

12 OUT OF THE FRYING PAN

met if we are to survive. Some, but not all, of these needs can be provided through the job market.

I have lived four lives since becoming an adult: as a single working woman, as a woman married to a poor man, as a welfare mother, and as a working single mother. I can truly say that in all of these lives I have needed supports at one time or another.

It is up to us to do the wise and right thing to ensure our future. Children are only loaned to the families that raise them—they belong to all of us. Our children are our greatest resource, and we must do whatever it takes to make sure that they get the adult guidance and discipline they need to develop into responsible individuals so that they can face the problems of adulthood and develop worthwhile solutions. To properly achieve this goal, we should value the entire family and help each member to live a life of value.

WHY MOTHER SLAPPED ME

Ann Withorn

IN OUR HOT SOUTHERN KITCHEN, AS ALWAYS, MOTHER WASHED dishes. I dried while Sister Barbara put away.

I was a senior in high school, taking "Problems in American Democracy," finding out about a new issue every week that needed to be fixed, in time for Mr. Morrow's standard Friday paper: "Facts about the problem; disputes about the problem; what is being done now; proposed solutions to the problem; what you would do to solve it." Weekly, the droll retired navy captain drilled us in a class that was my first introduction to public policy—outside of church and Sunday school, where return to Jesus, prayer, and avoidance of sin were the perpetual answers. I joked about how we should send our papers to President Johnson, so that he could get on with it.

That week we were studying poverty. Usually, I avoided discussing politics with Mother. She was so sure of her beliefs, and we would fight so easily about so much. But this time I assumed, given the childhood poverty which had shaped her life, that we could have a discussion.

Wrong.

She was adamant that people who took welfare were lazy, and just didn't want to work hard like she and my father did. "Good people can find jobs if they aren't so picky. Women who have made their bed must lie in it," she insisted.

No radical yet, but I was always willing to react to that tone of dismissal in her voice, heard in so many criticisms of me: "Good girls who try to look pretty, and go to church, and don't read so much will be fine. They won't turn out weird like you."

So I took the bait. "But Mother, I thought you would be more sympathetic. After all, you grew up on welfare."

Mother was not a hitter. Words were her weapons. So when the

slap in my face came it was almost an involuntary spasm, accompanied by words hissed between closed teeth. "Don't you *ever* say that again. My family did *not* grow up on welfare. Your grandfather was ill, in the hospital, and received veterans benefits. We earned what we received from the government because he fought in the war. We were *never* on welfare." Then she left, yet another night when my "disrespect" left me with the washing *and* the drying of the dishes.

In our household of denial, the incident would never be discussed again. I was left alone to ponder how my grandmother's poverty—caused by Pop's mental illness after tough service in World War I, followed by his life-long hospitalization beginning when Mother was five—was so different from welfare. The Veteran's Administration never sent enough money, and the checks sometimes just did not come. Grandmother had to live, with three kids, in rummy apartments, share space with questionable relatives, and never have enough. People would look down on her; even her cousins would taunt that her children's father was a "crazy man." Why wasn't that like welfare?

I still wonder and still cannot discuss welfare with Mother.

But I can talk and teach and continually try to figure out why it is that welfare is such a hot zone for people.

Talking about anything can set off some people. But welfare is a sure-fire fight almost anywhere it is discussed. Even people who agree about it get agitated.

Once, on a bus, I sat behind two men who were talking about "welfare queens." Both agreed that it was pathetic that the government was giving them money to do nothing, raise criminals, and get fat. But as they talked, their voices got louder, echoing my mother's deep fury. "Who do they think they are?" one man almost shouted to his friend as he left the bus, "having babies with no fathers, expecting *me* to pay for them?"

It has even affected me. An old friend was in my kitchen, trying to express his doubts to me about whether welfare is good for the Black community where he works. Somehow the idea that I have to defend women on welfare even in my own home, with my own friends, makes me furious. I yelled that he didn't know what he was talking about, how I wouldn't listen to such ignorance in my own kitchen.

