size and influence. Leary breezed in with a bag full of stationery, binders, and cover pages for reports that she had produced for the lobbyist. "They send stuff to every state!" she crowed. "I work with the DocuTech computer copier, I work with the on-line UPS computer, the Bryce printer, and the Pitney Bowes mailing machine. I also

work with a networking machine, where someone somewhere is networking a job to me."

Wendy was at a law firm so vast that "they have an office in Moscow," she boasted. "And they have 250 lawyers here in D.C. I'm a mail messenger. They just made me a supervisor. I've been told I'm one of the best workers that they has."

In another law firm, where Peaches had been assigned, "They have a fax room—eight machines!" she declared. "I'd love to have this in my house—the racks slide all the way around!"

When Leary touted the "high security" in her office, where you need a special key to get onto the tenth floor, Wendy proudly held up the plastic insert key she wore on a chain around her neck.

"I work at Hogan and Hartson downtown," reported Richard Ivory, a big man whose mellifluous voice was rich in pride. "It's one of the biggest law firms in the country—the biggest law firm in the country. I work in the mail room. I handle all the mail, UPS overnight deliveries." It was a highly responsible position, he explained to the group, because of the importance of the shipments and the precision with which they must be dispatched. "I have to be very careful about how I send the mail. I've been in my supervisor's office three times for compliments on my work. I'm going to go to the fax room. He sees a lot of potential."

Leary was practically giddy with her newfound worth. She started at \$17,000 a year, rose to the low twenties, and stayed there amid financial problems that dogged Xerox in the following years. But the world had opened to her. The previous night, she told the alumni, she had taken her mother and a friend to dinner at John Harvard's Brew House, on Pennsylvania Avenue, and then next door to the Warner Theatre for a gospel musical. Her friend asked, "Who's paying?" Leary said, "I'm paying." When her friend saw the price on the ticket, she said, "What?" and Leary decided to keep the stub as a souvenir of her expanded horizons.

She had gone from victim to victor. She attracted praise from supervisors. One said she had caught on so quickly that she made the job look as easy as eating cereal. Another wrote in praise of her demeanor: "No matter how difficult my day may have been, when I go to Ms. Brock with a job, her attitude and smile remind me that I can take time to breathe and relax. Tasks will get done." Steadily rising, Leary was transferred from the insurance lobbyist to a position overseeing nearly fifty machines at D.C. General Hospital, where she had once flunked out of a detox program, then to

the Department of Energy, where she was given the title of Service Coordinator and Technical Service Manager. Along the way, she garnered public recognition. Hers was the story everyone wanted to believe in, the story of redemption. A Washington television station did a feature on her, and she became a celebrated client of Suited for Change, a nonprofit group of well-dressed professional women in Washington who donate clothes and advice to impoverished women who need a decent wardrobe to make their way in the working world. She was chosen one year to say a few words at the organization's fundraiser, a swish affair of which Laura Bush was honorary chair.

In 2000, Leary was invited to speak in the chamber of the United States Supreme Court. The Justice Potter Stewart Award was being presented to the D.C. Superior Court Drug Intervention Program, "in recognition of its success in rehabilitating drug-dependent non-violent criminal defenders." Leary had been selected to represent all who had been given another chance.

She couldn't believe it, and she called me all in a flutter, asking if I would help with her speech. Sure, I said, but she would do beautifully if she just stood up there and told her story in her own words. I sent her transcripts of the interviews I had done with her during the previous two years, and urged her not to write her speech, just talk it. She did, and afterwards, still enchanted by the filet mignon dinner, the august setting, the powerful judges in attendance, she told me that she had looked out at the courtroom full of people wiping their eyes, that Associate Justice Antonin Scalia had walked up to her and said that she had brought him to tears. I did that? she thought to herself.

Another judge, having listened carefully, gave her a more sober reaction: She had to earn her way back into her family. He was right, for that success still eluded her. "My kids have not given me any respect or love because of the way I trashed their lives," she lamented. She was trying now with her grandchildren, bundling them off to the Smithsonian, reading them books, filling the vacuum she had created for her children. This, too, was part of the pattern of failure and redemption—a failed mother whose children also fail as parents, and thereby give her a second chance as a grandmother.

The Brock family tree, which I drew up while sitting one evening with Leary and Velma at their dining room table, looked like the wildest of Alexander Calder's mobiles. It began simply at the top—Velma's parents,

married, had eight children, and Velma and Horace, also married, had two. It then descended into a chaotic whirl of offspring from multiple liaisons by Leary and, a generation later, by some of her children. The diagram was so complex that if it had been made into a wind chime, the din would have been unrelenting, and not harmonious.

Leary had been violent with her children, she admitted. In her first year of recovery, when she thought she could suddenly resume a parental role, she got so rough with a daughter that a son had to pull her away. Now, the connections were still frayed sometimes; there was still violence in her tone of voice. In all her elation about her job, she did not seem to have energy left to reconstruct the damaged relationships with her adult children. One afternoon, as she sat watching television in her darkened living room, she saw a daughter come in through the front door carrying a suitcase. Leary's greeting had an edge of accusation: "You movin' back here?"

"No." Then the young woman disappeared into the back rooms. I asked about her.

"I don't know," Leary snapped. "I heard a rumor she's moving to North Carolina. I don't know what's going on with her."

