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IT'S CUSTOMARY WHEN YOU'RE GIVING A TALK LIKE THIS TO START WITH A COUPLE OF JOKES, TO WIN THE AUDIENCE OVER, GET THEM ON YOUR SIDE. BUT WE'RE HERE TO TALK ABOUT POVERTY IN THE UNITED STATES AND THERE'S NOTHING FUNNY ABOUT POVERTY.

SO NO JOKES TODAY. JUST THE TRUTH.

FIFTY YEARS AGO, AT A TIME WHEN JOHN F. KENNEDY WAS IN THE WHITE HOUSE, MICHAEL HARRINGTON PUBLISHED HIS GROUND-BREAKING BOOK, "THE OTHER AMERICA: POVERTY IN UNITED STATES."

OUR EYES WERE SUPPOSEDLY OPENED TO THIS GRAVE PROBLEM BACK THEN. AND THE TRUTH IS THAT A LOT OF PROGRESS WAS MADE OVER THE NEXT SEVERAL YEARS.

BUT POVERTY HAS NOW MOUNTED A FEROCIOUS COMEBACK IN THE UNITED STATES, TAKING A FIERCE TOLL ON TENS OF MILLIONS OF PEOPLE, MANY OF THEM VERY YOUNG. IN THE YEARS SINCE BILL CLINTON LEFT OFFICE, THE RANKS OF THE POOR HAVE EXPANDED BY 15 MILLION.

MANY OF THE GAINS MADE IN THE YEARS THAT FOLLOWED PUBLICATION OF “THE OTHER AMERICA” HAVE BEEN REVERSED. WE NOW HAVE MORE POOR PEOPLE IN THE UNITED STATES THAN AT ANY TIME SINCE THE CENSUS BUREAU STARTED KEEPING ACCURATE RECORDS BACK IN THE 1960s.

AND YET OUR MAINSTREAM POLITICIANS HARDLY EVER MENTION THE SUBJECT OF POVERTY.

WHEN PUBLIC OFFICIALS TALK ABOUT ECONOMIC ISSUES, THEY’RE ALMOST ALWAYS FOCUSED ON THE MIDDLE CLASS. IF THERE IS ANY DISCUSSION OF POVERTY AT ALL, IT’S USUALLY ABOUT HOW BEST TO CUT THE ALREADY MEAGER PROGRAMS THAT OFFER THE POOR SOME ASSISTANCE.

WE’RE IN THE MIDST OF A HOTLY-CONTESTED PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION BETWEEN TWO MEN WHO WOULD RATHER WALK BAREFOOT ACROSS HOT COALS THAN TALK ABOUT POVERTY IN AMERICA. WE HAD THREE PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES OVER THE PAST SEVERAL WEEKS AND POVERTY NEVER CAME UP ONCE.

MICHAEL HARRINGTON COMPLAINED THAT IN THE PROSPEROUS EARLY-1960s THE POOR HAD SLIPPED OUT OF THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF MAINSTREAM AMERICA – THAT THEY WERE INCREASINGLY ISOLATED FROM THEIR MORE FORTUNATE FELLOW CITIZENS. THE POOR WERE THERE, ALL RIGHT, IN ENORMOUS NUMBERS, BUT THE WILLFUL DENIAL OF THE MAINSTREAM POPULATION KEPT THEM LARGELY INVISIBLE.

“TENS OF MILLIONS OF AMERICANS,” SAID HARRINGTON “ARE AT THIS VERY MOMENT MAIMED IN BODY AND SPIRIT, EXISTING AT ALL LEVELS BENEATH THOSE NECESSARY FOR HUMAN DECENCY. IF THESE PEOPLE ARE NOT STARVING, THEY ARE HUNGRY, AND SOMETIMES FAT WITH HUNGER, FOR THAT IS WHAT CHEAP FOODS DO.

“THEY ARE WITHOUT ADEQUATE HOUSING AND EDUCATION AND MEDICAL CARE.”

IN AN INTRODUCTION TO A 30<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY EDITION OF “THE OTHER AMERICA,” IRVING HOWE WROTE THAT THE BOOK WAS A CRY OF THE HEART, “AN APPEAL TO THE CONSCIENCE” OF THE GOOD PEOPLE OF AMERICA.