I don't usually do this. But I, too, find it hard not to take welfare

as a personal issue. When I hear people say cruel things about women on welfare, I want to jump up and scream about how they do not know Debby or Mary or Juanita (or my grandmother?). They work so hard, with so little, and manage so well, or sometimes not so well, in spite of stresses and pressures undiscussed by any "Problems in American Democracy" class.

Over the years of studying poverty, I have come to see that talking about welfare is not about public policy, about how much money should be or can be spent to provide basic economic security to families with children in an uncertain economy. It is about deeply based assumptions about how we view women, and work, and the meaning of the compromises we are supposed to make in this life.

Sometimes I feel weird about doing it, but increasingly, even as an academic who could easily retreat behind facts and figures, I talk personally about women's poverty. I talk about how the latest round of "reforms" reminds me of my family, where plans were promoted and discussed based on denial of what everyone knew to be reality. I cannot help but tell audiences—even as I fear they will think I am as crazy as my grandfather—how in my family we ignored and reframed problems like an uncle's drinking himself to death, or my father's loss of a job. We found ways to deny how serious the problem was, or to go to family picnics and recast the adversity as "the best thing for us." I try to get people to see how the Right is trying to lull everyone with ill-conceived proposals, because pretending they will work makes it appear as if there *are* jobs available for everyone if they seek them; there *are* families that can take in a pregnant teen; there *are* ways to get men to provide for their children—if we just insist on it. Not to deny, not to pretend that these false reforms will work, is to call into question even bigger, even more frightening falsehoods: that jobs alone provide adequate security, or that all women want to raise their kids with a man.

It was scary to admit that my uncle was hopelessly heading down a path of no return. It was terrifying to think that, at 40, my father had held four jobs in six years and might be in real jeopardy of being able to convince anyone else to hire him. But I say to people that just as it was not healthy for my family to pretend that some new scheme to take Uncle Robert on vacation would "turn him around," or to pretend that Daddy was simply taking advantage of another opportunity when we moved yet again, so it is extremely dangerous

to deny the reality to which welfare is such a meager response. Many families *do* fail women who can't survive with bodies and souls intact if they remain either with birth families or with the fathers of their children. Most jobs fail single mothers because they cannot provide the income, benefits, and flexibility they need to raise their children. So welfare, which also fails women, still becomes the best solution. At the cost of continued poverty, disrespect, and bureaucratic indignity, it provides at least time and some flexibility to face, and not deny, the life that one has.

Welfare is so personal because, if we think about it, we cannot escape thinking about how insecure jobs are within this capitalist economy and how so many families are not the source of love and support we wish them to be. It also suggests that there could be another way. At heart, bad as we have indeed made the system, AFDC means that there is an option besides doing one's duty within abusive families or in life-destroying jobs. It is terrifying to admit that our acceptance of suffering with bad bosses and our tolerance of intolerable intimate injustices within the home could have been otherwise.

Right now, almost the whole society is trying to slap down women on welfare, telling them, with a societal hiss stronger than any mother could conjure up: "Don't you *ever* say we could have chosen assistance rather than stay in bad marriages; don't you claim that we could have done anything besides take two jobs, never seeing our children and making ourselves sick; don't you *ever* say it because then nothing we've endured makes any sense."

Somehow I knew then, and I know even more clearly now, that even if I have to do the dishes and dry, and get slapped sometimes, it is better to try to say what has to be said, to make such claims, to cry out loud.

TO A SINGLE MOTHER

Susan Eisenberg

When the just-changed diaper
 must be changed
 again,
 when a plate of spaghetti is dropped
 deliberately
 onto the kitchen floor
 noodle
 by
 noodle,
 when the phone ringing at bedtime
 snaps the spell of stories and songs,
 tension topping a hundred three —

I think of you two sharing a one-room flat.
 Mother and Child:
 the Madonna Myth.
 No partner to cut the burdens by half.
 No family to step in at overload.
 No door to quietly close crying infant
 safely in her crib for a moment's
 solitude, a cup of tea.
 Who honors your marathon of
 daily life?