With Leary's recovery, she and her mother had patched together a mutual respect. They lived together in her mother's house, which was still mortgaged but sustained by Velma's pension of \$30,000. Most of Leary's children were self-supporting most of the time: one son as a roofer in Pennsylvania, another as a security guard in the Energy Department, one daughter with Xerox, and another cleaning CIA headquarters. Velma's household included a changing cast of Leary's daughters and their children, with Velma the great-grandmother at the hub of the crazily revolving wheel.

"I love babies," said Velma, "but they're a little much. One is enough, into everything." She was eighty-six and frail and critical of her granddaughter (Leary's daughter), who finally put her children with a babysitter during the day. "We had to have a big falling-out for her to do it," Velma said. "She doesn't realize that I'm not as young as I was when I was taking care of her, you know. She thinks I can do the same thing that I did then, but I can't." How did she feel about raising her children, then her grandchildren, and now her great-grandchildren? "Tired," she said with a weak smile. "Don't feel any special way about it. That's just one job accomplished, I think. And always lookin' forward to what is next."

Velma's style with her great-grandchildren, whether from exhaustion

or as a practiced method of child rearing, had a harshness to it at times. One evening, at a birthday party for a school principal friend named Sarah, the conversations among adults were sweet and gentle, but they were punctuated by the small-arms fire of scolding words to the children. As if the room were taut with hair-trigger anxiety about the slightest misbehavior, Velma interrupted the pleasantness with staccato bursts like preemptive strikes. Not a kind or loving sentence was uttered to the youngsters. Perhaps these children would have otherwise been hellions, but it was hard to see. Besides twins of three months, there were two girls ages five and seven and a three-year-old boy, Deandre.

When dessert came out, an open gallon of ice cream—half chocolate, half vanilla—was placed right in front of Deandre. What would any three-year-old do? Stick his finger in it, of course. So that's what Deandre did, into the vanilla half, and his great-grandmother, Velma, slapped his hand and threatened to send him to bed. He started to cry, though almost silently, as if he were afraid to cry. "Why are you crying?" Velma asked sharply, and threatened again to send him to bed. "Don't cry!"

Everyone except the two girls gathered to sing "Happy Birthday" to Sarah, followed by "God Bless You" to the same tune. Then Velma scooped out the vanilla with the finger hole in it, gave it to Deandre, and made it sound like punishment: He would have the part he touched, she decreed. He started to cry again.

"Why are you crying?" Leary asked harshly in an echo of her mother. "Don't cry!"

Then, Sarah softly intervened. She told Deandre that she would eat the vanilla that contained his finger hole, and she took over dishing out the ice cream. She asked the boy if he wanted chocolate or vanilla—the first time anybody had inquired about his wishes. Chocolate, it turned out. That's why he was crying. He stopped as soon as Sarah put a dish of chocolate in front of him.

Whatever stresses and strains were being passed down through the generations, though, the family connections were helping to sustain Leary and keep her from falling backward. A year or so later, on Leary's fiftieth birthday, Velma prepared a feast of foods that Leary used to love as a child, and three of her four children came to her party; she was estranged from only one at that time.

"I can't force it," Leary said, giving herself some advice. "Let them come to you. Just let them see that you're a different person."

The dream in America is a demanding standard, the myth is a noble goal. When a man or a woman or a family fills its full measure of possibility, the nation's virtue is affirmed. So the nation should feel very good about the Tran family of Saigon, now of Santa Ana, California, whose accomplishments have demonstrated how powerful the right combination of drive, opportunity, thrift, education, health, connections, and mutual support can be. Within four months of arriving as refugees from Vietnam in 1998, three of the five family members were working at jobs whose low wages, pooled, brought in \$42,848 a year. Within five months of arrival, they had saved enough to pay cash for two used cars. Less than a year later, the two oldest children were at a community college.

Their successes demonstrated that work works at the low end of the pay scale only when everything else works: when a cohesive family has multiple wage-earners who believe in their own competence, have the skills, know how to find jobs, manage their money with care, and never retreat in the face of hardship. If this sounds heroic, it is. There is no room for mistake or misfortune—not for drugs, not for alcohol, not for domestic violence, not for poor schooling, not for illness or injury, not for anything less than high diligence. So far, so good for the Tran family.

The model is so rare that it is no model at all, just an exception that highlights the problems for the vast numbers of working poor who can't line up every single factor in their favor. Vietnamese, Chinese, Koreans, and other Asians are often stereotyped as brilliantly hardworking and successful in that perfect American Dream. But millions of Asians also come to the United States and fail, as the Koreans who work in Los Angeles restaurants can testify. Anyone who watches the Trans put the pieces together can see vividly the pieces that are absent for so many others.

Tran Mao, a friendly man in his late forties, wore gold-framed glasses, chinos, and sandals. A few teeth were missing from his smile, and he chopped the air with his hands as he spoke. During the war he was trained in Mississippi as an electronics technician for the South Vietnamese Air Force (hence his good English), and his rank as a noncommissioned officer brought him a year in a "reeducation camp" after the North Vietnamese victory in 1975. A few years later, he and two of his children joined thousands of other Vietnamese in a desperate escape by boat. They made their way to Indonesia and spent seven years in a refugee camp, where he

worked for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Denied refugee status himself, however, he was deported back to Vietnam with his family. He persisted, and two years later he finally gained the refugee designation that brought him, his wife, and their three children visas to the United States.