HE SAID THAT HARRINGTON WAS ASKING, “HOW CAN YOU ALLOW SUCH A SCANDAL TO FESTER IN THIS COUNTRY?”

[BEAT]

WELL, I WOULD ASK THE SAME QUESTION TODAY, A HALF-CENTURY AFTER IT WAS FIRST POSED.  
*HOW CAN WE ALLOW THIS SCANDAL TO CONTINUE TO FESTER?*

NEARLY FIFTY MILLION AMERICANS ARE POOR RIGHT NOW – IN 2012 – IN THE RICHEST NATION EVER TO INHABIT THE EARTH. THESE ARE FELLOW CITIZENS OF OURS – MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN – WHO ARE SINKING INTO THE QUICKSAND OF EVER-DEEPENING MATERIAL DEPRIVATION, AND ISOLATION FROM SOCIETY’S MAINSTREAM.

ANOTHER FIFTY MILLION PEOPLE ARE WHAT WE CALL THE NEAR-POOR – THEY’RE HANGING ON JUST A NOTCH OR TWO ABOVE THE OFFICIAL POVERTY LINE, WHICH MEANS THEY CAN FEEL THE AWFUL FLAMES OF POVERTY LICKING AT THEIR HEELS.

THE PEOPLE IN THOSE TWO CATEGORIES – THE POOR AND THE NEAR-POOR – COMPRISE NEARLY A THIRD OF THE ENTIRE AMERICAN POPULATION.

ONE IN EVERY FIVE AMERICAN CHILDREN IS POOR – AND ONE IN EVERY THREE BLACK CHILDREN. THE UNITED STATES HAS THE HIGHEST CHILD POVERTY RATE IN THE ENTIRE INDUSTRIALIZED WORLD.

AND THIS IS THE CASE AT A TIME WHEN THE ECONOMIC ELITE IN AMERICA – THAT SMALL SLIVER OF THE POPULATION AT THE TOP OF THE ECONOMIC PYRAMID – ARE ENJOYING RICHES THAT COULD NEVER PREVIOUSLY HAVE BEEN IMAGINED IN ALL OF OUR NATION’S HISTORY.

THE MAYOR OF MY CITY, NEW YORK, IS PERSONALLY WORTH SOME \$25 BILLION.

BUT AMONG MICHAEL BLOOMBERG’S CONSTITUENTS – THE EIGHT MILLION RESIDENTS OF NEW YORK CITY – ONE IN EVERY FIVE IS MIRED IN POVERTY. THE HOMELESS FAMILY CASELOAD IN NEW YORK IS SO GREAT THE SHELTERS HAVE TO TURN PEOPLE AWAY.

SO WE HAVE ON THE ONE HAND A MAYOR WITH \$25 BILLION, A DOZEN HOMES AND HIS OWN PRIVATE AIRPLANE – A MAYOR SO RICH HE DISDAINS LIVING IN THE MANSION PROVIDED BY THE TAXPAYERS FOR THE CITY’S TOP ELECTED OFFICIAL.

ON THE OTHER HAND WE HAVE THIS MAYOR’S CONSTITUENTS SLEEPING IN THE RAIN ON CARDBOARD IN THE STREETS. THAT SEEMS MORE LIKE A MEDIEVAL SCENE OF NOBLES AND SERFS THAN WHAT I HAD IMAGINED AMERICA IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY WOULD BE LIKE.

THE BANKERS, THE C.E.O.s, THE HEDGE FUND MANAGERS IN MY TOWN – IN THEIR SLEEK BLACK, CHAUFFEUR-DRIVEN LIMOUSINES – DRIVE PAST THE POOR AND THE HOMELESS WITHOUT EVEN NOTICING THEM, WITHOUT FOR A MOMENT GIVING THEM A SECOND THOUGHT.

THAT DISCONNECT ONLY WORSENERD THIS WEEK WITH THE DESTRUCTION WROUGHT BY HURRICANE SANDY. MORE THAN A HUNDRED HOUSES BURNED DOWN IN THE BOROUGH OF QUEENS DURING THE STORM, AND THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE WERE DRIVEN FROM THEIR HOMES BY FLOODING AND WIND DAMAGE.

THE POOR, OF COURSE, WERE HAMMERED WORST AND HAD THE FEWEST RESOURCES TO FALL BACK ON. MANY WERE LEFT WITHOUT FOOD, WITHOUT POWER, WITHOUT WATER, WITH NO MONEY, AND WITH NO PLACE ELSE TO GO.

