



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK  
Spirituality · Community · Justice

## **Economic Justice: Psychology, Poverty, & the American Dream**

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[frederickuu.org](http://frederickuu.org)

An important part of our Unitarian Universalist heritage is the tradition of both a **“free pulpit”** and a **“free pew.”** The *freedom of the pulpit* means that I am encouraged to preach about whatever I think is significant and meaningful for us to consider as a congregation. The *freedom of the pew* means that you are not expected to believe or do something simply because I or anyone else says so in a sermon.

That being said, once a year members and friends of this congregation contribute all sorts of items, events, offers, and opportunities to our annual auction. And each year my contribution is to preach a sermon on the topic of the highest bidder's choice: “whatever topic you are passionate about or think would be particularly challenging, meaningful, or provocative.” So if there is a sermon topic you’ve been hoping to hear addressed, our upcoming auction can be your chance. (Note that our usual early November Auction will likely be moved online and delayed until early 2021 due to the pandemic.)

Last year, Bruce Fry won the auction sermon, and as the topic, he chose “The economic and psychological burdens of poverty.” From a UU perspective, many of you know that one theme I return to regularly is embodied in our UU Sixth Principle: “The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice” not merely for some, but “for all.” From that perspective, the financial and mental stress of poverty strikes me as deeply unfair and out of alignment with our deepest values. But let’s also be honest that not everyone holds UU values.

An additional framework that might be used to create broader support for economic justice is the American Dream. As the Harvard political science professor Robert Putnam has explored in his book Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis (Simon & Schuster, 2016), despite the increasingly strong partisan divides in our country, for many decades, surveys of the American public have shown that approximately 95 percent of Americans continue to support the principle that, **“Everyone in America should have equal opportunity to get ahead”** (32).

The strong consensus that each individual should have the chance to succeed or fail on the basis of their own effort is an entry point for economic justice. As many studies have shown, people living in poverty are not playing on an equal playing field compared to people living with economic privilege.

Since the Auction Sermon topic asked me to address both the economic and psychological burdens of poverty, I’ll start with psychology, then move on to economics. From a psychological perspective, some of the most interesting and significant studies related to poverty center on the Adverse Childhood Experiences Scale. This scale included ten general categories, and I’m aware that listing these general types of experiences could bring up painful memories. If so, I invite you to offer your love and compassion in this moment. If you are open to it, try saying these phrases with me either silently or aloud:

May I be filled with loving-kindness

May I be peaceful and at ease

May I be safe and protected.

Offering compassion to ourselves is one among many tools for working with difficult experiences.

And the reason I am taking the time to list the ten items on the Adverse Childhood Experiences Scale is that they can help make the *unconscious* conscious. They can help us be more aware of dynamics that are impacting our life and the lives of others. Being more aware of these dynamics does not change the past, but it can make our memories of these experiences more workable in the present.

Along these lines, two of my favorite quotes from the psychologist Carl Jung come to mind here. First, “One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of

light, but by *making the darkness conscious*.” If we can become *more aware* of unconscious dynamics at play, we can *name* what is happening, and make our situation more workable. The second quote from Jung is that, “Until you make the unconscious *conscious*, it will direct your life and you will call it fate.”

So from that perspective, the following are the ten items on the Adverse Childhood Experiences Scale:

Abuse

1. Household adult humiliated or threatened you physically
2. Household adult hit, slapped, or injured you
3. Adult sexually abused you

Neglect

4. Felt no one in family loved or supported you

Household Dysfunction

5. Household member depressed or suicidal
6. Mother/stepmother was physically abused
7. Parents separated/divorced
8. You lacked food or clothes or your parents were too drunk or high to care for you
9. Household member imprisoned
10. Lived with an alcoholic or drug user (113)

Adverse Childhood Experiences can create what has been called “toxic stress” that negatively impacts brain development—and has been shown to have a strong correlation with many negative behaviors and negative health outcomes in adults (112).

Let me also add that, of course, children at all socioeconomic levels experience various Adverse Childhood Experiences; however, children “who grow up in low-income, less educated families are at considerably greater risk. Even kids living at twice the poverty level are two to five times more likely” to experience numerous factors on the Adverse Childhood Experience Scale compared to their more economically advantaged peers (113).

Now in the same way that being wealthy doesn’t guarantee you a pass from having Adverse Childhood Experiences, it is also true that there are many impoverished parents who are sensitive, responsive, and compassionate in ways that help mitigate

the impact of Adverse Childhood Experience (115). Nevertheless, raising awareness of the correlation between poverty and Adverse Childhood Experiences can help motivate people to support economic justice programs. It is not possible to be in alignment with the American Dream that, “Everyone in America should have *equal* opportunity to get ahead” based on their own hard work when you realize people living in poverty have to work more than twice as hard to get half as far.

To be more specific about what I mean, allow me to shift from the psychological burdens of poverty to an economic angle. When I think about the struggles of trying to make it in America, one book that comes immediately to mind is Barbara Ehrenreich’s modern classic *Nickel and Dimed*. To research this book, Ehrenreich went undercover to experience what it is like to try to get by as a minimum wage worker in America. Her book, published in 2001, when I was about two years from entering the job market— had a profound impact on me regarding the unequal struggles workers face.