The Trans began their new life as if they were true Americans: in debt. Their plane tickets had been bought by the International Organization for Migration, which required repayment at \$125 a month. They also borrowed \$2,000 from friends for a sparse array of furniture. With their three children now twenty, nineteen, and eleven, the two oldest were part of the family's labor force, and they quickly went to work—the son, Tuan, in a bicycle factory at \$5.75 an hour, California's minimum wage at the time; the daughter, Phuong, at 10 cents more assembling bicycle lights; the father at minimum wage packing medicine for a drug company. After a month, Mao's fluent English landed him a counselor's position for \$9 an hour at a service agency called The Cambodian Family, which helped find jobs for new immigrants, primarily from Cambodia and Vietnam. The debts were soon paid off.

Mao understood clearly that there were two tickets his children would need to excel in the United States: fluent English and higher education. Every day in his agency, he saw how limiting the lack of English could be for the people he tried to help complete applications and prepare for job interviews. Every evening, therefore, he tried to help his children with English, making them read and encouraging them to watch television to improve their comprehension. Since Phuong and Tuan both worked with other Vietnamese, they never had a chance to speak English on the job, so their improvement was negligible, and Mao made no effort to disguise his frustration. "Pronunciation is no good," he said of Phuong, who bowed primly at the waist in respectful greeting. She had learned a precise, heavily accented English in the Indonesian refugee camp. "She should try to practice more and more," her father admonished. He worried especially about her mother and her nineteen-year-old brother, who spoke very little. Soon he had everybody enrolled in English classes, himself included. He was taking a computer course as well, hoping someday to get the college degree that had eluded him because of the war, and then because of the end of the war.

So, five studying people were scheduling the use of their two desks, one in the kitchen, one in the living room. They had pictures of the Virgin

lary around, and on one desk a Packard Bell computer and printer. Their two-bedroom apartment was crowded, but it cost \$675 a month, and they could not afford more. Mao and his wife, Lang Ho, slept in one bedroom, the boys in the other, and Phuong on the living room floor. On the relaxed, pleasant street below, Asians and Latinos casually strolled to and from a run-down little shopping center, where many of the signs were in Spanish. A woman pushed a red shopping cart with a huge plastic bag overflowing with bottles and cans.

By the fall of 1999, both Phuong and Tuan had left their jobs to enroll at Santa Ana College (Phuong in college courses, Tuan to get his G.E.D.), and their mother, Lang Ho, had taken up the slack by getting work assembling pens at a local factory. She was making minimum wage with no medical insurance or other benefits. Mao's pay rate at The Cambodian Family had gone up to \$10 an hour. Every weekend the family sat together to plan the week's spending. "We have to write down," Mao said. "We work together. Usually we go shopping for food once a week. . . . We collected coupons from the newspaper. . . . We only buy what we think is most important for our family." There were disagreements.

"Sometimes I want to buy my shoes," said Phuong. "But I think again, I have not money. I don't need shoes right now. I can save money, buy food for my family. . . . My father tell me, 'You can't buy that, you do that or do that.'" Then she added: "But I can decide myself: self-control." They were living \$400 to \$500 a month, Mao said, and sending money to relatives in Vietnam.

By spring 2002, the recession had hit some of Mao's clients, who were being laid off by factories and could not get hired by temp agencies because of their limited English. But his family had been spared so far. His hourly wage had risen to \$13, and his wife's to \$7. Phuong and Tuan, continuing school, were both working part-time and contributing to the family budget. "I have a credit card but seldom use it," said Mao. "I try to manage not to use it. I don't want to be in huge debt."

When she arrived in 1998, Phuong had an ambition. "I want to become a doctor and help poor patients," she declared. Her father laughed, as if embarrassed by his daughter's foolish dream. Four years later, she still had the same goal. He laughed again, as if embarrassed by his hope.

Chapter Eleven

SKILL
AND WILL

Not a place on earth might be so happy as America.

—Thomas Paine, 1776

As the people in these pages show, working poverty is a constellation of difficulties that magnify one another: not just low wages but also low education, not just dead-end jobs but also limited abilities, not just insufficient savings but also unwise spending, not just poor housing but also poor parenting, not just the lack of health insurance but also the lack of healthy households.

The villains are not just exploitative employers but also incapable employees, not just overworked teachers but also defeated and unruly pupils, not just bureaucrats who cheat the poor but also the poor who cheat themselves. The troubles run strongly along both macro and micro levels, as systemic problems in the structure of political and economic power, and as individual problems in personal and family life.

All of the problems have to be attacked at once. Whatever remedy is found for one may help but not cure unless remedies are found for most of

the others. Granting a Section 8 housing voucher helps a family move into a better apartment, which may ease a child's asthma and lead to fewer days of missed school. But it won't carry the family far if the child is abused, or if the parent has few skills, works near minimum wage, spends huge amounts on transportation and day care, and can't get affordable credit. As long as society picks and chooses which problem to resolve in crisis—usually the one that has propelled the family to a particular agency for help—another crisis is likely to follow, and another. If we set out to find only the magic solution—a job, for example—we will miss the complexities, and the job will not be enough.

The first question is whether we know exactly what to do. What problems do we have the skills to solve, and where do our skills reach their outer limits? What territory of intractable problems lies unmapped, beyond our abilities?

The second question is whether we have the will to exercise our skill. Would we spend the money, make the sacrifices, restructure the hierarchy of wealth to alleviate the hardships down below?