AS ONE MAN SAID, WITH TEARS FILLING HIS EYES, “REBUILD WHAT? I HAVE NOTHING TO REBUILD WITH.”

IT WAS HEARTBREAKING.

[BEAT]

THE TRUTH IS THAT ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN THE UNITED STATES ARE SUBSTANTIALLY WORSE THAN THE RHETORIC OF THE POLITICIANS AND THE COVERAGE OF THE PRESS WOULD LEAD US TO BELIEVE.

MORE THAN 20 MILLION AMERICANS LIVE IN EXTREME POVERTY. THEY’RE TRYING SOMEHOW TO SURVIVE ON LESS THAN \$11,000 A YEAR FOR A FAMILY OF FOUR. IT’S HARD TO IMAGINE HOW THAT’S EVEN POSSIBLE. THAT’S DESTITUTION.

THE EXTREME POOR ARE THE FOLKS WHO WILL EAT ONE MEAL A DAY INSTEAD OF TWO TO CONSERVE FOOD. THEY’RE THE ONES WHO CAN’T EVEN THINK ABOUT GETTING DENTAL WORK DONE. THEY’RE THE ONES – AND I’VE COVERED THIS SO MANY TIMES OVER THE YEARS I’VE LOST COUNT – THEY’RE THE ONES WHO WHEN THEIR CHILDREN DIE, THEY CAN’T EVEN AFFORD TO BURY THEM.

IT’S WRONG TO ALLOW THIS TRAGIC STATE OF AFFAIRS TO CONTINUE. MICHAEL HARRINGTON’S QUESTION STILL HANGS IN THE AIR LIKE A DARK CLOUD, A REBUKE TO ALL OF US FORTUNATE ENOUGH TO BE DOING WELL:

HOW IN THE WORLD CAN WE ALLOW SUCH A SCANDAL TO FESTER IN THIS COUNTRY?

[BEAT]

PEOPLE DON'T TALK ABOUT LYNDON JOHNSON MUCH ANYMORE. BUT JOHNSON, LIKE MICHAEL HARRINGTON, KNEW BACK IN THE 1960s THAT IT WAS WRONG TO LET OUR FELLOW CITIZENS, OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS, WALLOW IN POVERTY WHEN WE HAD THE RESOURCES AND THE KNOW-HOW TO EASE THEIR PLIGHT.

NOT TOO LONG AGO, I RE-READ JOHNSON'S GREAT SOCIETY SPEECH, WHICH HE DELIVERED AS THE COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN ON MAY, 22, 1964.

THE COUNTRY WAS STILL TRYING TO GET BACK TO NORMAL AFTER THE TRAUMA OF THE KENNEDY ASSASSINATION EIGHT MONTHS EARLIER AND JOHNSON WAS LAYING OUT WHAT AMOUNTED TO A SENSE OF NATIONAL PURPOSE – AN EXPLICIT STATEMENT OF WHAT THE UNITED STATES, THE WEALTHIEST AND MOST POWERFUL NATION ON EARTH, SHOULD BE ABOUT.

“FOR A CENTURY,” SAID JOHNSON, “WE LABORED TO SETTLE AND SUBDUE A CONTINENT. FOR HALF A CENTURY, WE CALLED UPON UNBOUNDED INVENTION AND UNTIRING INDUSTRY TO CREATE AN ORDER OF PLENTY FOR ALL OF OUR PEOPLE.

“THE CHALLENGE OF THE NEXT HALF CENTURY IS WHETHER WE HAVE THE WISDOM TO USE THAT WEALTH TO ENRICH AND ELEVATE OUR NATIONAL LIFE, AND TO ADVANCE THE QUALITY OF OUR AMERICAN CIVILIZATION.”

JOHNSON HAD A VISION THAT WAS WORTHY OF THIS COUNTRY, AND THAT'S SOMETHING THAT OUR LEADERS LACK TODAY.

JOHNSON CALLED UPON THE CITIZENS OF AMERICA TO BUILD A SOCIETY THAT IS MUCH MORE THAN JUST RICH AND POWERFUL.