From her own perspective, Ehrenreich has said that her experience moved her **“from concern about the exploitation of low-wage workers—to something more like rage”** (Tirado x). She was infuriated by the “daily humiliations” that both she and her co-workers faced: being constantly suspected of using drugs or stealing, having little or no control or input over changes to their work schedules and, ironically, being short-changed multiple times on pay by the very same employer who was always worried about being stolen from (xi).

Ehrenreich’s book, however, is ultimately the perspective of someone with economic privilege seeking to put a spotlight on economic injustice. So although I do still recommend Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* to anyone who hasn’t read it, I would also recommend that you read a newer book titled *Hand to Mouth: Living in Bootstrap America* by Linda Tirado who, unlike Ehrenreich, lived for years as a low-wage worker. Her subtitle (“Living in Bootstrap America”) reminds me of a profound quote from The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. that, **“It’s a cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps.”**

Tirado’s book is in equal parts hilarious, provocative, and poignant, and I’m only going to have time to share a few pieces of it. One of the most important points is how hard she works for so little reward. She gets up at 6:00 a.m. every morning so that she

can get to class (and eventually get a college degree), get the kids to school, work at one or both of her jobs, get home a little after midnight, do some homework and housework, and get to bed by 3:00 a.m.—so that she can get an inadequate three hours of sleep before getting up at 6:00 a.m. to restart the daily grind. Two nights a week she can get to bed by midnight, but that’s always dangerous because it can throw off her sleep pattern for the rest of the week (xiv). **The most demoralizing part is to work that hard and still be poor** (8).

Although a significant percentage of people earning minimum wage are teenagers who may still be living at home, it is also true that “800,000 adults over the age of twenty-five work at minimum wage or below. Or to put that number in context, about 25,000 more people than live in all of San Francisco” (9).

And in such circumstances, Tirado writes compellingly about how easy it is to resort to unhealthy coping mechanisms just to get by (xvi). Along these lines, what I appreciate most about her book is how human it is. She’s searingly honest, vulnerable, and transparent about the realities of just trying to get by—including hilarious and poignant stories on topics that range from junk food to sex.

Her favorite example is when more economically well-off people criticize her for smoking. She writes that: “I smoke because it’s a fast, quick hit of dopamine.... I know it’s bad for me. I’m addicted, not addled. [Cigarettes] keep me awake, they keep me going” (90).

Overall, I agree with Barbara Ehrenreich that, “**Poverty is not a ‘culture’ or character defect; it is a shortage of money.** And that shortage arises from grievously inadequate pay, aggravated by constant humiliation and stress, as well as outright predation by employers, credit companies, and even law enforcement agencies” (xii).

And if there is one takeaway from Tirado’s book that all of us—regardless of our level of income—can put into action immediately, it is to be even more intentional than you perhaps already are about being compassionate if you run into a low-wage worker who is having a bad day (83). That basically means just being kind, which is also, of course, a good strategy for anyone’s bad day—or good day, for that matter.

More generally, those of you who have been around here for awhile know that I personally think that the solution to poverty is to *give people money*. To me, the

universalist half of our Unitarian Universalist heritage means working to provide a stable floor for all. Period. I don't believe we all should be equal; many people may want to work harder and earn more. But I do believe that every human being deserves a basic minimum needed for a dignified life. I've said a lot about that in previous sermons. If you are looking for an accessible entry point to UBI, one readable book is economist Annie Lowry's [Give People Money: How a Universal Basic Income Would End Poverty, Revolutionize Work, and Remake the World.](#)

I also highly recommend the book [Eviction](#) by Matthew Desmond, which has become an even more urgent topic amidst the pandemic. And if you or someone you know is in crisis, one resource to call is [2-1-1](#), which can help with a wide variety of problems.

Our country has a tremendous wealth gap (Putnam 35). We do not have to allow our current system of deep economic injustice and unfairness to continue. We can level the playing field. And it is important to be honest that there is also a high cost to inaction. Underinvesting in childhood poverty has serious longterm consequences related to diminished economic productivity, rising crime rates, and skyrocketing health care costs (231). Conversely:

the Nobel Laureate economist James Heckman has estimated that even expensive investments in early childhood education would yield real rates of return (approximately 6 to 10 percent) that outstrip long-term stock market returns.... Ignoring the plight of poor kids imposes a substantial economic burden on all of us. (233)

When I think about how this situation might change, I'm reminded of an essay from the philosopher Richard Rorty published in 1996 titled "Looking Backward from the Year 2096." In this essay, he imagines how future generations might look back on us in parallel to how we look back on previous generations. To be specific, from our contemporary perspective, it is easy to look back on citizens of this country who lived before the Civil War, and condemn their tolerance of enslaving human beings based on nothing more than the color of their skin. Today we ask, "How could our ancestors have stomached slavery?" But what if we turned that around and look in the mirror at ourselves today? One day, will our own descendants look back on us here in 2020, and

ask, “How could our great-grandparents (that’s us) have legally permitted a C.E.O. to be paid [100] times more than her lowest paid employees” (243)? Amidst such great wealth, how could we have allowed children to live in preventable poverty?

We do not live in 2096. And there is no guarantee that power will be eliminated in the eight decades between then and now. It all turns on what happens in the coming months and years. For now, we live here in the year 2020, when poverty remains what Rorty has rightly called a “moral abomination” that is the responsibility of us all. May each of us act individually and collectively within our spheres of influence to help co-create a world in which all human beings have a stable floor and a level playing field from which to grow and act and flourish.