We lack the skill to solve some problems and the will to solve others, but one piece of knowledge we now possess: We understand that holistic remedies are vital. So, gateways to addressing a family's range of handicaps are needed, and they are best established at intersections through which working poor families are likely to travel. Dr. Barry Zuckerman at the Boston Medical Center has shown how it can be done there, with social workers and lawyers. Principal Theodore Hinton at the Harris Educational Center in Washington has tried to do it there, with scarce resources, by opening his school into the evening, offering parenting classes, and providing information on health insurance. Public housing projects in Los Angeles have referred residents to English classes and job training.

These are embryonic forms of a big idea. If hospitals, schools, housing authorities, police departments, welfare offices, and other critical institutions were bold and well enough financed, they could reach far beyond their mandates, create connections of services, and become portals through which the distressed could pass into a web of assistance. It is a question of skill and will.

Will is a function of power, and the people who work near the edge of poverty don't have very much power. They do have more than they use, however. They have power in their personal lives that many of them leave untapped. They have power in the marketplace that is not organized effec-

tively. They have power in politics that they practically ignore: the power of the ballot.

Whenever liberal Democrats criticize tax cuts for the rich or program cuts for the poor, conservative Republicans raise the fearsome specter of "class warfare" as if they and their supporters in business were not reinforcing class differences by structuring tax breaks and pay scales. In 2003, for example, the Bush White House and Republican congressional leaders excluded millions of low-wage families, with incomes between \$10,500 and \$26,625, from a \$400-per-child payment being made under an increase in the child tax credit, part of a big tax bill that brought immense benefits to the wealthy. But the poor do not fight back. The lower the income, the lower the rate of voter turnout. In the 2000 presidential election, 60 percent of all American citizens over eighteen went to the polls. Three-quarters of those with family incomes over \$75,000 voted, 69 percent of those earning \$50,000 to \$75,000, and so on down to a mere 38 percent of those whose households took in less than \$10,000 a year.¹ In addition to those who disenfranchise themselves, nearly two million citizens over eighteen in prisons, plus ex-convicts, are disqualified in most states from voting. An overwhelming majority of them are from low-income ranks. Twelve percent of all black men between eighteen and thirty-four are in jail.²

Therefore, although nobody needs government more than the poor and the nearly poor, they have little influence on its policies. Neither the Democratic Party nor anti-poverty organizations have mobilized sufficiently to encourage low-income Americans to find their voices. In one modest effort, a small sign was placed on the counter of an office in Imperial Courts, a public housing project in the Watts section of Los Angeles:

Mumble
Grumble
Complain
Wallow
Hope
Despair
Worry

Vote

Just a reminder: the one on the bottom changes things a lot faster.
Call 1-800-343-VOTE to register.

The message was clever but probably ineffectual, because Census Bureau surveys show that the lower their income and education, the less inclined Americans are to believe that voting makes a difference. That doubt is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Consumed with the trials of their personal lives and cynical about the power structure, most tell pollsters that they find elections uninteresting and politicians untrustworthy. Without getting candidates' attention at the polls, then, low-income Americans rely on the more affluent to represent their interests. This the affluent do with various degrees of inadequacy, depending on the party in power, the health of the economy, and the current state of the nation's altruism. When it comes to benevolence, we are a moody society.

This need not be. The priorities of the nation and the landscape of politics could change, subject to a few ifs. If people with family incomes under \$25,000 had cast ballots at the same rate as those above \$75,000, more than 6.8 million additional voters would have gone to the polls in 2000, when Al Gore finished with a slight edge of 543,895 in the popular count over George W. Bush. An upsurge in low-income voters would have overcome even Florida's biased registration and balloting system and (if only a slight majority of them had voted Democratic) would have reversed the results, electing Gore.

Even in landslides, most states' electoral votes are won by margins of 5 percent or less, so the 6.8 million additional low-income voters (6.5 percent of the total electorate) could decide the outcome. In many races for Congress and state legislatures as well, those in or near poverty could hold the balance of power. If large numbers cast ballots according to their own needs, candidates might suddenly find them interesting. If Democrats were able to sharpen their social welfare positions without losing middle-class support . . . If they conducted intensive registration and get-out-the-vote drives among citizens who benefit from anti-poverty programs . . . If a strong low-income contingent in the electorate forced Republicans to adopt more generous platforms . . . If those working at the edge of poverty became visible . . .

In reality, however, most Americans do not vote in line with their class interests, and there is no guarantee that the poor would do so even in a large turnout. Balloting seems driven more by aspiration than complaint. *Time* magazine found in a 2000 survey that 19 percent of Americans thought they were in the top 1 percent of wage-earners, and another 20 percent expected to be in the future. "So right away you have 39 percent of Ameri-

cans who thought that when Mr. Gore savaged a plan that favored the top 1 percent, he was taking a direct shot at them," wrote David Brooks, a senior editor at *The Weekly Standard*.³

When self-delusion distorts behavior at the polls, it has damaging consequences for those of low income. Voting is the basic building block of democratic government, and government is the instrument best positioned to make a difference to the working poor. No key sector of this free-enterprise system, whether business or charity, escapes the pervasive influence wielded by government through tax policy, regulation, wage requirements, subsidies, grants, and the like.

The fact that government is the hub of the wheel puts the country's doubts at the center of the most effective efforts to alleviate poverty. Deep ambivalence about governmental power has shaped the American endeavor since the Colonies wrested themselves from the British monarchy—an aversion defined caustically by Thomas Paine in his 1776 pamphlet *Common Sense*: "Society in every state is a blessing, but Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state, an intolerable one."