HE ENVISIONED A SOCIETY THAT DEMANDED AN END TO POVERTY, A SOCIETY IN WHICH THE PEOPLE WERE MORE CONCERNED, AS HE PUT IT, WITH THE QUALITY OF THEIR GOALS THAN WITH THE QUANTITY OF THEIR GOODS – A SOCIETY THAT IN THE GREAT TRADITION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM OFFERED BOUNDLESS OPPORTUNITY TO EVERYONE, INCLUDING THE POOREST AND THE YOUNGEST AMONG US.

LIKE HARRINGTON, JOHNSON WAS ADAMANT ABOUT THE EVIL OF POVERTY. HE SAW IT AS A SCOURGE AND SAID THAT ERADICATING IT FROM OUR SOCIETY WAS THE GREATEST CHALLENGE OF THE NEXT HALF-CENTURY.

[PAUSE – LOWER TONE]

WELL, THAT HALF CENTURY IS UP AND WE'VE FAILED TO MEET THE CHALLENGE.

[BEAT]

SHAME ON US.

THE SCOURGE OF POVERTY IS NOW SPREADING THROUGH OUR SOCIETY LIKE A DEADLY VIRUS, AND MANY OF THE SYMPTOMS ARE TERRIBLE INDEED.

POVERTY CAN EAT AWAY AT PEOPLE'S SOULS. I REMEMBER A SERIES OF CONVERSATIONS I HAD SOME YEARS AGO WITH YOUNG PEOPLE IN CHICAGO WHO WERE OUT OF SCHOOL, OUT OF WORK, AND AS I WROTE AT THE TIME, ALL BUT OUT OF HOPE.

THEY DID NOT TALK, AS MY FRIENDS AND I DID WHEN I WAS YOUNG, ABOUT FINDING THAT PERFECT JOB. THEY DID NOT TALK ABOUT BEING IN LOVE AND EVENTUALLY MARRYING AND RAISING A FAMILY. THEY DID NOT EXPRESS A DESIRE TO SOMEDAY OWN THEIR OWN HOME.

THERE WAS, TO TELL THE TRUTH, A REMARKABLE ABSENCE OF POSITIVE COMMENTS AND EMOTIONS OF ANY KIND. THERE WAS A WIDESPREAD SENSE OF FRUSTRATION, AND SOME ANGER. BUT MOSTLY THERE WAS JUST SADNESS.

YOU DON'T WANT TO SEE THAT IN YOUNG PEOPLE, JUST STARTING OUT. BUT THAT'S WHAT POVERTY DOES TO PEOPLE.

THERE ARE OTHER SYMPTOMS. THE CITY OF CAMDEN, NEW JERSEY, ONE OF THE POOREST AND MOST DANGEROUS PLACES IN AMERICA, IS DISSOLVING ITS POLICE FORCE BECAUSE IT CAN'T RAISE ENOUGH TAX REVENUE TO SUPPORT IT.

ELSEWHERE, HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF TEACHERS, FIREFIGHTERS AND POLICE OFFICERS HAVE BEEN LAID OFF, SENT TO THE SIDELINES, BECAUSE OF STATE AND LOCAL BUDGET SHORTFALLS. SOME COMMUNITIES ARE ON THE VERGE OF BANKRUPTCY.

MANY OF THE PROBLEMS WE'VE LONG ASSOCIATED WITH THE INNER CITY CAN NOW BE FOUND IN OTHER VENUES.

SPEND A LITTLE TIME IN SOME OF OUR DOWN-AT-THE-HEELS SUBURBS, OR RUST BELT COMMUNITIES AND RURAL TOWNS AND VILLAGES, AND YOU'LL SEE THE POVERTY AND JOBLESSNESS, THE BROKEN FAMILIES, THE OUT-OF-WEDLOCK BIRTHS, THE DRUG AND ALCOHOL ABUSE, THE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, AND ON AND ON.

THIS IS WHAT ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION HAS ALWAYS DONE TO PEOPLE.

WE'RE IN DENIAL ABOUT JUST HOW BAD THINGS HAVE GOTTEN. A REPORT CAME OUT RECENTLY SHOWING THAT THE LIFE EXPECTANCY FOR THE POOREST AND LEAST WELL-EDUCATED WHITE AMERICANS HAD DROPPED BY FOUR YEARS SINCE 1990.



CAN YOU IMAGINE? A FOUR-YEAR DROP IN LIFE EXPECTANCY? SINCE 1990?