There is something still to be said for that suspicion. We have owed our freedom to our distrust of government from the beginning, when ingenious checks and balances, the separation of powers, were written into the Constitution. In a time of terrorism, that wariness of the imperious potential of the state has been blunted perilously, but it remains a force in today's political debates over economic and welfare policy. Preaching against big government and applauding private enterprise, conservatives try to prevent state encroachment on the free flow of the market, often to the detriment of the environment, the worker, the consumer. In this view, most zealously expressed by the libertarian wing of the conservative movement, the purpose of government is exceedingly narrow: "The state exists to preserve freedom," declares the Federalist Society, which has successfully promoted right-wingers into the judiciary.

It is a ringing truth, but a stingy statement. The state exists not just to preserve freedom. It exists also to protect the weak. It exists to strengthen the vulnerable, to empower the powerless, to promote justice. It exists to facilitate "the pursuit of happiness." It can behave both as a remote force hostile to the people and as the embodiment of the broad community. It can overregulate and stifle, and it can foster exploration and invention. It should leave individuals alone in their private lives, and it should pool the society's resources for the common good. Government has more than one

personality, and the trick for Americans—one we have been experimenting with since our inception—is how to manage the contradictions.

No system has resolved this quandary. Marxism failed because it misinterpreted history: It saw the stages of civilization leading inexorably to classlessness, a naive assessment of humankind's capabilities. It also failed because its initial disciple, "the world's first socialist state" as the Soviet Union called itself, mistook government for the citizenry. The welfare of the state was elevated above the welfare of the people, producing a bureaucracy of state ownership so vast and smothering that practically nothing existed outside of it—nothing except the humble kitchen tables around which the Russian people talked secretly to one another.

Americanism could fail, too. It is devoted to keeping government in its place, but the question of what place that should be is the centerpiece of our ongoing discussion. Without our keenest vigilance, government grows autocratic in a frightening age of terrorism, or loses humaneness in an age of damaging disparities among our people. We need to restrain and use government simultaneously.

The entire society needs governmental tools to help those working at the bottom of the economic hierarchy—both to lend them a hand in what they cannot do alone and to assist them in developing the capacity to do what they can ultimately do themselves. No dichotomy exists here between societal help and self-help. Government can be neither absent nor all-encompassing. It cannot fail to maintain a safety net, cannot avoid direct grants to the needy, cannot be blind to its role as the community's resource. But it also has to blend its power in creative interaction with the profit and nonprofit worlds, with private industry and private charity.

The most evident point of attack is the wage structure. Business executives have the skill but certainly not the will to compress salary differentials by raising the bottom and making sacrifices at the top. Revised tax structures could induce such policy. Government has the skill to legislate a big boost in the minimum wage, but it lacks the political will, largely because most low-income Americans don't vote their interests or don't vote at all, and can't compete with private industry's sophisticated lobbying and campaign contributions.

Furthermore, the minimum wage is a blunt instrument, and the skill to use it is not perfected. Economists disagree over how much it could be

raised without harming entrepreneurial risk-taking, although it is reasonably argued that the federal minimum, which has declined in real dollars against inflation, could probably rise considerably before doing damage. Eleven states and the District of Columbia have demonstrated as much by placing their own minimum wages at \$6.15 to \$7.15 an hour, well above the federal rate of \$5.15.⁴

One idea for making the tool more refined is to set different minimums for different parts of the country based on regional costs of living. Another approach is the "living wage" law. More than 100 counties and cities now require that private companies with government contracts pay \$6.15 to \$14.75 an hour, levels calculated to support a decent standard of living.⁵ Preliminary results show minimal budget increases for localities, reductions in government subsidies to workers' families, and relief among contractors who no longer have to squeeze employees' pay to compete for low bids. Some economists suspect that the living wage doesn't target the right people, however, because those being hired into such jobs are workers of higher caliber, not those at the bottom who need a hand moving up from minimum wage positions.

We have learned other ways to address the discrepancy between what people can earn in the market and what they need for comfortable living. One method, the Earned Income Tax Credit, rewards work. While the payment looks like a subsidy of the employee, it acts as much to subsidize the employer, who can pay low wages without causing the worker quite as much pain. Indeed, the program indirectly benefits many large corporations, from Wal-Mart to McDonald's, and helps make them more profitable. Having cleverly invented this tool, however, we haven't mustered the will to give it sufficient impact; aside from year-to-year growth with the cost of living, the program has seen no increases since 1996. In 2003, President Bush asked Congress for \$100 million, not to augment the payments, but to hire 650 new auditors to check for fraudulent claims.⁶

Employers are also heavily subsidized by states, counties, and cities competing to attract new industry, and by the creation of federally funded enterprise zones with tax credits to draw manufacturers into poor areas. As a case in point, Alabama has awarded foreign auto companies hundreds of millions of dollars through property tax abatements, suspensions of income taxes, and payments to boost workers' wages—plus a virtually union-free environment.

In exchange for such handouts, private industry could be asked for a

great deal more than its mere presence, but that rarely happens. The creation of jobs is considered sufficient repayment. Here, federalism and local control can interfere with national economic interests, for when localities compete savagely to undercut one another in granting tax relief, they undercut their own tax bases and distort the geographical distribution of work. In Alabama and the rest of the South, which are practically devoid of organized labor, the incentives raise earnings among residents of some of the country's poorest regions, but by diverting jobs, they also undermine unions elsewhere. The proportion of America's workers in labor unions has gradually declined, from 35 to 12.5 percent nationwide between 1950 and 2004; in government, 36 percent are unionized, but in the private sector the figure is only 7.9 percent.⁷

Broader union membership would be beneficial, but even some union jobs yield only low-wage stagnation, as in parking garages and janitorial services. The country's prosperity relies on badly paid workers—that's a fact that is not going to disappear. So the best way to improve a worker's wage is through promotion and upward mobility; new laborers will flow in beneath to take the low-wage positions, and ideally, most of them will eventually climb into decent pay scales.

We know at least two effective methods to help someone starting in the \$5- to \$8-an-hour range move to \$15 or more: One is through sophisticated job training of the kind that rescued Peaches and Leary Brock from the ravages of low skills and disbelief in themselves; the skill is there, now the will has to be mustered to fund such efforts adequately. The second is through a revival of vocational education in high school and a network of apprenticeships for those who don't go to college. There, too, the issue is not one of skill but of will.

Wage differences between high school and college graduates have increased sharply since 1980 as many young people fall through a hole in the economy. Because secondary schools feel growing pressure toward a "college-for-all" curriculum, they send higher percentages to college (nearly 60 percent, up from 30 percent in 1970) but leave many of those who don't attend or don't graduate without the abilities required at well-paid levels of industry. "Doing well in the workplace involves a far more heterogeneous set of skills than doing well in high schools and universities," writes Robert Lerman, an economist at the Urban Institute and American University. Unlike most industrialized countries, he notes, the United States has allowed vocational training to lag, leading to a "weakness in the

middle-skill area" that has been cited by foreign manufacturers as reason to avoid investing here. Sweden, Norway, France, England, Japan, Australia, and Germany have spliced technical secondary-school courses into industry-sponsored apprenticeships, producing highly qualified personnel. But when industries come to the United States from abroad, they often invoke dramatic measures to address the American failings; Lerman reports that BMW, the German automaker, has flown American workers to Germany for instruction.

The notion of funneling certain teenagers into vocational school rubs against the American ethic of egalitarianism, which touts the ideal of equal opportunity without actually providing it. Many parents, believing fervently in the dream, oppose vocational tracking for their children, seeing college as the only reliable pathway upward. The trouble is, if you're like Christie the day-care worker in Ohio, your failure to graduate from college may leave you without the technical skills to make you valuable in the hard-nosed labor market. Christie would have done better on a vocational track than by starting college and dropping out.

Here and there, vocational programs operate successfully under the aegis of certain industries, labor unions, and state governments. "In America, there's everything," Lerman says. "Somebody's always doing something well somewhere." State agencies in Wisconsin, for example, have collaborated with private companies to train young people in printing, finance, biotech, and a score of other areas. He believes that Head Start, the federally funded preschool program for poor children, could be a vehicle for creating youth apprenticeships among high school students, which would then provide credentials in the field of child development.⁸ But on a nationwide scale, we have not chosen to repair this breach in training our young people for well-paying work.

In broader educational matters, the intersection of skill and will is more complex and controversial. Volumes have been written about improving public schools, but insufficient attention has been given to the unfair way they're financed. The fundamental structure is so flawed that even the efforts of a few generous states to equalize funding between rich and poor communities have made too little difference. Most school districts depend largely on local property taxes, and since most Americans live in areas segregated by class as well as race, the disparities are acute. In New York State's districts, for example, the tax base, the value of all taxable real estate, ranges from \$802,047 to \$133,873 per pupil, producing a per-student

annual expenditure whose average ranges from \$13,974 in the wealthiest school systems to \$7,457 in the poorest—and this in a state that tries to reduce the gap by funneling more aid to poorer districts.⁹

The financing method perpetuates the inequities: The schools that have more money provide a superior education, which helps children improve their earning power so they can live in communities that have more to spend on public education. This, in turn, accentuates the racial divide, for public schools have been resegregated since the late 1980s, thanks in large measure to rulings by conservative judges installed by Republican presidents and Senates. One-sixth of the country's black students now attend virtually all non-white schools, many of which are impoverished, and only one-seventh of the whites attend multiracial schools, defined as those with 10 percent or more minority enrollment.¹⁰

Breaking the pernicious pattern by funding schools on a statewide or nationwide basis would not end racial segregation, but it would be a step toward redistributing resources. But then, every solution creates at least one new problem. Money comes with strings attached. The ideal of pooling taxpayers' involuntary contributions at higher levels of government to convey it equitably down the line collides with the powerful devotion in this land to local control—and to privilege. Vouchers for private schools undermine the separation of church and state and draw resources away from public schools.

Furthermore, not every ailment can be relieved by money. Even if teachers were paid in accordance with their essential value to society, even if there were enough of them to keep classes small and instruction somewhat individualized, even if they had sufficient books and microscopes and maps, not all the problems that children carry into school would go away. At some place along the continuum of difficulties, our skills weaken. We do not know how to address all those troubles that young people face. However, we do know how to do much more than we choose to do. Our insufficient will has not carried us even close to that twilight region where our competence fades.

The same can be said of every burden that weighs on the working poor. We know how to promote home ownership and make decent apartments affordable, but we don't do enough of it. We know a great deal about how to treat alcoholism and drug addiction, but we don't provide enough facilities to accommodate all who need and crave the help. That is also true of depression and other mental illness.