I THOUGHT THAT WOULD BE A BIG NATIONAL STORY, BUT I WAS WRONG. THAT'S WHAT I MEAN WHEN I SAY WE'RE IN DENIAL. PEOPLE RUN TO THE SHELTER OF DENIAL WHEN THEY JUST CAN'T FACE THE TRUTH. WHEN THE TRUTH SEEMS JUST TOO AWFUL TO CONTEMPLATE.

SO HOW DID WE GET TO THIS SORRY STATE OF AFFAIRS?

I'M GLAD YOU ASKED.

WE FELL FROM THE GREAT PROMISE OF THE 1950s AND 60s – WHEN LYNDON JOHNSON COULD DREAM OF A GREAT SOCIETY IN WHICH POVERTY WOULD BE ELIMINATED – TO THE PAINFUL DEPTHS OF OUR PRESENT TIME BECAUSE OF A LONG SERIES OF PUBLIC POLICY DECISIONS THAT HURT THE POOR AND THE MIDDLE CLASS AND RADICALLY EXPANDED THE WEALTH AND POWER OF THE RICH.

THESE WERE DELIBERATE DECISIONS.

AS JACOB HACKER AND PAUL PIERSON EXPLAINED IN THEIR IMPORTANT BOOK, “WINNER-TAKE-ALL POLITICS”:

“STEP BY STEP AND DEBATE BY DEBATE, AMERICA’S PUBLIC OFFICIALS HAVE REWRITTEN THE RULES OF AMERICAN POLITICS AND THE AMERICAN ECONOMY IN WAYS THAT HAVE BENEFITED THE FEW AT THE EXPENSE OF THE MANY.”

WHETHER IT WAS ENACTMENT OF THE SO-CALLED FREE TRADE AGREEMENTS, OR THE LOOSENING OF FINANCIAL INDUSTRY REGULATIONS, OR THE BUSH TAX CUTS, OR THE GOVERNMENT COLLABORATING WITH PRIVATE INDUSTRY TO DESTROY THE LABOR MOVEMENT...

...THESE WERE NOT DECISIONS THAT STRENGTHENED OUR SOCIETY OR EASED THE STRUGGLES OF WORKING FAMILIES. THESE WERE DECISIONS THAT MADE THE RICH RICHER.

WE'RE NOT IN DIRE ECONOMIC STRAITS BECAUSE OF SOME ACT OF GOD OR SOME MYSTERIOUS, IRRESISTIBLE MARKET FORCES. WE'RE IN A MESS BECAUSE WE ALLOWED THE POLITICIANS WE ELECTED TO REMAKE THE RULES TO FAVOR OF THOSE WHO WERE ALREADY RICH AND POWERFUL.

THERE WAS NOTHING PRE-ORDAINED OR INEVITABLE ABOUT THE BANKS AND MORTGAGE COMPANIES DREAMING UP THEIR LUNATIC TOXIC INVESTMENTS AND RUNNING WILD THROUGH THE AMERICA'S HOUSING LANDSCAPE. THEY RAN WILD BECAUSE WE LET THEM RUN WILD.

WE DISMANTLED FINANCIAL INDUSTRY REGULATIONS THAT HAD WORKED PERFECTLY WELL SINCE THE DEPRESSION AND WE ALLOWED THE BANKS AND THE BROKERAGE HOUSES TO SELF-REGULATE. HOW CRAZY WAS THAT?

THE NUNS THAT I HAD BACK IN GRAMMAR SCHOOL KNEW THAT YOU COULDN'T LET THE KIDS REGULATE THEMSELVES. YOU HAD TO HAVE SOME RULES. YOU HAD TO HAVE SOME ORDER. YOU HAD TO HAVE SOMEONE IN CHARGE.

JOSH BIVENS OF THE ECONOMIC POLICY INSTITUTE TELLS US IN HIS BOOK "FAILURE BY DESIGN" THAT "THE ECONOMY THAT GENERATED SUB-PAR OUTCOMES BEFORE THE GREAT RECESSION AND THAT TURNED A HOUSING BUBBLE INTO AN ECONOMIC CATASTROPHE WAS *DESIGNED*. IT WAS DESIGNED SPECIFICALLY, HE SAID, TO GUARANTEE THAT THE POWERFUL REAPED A LARGER SHARE OF THE REWARDS OF OVERALL ECONOMIC GROWTH. AND IN THIS PURPOSE IT SUCCEEDED."