We know very well that many who work at the edge of poverty fall between the cracks of health insurance plans, earning too much to qualify for Medicaid and too little to buy private coverage. We have made only a partial response. Since 1998 government has filled much of the gap with the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), which provides federal matching grants to states that cover children at 100 to 200 percent of the poverty level—or higher, as in New Jersey, which extends coverage up to 350 percent. Few states have chosen to insure parents, however, and reduced tax revenues in a recession make that even less likely to happen. (The program's annual federal budget of \$4 billion is roughly the cost of a new aircraft carrier.) Furthermore, nearly a quarter of all uninsured children are ineligible for public coverage, a huge failing that could be changed by federal largess. Then, too, one-quarter of poor children who qualify for Medicaid are not enrolled, either because their parents don't want government help, are deterred by complex application procedures, or simply don't know that the children are entitled to benefits. We have not even had the will to spend extra money for outreach workers to get those kids insured. The same can be said for other support: Only one-third of the households in poverty receive food stamps or subsidized housing.

The larger debate over the country's patchwork health insurance system, which leaves 45 million uncovered, touches on all the big questions about government's role, the private sector's fairness, and the class structure of America. Employer-based policies may be the worst conceivable way to organize coverage. They drive up companies' labor costs, force workers into badly run health maintenance organizations, and create pools of insured so small for some firms that a single employee's cancer diagnosis can send premiums shooting through the roof for everyone. In an age of high mobility, workers bounce from one to another plan as they change jobs, often enduring months without protection. We don't get our auto insurance through our workplaces, and we shouldn't get our medical insurance that way either.

But do we have the skill to solve this? Can we craft a form of universal coverage without stifling efficiency and scientific enterprise? Despite fears about government suffocating the private sector, the opposite has happened in research and development, where soaring federal funding has stimulated a similar growth of private investment. The question is whether the same would happen if a single-payer system of medical insurance were created. The single payer would be the federal government, funding the plan

through taxes, as it does now to insure 30 million elderly through Medicare and 45 million poor through Medicaid. That would provide basic care for everyone, regardless of income. You could even call it Basicare.

There are fears that this would lead to rationing of a kind, as in Canada and England. Some Canadians have experienced long waits in getting such treatment as chemotherapy after breast surgery, for example. In spreading finite medical assets more evenly throughout the population, would Basicare also deprive the wealthy of their privileged access to boundless supplies of specialists, high-tech testing, and advanced remedies? Would it constitute "socialized medicine" and sap the profit motive that drives research and draws talent into the profession? Many doctors who resent government regulation of their fees now refuse to see Medicaid and Medicare patients because the payments are so low—or they charge the elderly rich annual subscription fees to compensate for Medicare reimbursements.

The private alternative, however, has brought the nation's medical system to the brink of catastrophe. Insurance companies exact wildly escalating payments from the public, indulge in exorbitant payoffs to their executives, execute dangerous denials of treatment, and reinforce a class-based hierarchy of care that damages the health of Americans with lesser means. Just as government has gradually entered the insurance business through Medicare, Medicaid, and SCHIP, it can't shrink from further involvement without neglecting its duty to the general welfare. Until a single-payer system becomes politically acceptable, some form of federal-private interaction through subsidies and regulation is a must.

Here is where we need the will to develop the skill to have it both ways: to guarantee the benefits without smothering individual choice or medical initiative. That would be quite an achievement for a nation so steeped in aversion to big government yet so idealistic in the pursuit of social justice. Surely this would happen if members of Congress, who enjoy one of the country's best insurance plans, faced the difficulties of Caroline Payne, who had to halt back treatment after being dropped from Medicaid; or Lisa Brooks, whose credit rating was ruined by an HMO that refused to pay for an ambulance; or those malnourished kids at the clinics in Boston and Baltimore.

We know what an unhealthy early childhood does to a growing human being. Neuroscience and other areas of research have taught us about the intricate relationships between the biological and the cognitive, between early nurturing and later functioning. Our understanding

of the problems is ahead of the skills we have acquired to solve them, and the skills are ahead of our will to act. Across the country we have developed a multitude of early-intervention programs, many founded on sound concepts. But those that are underfunded and run by undertrained staff set an unhappy pattern: The project receives inadequate resources, which leads to its want of success, which causes it to be abandoned as a failed approach.

Parents' handicaps in raising their children lie along that continuum between the correctable and the unmanageable. At the most accessible end of the spectrum, mothers and fathers may simply lack informed techniques of parenting that can be taught in classes or individual counseling. Plenty of well-to-do parents pay for such training; low-income parents may find sporadic help without charge through social agencies. Parents learn such skills as how to encourage their children rather than focus on their wrongdoing, how to do joint problem-solving and help kids make their own choices, how to manage anger, how to administer discipline sensibly, how to listen and express empathy, and how to achieve mutual respect.

At the distant end of the continuum, though, where serious personality disorders and disrupted families affect parenting, our skills are weaker. Some parents carry such profound disturbance from their own upbringing that lessons and advice don't have much impact. We have not figured out how to curb sexual abuse, for example, other than by removing children to foster families, which are not always model households themselves. These are concerns that cut across class lines.

Given the decisive nature of the earliest years, why doesn't American society muster its most ingenious efforts to guide parents and safeguard children? The successful programs are described with recurring terms: "comprehensive," "intensive," and "highly professional." Another should be "expensive." When you have highly professional specialists in medicine, psychology, and child development focusing on a family the way a trauma team huddles over a patient in surgery, you run up very high bills.