TO SAY THAT IT SUCCEEDED IS AN UNDERSTATEMENT. IN 2010 AN INCREDIBLE 93 PERCENT OF ALL INCOME GROWTH IN THE UNITED STATES – 93 PERCENT – WENT TO THE WEALTHIEST ONE PERCENT OF HOUSEHOLDS.

NINETY-THREE PERCENT! THAT LEFT JUST SEVEN PERCENT OF ALL THE INCOME GAINS TO BE DIVIDED UP BY THE REMAINING 99 PERCENT OF THE POPULATION. THAT’S JUST WRONG.

YOU DON’T HAVE TO TAKE IT FROM ME, OR PEOPLE LIKE JOSH BIVENS, WHO ARE ON THE LEFT-HAND SIDE OF THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM. IF YOU WANT TO UNDERSTAND WHAT THE PEOPLE AT THE TOP ARE DOING TO THE ORDINARY PEOPLE WHO MAKE UP THE MASS OF OUR SOCIETY, JUST LOOK AT THE FACTS AND LISTEN TO THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE CORPORATE CAPITAL ELITE THEMSELVES.

HERE’S WHAT ALLEN SINAI, THE CHIEF GLOBAL ECONOMIST AT THE RESEARCH FIRM DECISION ECONOMICS, TOLD THE NEW YORK TIMES:

“AMERICAN BUSINESS IS ABOUT MAXIMIZING SHAREHOLDER VALUE. YOU BASICALLY DON’T WANT WORKERS. YOU HIRE LESS AND YOU TRY TO FIND CAPITAL EQUIPMENT TO REPLACE THEM.”

SINAI KNEW WHAT HE WAS TALKING ABOUT. MY FORMER COLLEAGUE AT THE NEW YORK TIMES, LOU UCHITELLE, TITLED HIS BOOK ABOUT THE CONSEQUENCES OF MASS LAYOFFS, “THE DISPOSABLE AMERICAN.”

HE WROTE THAT IN THE TWO DECADES FROM 1984 TO 2004 – THAT’S BEFORE THE GREAT RECESSION – IN THOSE TWO DECADES, THE BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS “COUNTED AT LEAST 30 MILLION FULL-TIME WORKERS WHO HAD BEEN PERMANENTLY SEPARATED FROM THEIR JOBS AND THEIR PAYCHECKS AGAINST THEIR WISHES.”

*THIRTY MILLION.*

MILLIONS MORE “HAD BEEN FORCED INTO EARLY RETIREMENT OR HAD SUFFERED SOME OTHER FORM OF DISGUISED LAYOFF, [THUS] MASKING THE MAGNITUDE OF THE PROBLEM.”

SO YOU WANT TO KNOW WHY WE HAVE SO MUCH POVERTY? WHY WE HAVE A HOUSING CRISIS? WHY THE ECONOMY IS SO WEAK AND CONSUMER DEMAND IS SO ANEMIC.

IT’S BECAUSE WE TOOK THE JOBS AND THE MONEY AWAY FROM WORKING PEOPLE, AND LOOKED OUT ONLY FOR THE RICH.

THE FIRST TEN YEARS OF THE 21ST CENTURY ACHIEVED THE DUBIOUS DISTINCTION OF BEING THE ONLY DECADE SINCE THE DEPRESSION IN WHICH THE NATION’S MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME ACTUALLY DECLINED.

THAT’S WHAT’S GOING ON IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

IN THE FIVE YEARS FOLLOWING THE ONSET OF THE RECESSION, MORE THAN HALF OF THE AMERICAN WORKFORCE ENDURED THE LOSS OF A JOB, A CUT IN PAY, OR AN INVOLUNTARY REDUCTION TO PART-TIME STATUS. MORE THAN HALF.

LAWRENCE SUMMERS, THE FORMER TREASURY SECRETARY AND PRESIDENTIAL ADVISER, HAS POINTED OUT THAT IN 1965 ONLY ONE IN 20 MEN, AGES 25 TO 54, WAS NOT WORKING – ONE IN 20. BY THE END OF THE CURRENT DECADE, THAT IS LIKELY TO BE ONE IN SIX – “EVEN,” SAID SUMMERS, “IF A FULL CYCLICAL RECOVERY IS ACHIEVED.”

[LONG BEAT]

WE’RE IN TROUBLE HERE, DEEPER TROUBLE THAN MOST PEOPLE REALIZE. THE INTERESTS OF THE CORPORATE-FINANCIAL ELITE ARE NOT THE SAME AS THE INTERESTS OF WORKING AMERICANS. AMERICANS NEED JOBS – GOOD JOBS AT GOOD PAY, WITH BENEFITS.

THOSE KINDS OF JOBS, FOR THE MOST PART, ARE SEEN BY CORPORATE EXECUTIVES AS DRAINS ON PROFITS.

[BEAT]

THAT'S A TERRIBLE STATE OF AFFAIRS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF WORKING AMERICANS AND THOSE OF US WHO WANT TO ELIMINATE POVERTY. BECAUSE THE ONLY WAY YOU GET RID OF POVERTY IS TO PUT PEOPLE TO WORK.

SO WHAT DO WE DO?

THE FIRST THING WE HAVE TO DO, THOSE OF US WHO CARE DEEPLY ABOUT THESE ISSUES, IS TO MAKE THESE MATTERS CLEARER TO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE. I REMEMBER THAT A BIG DEAL DURING THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT OF THE 1970s WAS RAISING THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF THOSE WHO DIDN'T UNDERSTAND CLEARLY ENOUGH WHAT WAS HAPPENING TO WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES.

SO WE HAVE TO DO SOME CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING. WE HAVE TO WAKE THE POPULATION UP. SHAKE PEOPLE OUT OF THEIR DENIAL.

THE BEST MEDICINE FOR THESE FESTERING ECONOMIC WOUNDS – THE BALM, THE SALVE, THE OINTMENT, THE ANTIBIOTIC THAT WILL BRING US BACK TO FULL HEALTH – IS AWARENESS.

YOU CAN HELP BIGTIME WITH THAT PART OF THE EFFORT TO MAKE THE AMERICAN ECONOMY WHOLE AGAIN. IN OTHER WORDS, AN ECONOMY THAT SERVES ALL THE PEOPLE. YOU CAN SPREAD THE WORD THAT WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING HAS BEEN EGREGIOUSLY UNFAIR AND INEQUITABLE AND HAS HURT PEOPLE BY THE SCORES OF MILLIONS.

OUR GOAL IS TO ESTABLISH A SYSTEM IN WHICH THE RESOURCES AND THE WEALTH OF OUR SOCIETY ARE MORE EQUITABLY DISTRIBUTED.

LET EVERYONE WITHIN EARSHOT KNOW THAT IT'S NOT ALL RIGHT TO KEEP GIVING TAX BREAKS TO THE RICHEST AMONG US, THE MILLIONAIRES AND BILLIONAIRES, WHILE WORKING FAMILIES ARE LINING UP AT FOOD PANTRIES IN OHIO AND PENNSYLVANIA AND MISSOURI AND ARIZONA, AND JUST ABOUT EVERY PLACE ELSE FROM ONE COAST TO THE OTHER.

IT'S NOT ALL RIGHT TO LET OUR NATION'S CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE, ITS ROADS AND BRIDGES AND PORTS AND LEVEES, AND WATER AND SEWER SYSTEMS, GO TO ROT AND TO RUIN WHILE MILLIONS OF MANUFACTURING WORKERS AND CONSTRUCTION WORKERS AND DESIGNERS AND ENGINEERS ARE DESPERATE FOR EMPLOYMENT.

BUT SPREADING THE WORD IS NOT ENOUGH. WE HAVE TO ACT, AND WE HAVE TO GET OTHERS TO ACT WITH US. BECAUSE IF WE WAIT FOR THE POLITICIANS TO DO THE RIGHT THING, WE WILL BE WAITING FOREVER, WE HAVE TO MAKE THEM DO THE RIGHT THING.

THOSE MULTIMILLIONAIRE SENATORS ARE NOT GOING TO STEP OUT OF THEIR TOWN HOUSES SOME FINE MORNING AND SUDDENLY, ON THEIR OWN, SNIFF THE RAREFIED AIR OF ENLIGHTENMENT. THEY'RE NOT GOING TO SAY, OUT OF THE BLUE, YOU KNOW WHAT, WE HAVE TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT POOR PEOPLE IN THIS COUNTRY. WE HAVE TO DO SOMETHING TO MAKE HOUSING MORE AFFORDABLE. BY GOLLY, CAMDEN DOESN'T HAVE A POLICE FORCE ANYMORE. WE OUGHT TO TAKE A LOOK AT THAT.