Can the wealthiest country in the world afford to pay? You bet we can, especially if those at the top are willing to sacrifice a little. It might even save us money elsewhere in our social welfare budgets, as suggested by the results of the federal Infant Health and Development Program, a clinical trial aimed at premature babies. From birth through age three, 985 children in eight locations across the country were bombarded with attention from pediatricians, social workers, home visitors, and others who monitored

ir health, referred families to services, provided educational child care, and the like. At three, the kids had higher IQ scores, larger vocabularies, and fewer behavioral problems than children who had not received the services.¹¹ In other words, when we do it right, it works. "And everywhere we've tried to do it on the cheap, everywhere we've tried to cut a corner, we've ended up spending money with no appreciable results," said Representative George Miller of California, who was chairman of the House Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families.¹² We have known all this for a long time. He made the observation in the 1980s.

Even our extensive efforts don't reach enough children. Head Start, a preschool program for the poor, is funded at an annual amount worth the price of one and a half new aircraft carriers. It enrolls only 60 percent of the youngsters who are eligible, according to the Children's Defense Fund, and its teachers, only half of whom are required to have a college degree, earn an average of just \$22,000 a year. The Bush administration has shaken up the program by announcing plans to require it to push reading for preschoolers, a policy disputed as unwise by many educators. Early Head Start, begun in 1995 to tackle the critical years from birth to three, has been deemed effective by preliminary studies, but it touches only 5 percent of the nation's eligible children. Meanwhile, government policies operate at cross-purposes by ratcheting up the work requirement imposed on welfare mothers without raising funds for child care. We don't even do what we know how to do.

To appraise a society, examine its ability to be self-correcting. When grievances are done or endemic suffering exposed, when injustice is discovered or opportunity denied, watch the institutions of government and business and charity. Their response is an index of a nation's health and of the people's strength.

The United States possesses agile mechanisms for discerning troubling truths and adjusting toward reform. We have done so against racial discrimination, environmental degradation, corporate malfeasance, misguided foreign policy, police brutality, and domestic poverty. The fact that all these ills remain, many of them less virulent than a half century ago, testifies to both the challenge and the accomplishment. If the ideal is high enough, it is never quite attained. If the striving is sufficiently intense, it

never runs to completion; at best, it yields success after success indefinitely. That should be our mission against poverty in working America.

If a single cause were identified, a remedy might be readily designed. It would fit neatly into a liberal or a conservative prescription. If either the system's exploitation or the victims' irresponsibility were to blame, one or the other side of the debate would be satisfied. If the reasons were merely corporate greed or government indifference or impoverished schools, then liberal solutions would suffice. If the causes were only the personal failures of parents and children, teachers and workers, then conservative views would hold. But "repression is a seamless garment," as Salman Rushdie wrote. This is repression of a kind, and it lacks the clear boundaries that would define the beginning and the end of accountability. In the fields of North Carolina, the migrants are driven by Mexico's destitution and drawn by America's promise. They are indentured to coyotes and *contratistas*. They are warehoused in squalor and paid a pittance by growers, by wholesalers, by supermarket chains, and by shoppers who enjoy low prices for the cucumbers and tomatoes that the migrants harvest. When accountability is spread so broadly and diffused, it seems to cease to exist. The opposite is true. It may look as if nobody is accountable. In fact, everybody is.

The liberal-conservative divide is not only about how big government should be; it is also about what government should do. Liberalism is the use of the state for some purposes; conservatism is the use of the state for other purposes. Just as liberal Democrats call for increasing grants and programs for the poor, "social conservatives" among Republicans want big government to give or withhold money to promote marriage, dictate local education policies, discourage child-bearing by mothers on welfare, and subsidize religious institutions' moralistic efforts to combat indigence.

The troubles of the working poor will not be relieved by this ideological debate. Political argument is vital for democracy, but solutions must finally transcend the familiar disagreements. The political opponents have to cross into each other's territory to pick up solutions from the opposite side. Just as President Bill Clinton entered conservative ground to impose time limits and work requirements on welfare recipients, so would conservatives do well to step into the liberal arena for the assistance that government needs to provide. Opportunity and poverty in this country cannot be explained by either the American Myth that hard work is a panacea or by

the Anti-Myth that the system imprisons the poor. Relief will come, if at all, in an amalgam that recognizes both the society's obligation through government and business, and the individual's obligation through labor and family—and the commitment of both society and individual through education.

Workers at the edge of poverty are essential to America's prosperity, but their well-being is not treated as an integral part of the whole. Instead, the forgotten wage a daily struggle to keep themselves from falling over the cliff. It is time to be ashamed.

Epilogue

Lives continue unresolved. Since the hardcover edition of this book appeared, some of the people in these pages have taken happier directions, others have seen hopeful prospects dissipate, and many remain mired in stagnation. Here is what has happened to a few of them.

Ann Brash (pp. 193–200), still working as a poorly paid book editor, received some financial relief from her son, Sandy, who lived at home and contributed part of his wage as a computer specialist at Dartmouth. But she watched in dismay as her daughter, Sally, dropped out of the New England Conservatory of Music to take a job in a flower shop for \$13 an hour. After all, to maximize Sandy's and Sally's opportunities, Ann had chosen poverty as an alternative to working multiple jobs, which would have meant sacrificing the time needed to raise her children well. Nothing