THAT'S NOT HOW IT WORKS.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS TAUGHT US BACK IN THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY THAT POWER CONCEDES NOTHING WITHOUT A DEMAND. IT NEVER DID, HE SAID, AND IT NEVER WILL.

THAT BIT OF ENLIGHTENMENT IS WELL KNOWN, BUT WHAT HE SAID RIGHT AFTER THAT HAS LONG BEEN FORGOTTEN. DOUGLASS SAID:

“FIND OUT JUST WHAT ANY PEOPLE WILL QUIETLY SUBMIT TO AND YOU HAVE FOUND OUT THE EXACT MEASURE OF INJUSTICE AND WRONG WHICH WILL BE IMPOSED UPON THEM, AND THESE WILL CONTINUE TILL THEY ARE RESISTED WITH EITHER WORDS OR BLOWS, OR BOTH.

“THE LIMITS OF TYRANTS,” HE SAID, “ARE PRESCRIBED BY THE ENDURANCE OF THOSE WHOM THEY OPPRESS.”

WELL, WE SHOULD CERTAINLY HAVE REACHED OUR LIMITS BY NOW.

IT’S TIME TO ACT. WE HAVE TO RESIST. NOT WITH BLOWS. NOT WITH VIOLENCE. BUT WITH ALL THE OTHER RESOURCES WE HAVE AT OUR COMMAND.

AND THAT MEANS WE HAVE TO CONNECT THE DOTS. IT’S NOT JUST POVERTY. IT’S THE SHORTAGE OF GOOD JOBS, THE LACK OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING, THE POOR STATE OF SO MANY OF OUR SCHOOLS AND THE CRUMBLING OF SO MUCH OF OUR INFRASTRUCTURE.

IT’S THE WARS WE INSIST ON FIGHTING THAT DESTROY THE LIVES OF SO MANY AND CONSUME THE RESOURCES WE DESPERATELY NEED TO GET OUR OWN HOUSE BACK IN ORDER.

THEY’RE ALL LINKED. START REBUILDING OUR SCHOOLS AND AMERICA’S INFRASTRUCTURE AND YOU START TO PUT PEOPLE BACK TO WORK. START PUTTING PEOPLE BACK TO WORK AND YOU’LL BEGIN TO MAKE REAL HEADWAY IN OVERCOMING POVERTY.

WHEN PEOPLE ARE WORKING, THE WAGES THEY PLOW BACK INTO THE SYSTEM START TO REBUILD THE ECONOMY. AND THE TAXES THEY PAY PROVIDE THE REVENUES WE NEED TO COVER THE INVESTMENTS WE’RE MAKING, AND EVENTUALLY TO BRING DOWN OUR DEFICITS.

IT ALL STARTS WITH WORK. FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT'S FIRST INAUGURAL ADDRESS, AT THE HEIGHT OF THE DEPRESSION IN 1932, IS REMEMBERED MOSTLY FOR THE PHRASE, "ALL WE HAVE TO FEAR IS FEAR ITSELF."

BUT HE ALSO TOLD THE WORRIED THROGS GATHERED OUTSIDE THE CAPITOL, AND THE MILLIONS LISTENING ON RADIO, THAT "OUR GREATEST PRIMARY TASK IS TO PUT PEOPLE TO WORK."

IT WAS A TASK, ROOSEVELT INSISTED, THAT SHOULD BE TREATED "AS WE WOULD TREAT THE EMERGENCY OF A WAR."

[BEAT]

OUR TASK TODAY IS TO REACH BEYOND OUR COMFORT ZONE AND BEGIN TO RALLY OTHERS WHO ARE CONCERNED ABOUT THESE CRITICAL ISSUES TO A CITIZENS ACTION MOVEMENT THAT WILL UPEND THE GROSS INEQUITIES IN OUR SOCIETY AND BRING BACK FAIRNESS FOR ORDINARY AMERICANS.

WE DO THAT BY FORMING ALLIANCES WITH THE INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS WORKING ON THE MANY FACETS OF THESE PROBLEMS. TO BE SUCCESSFUL WE HAVE TO BUILD A REAL MOVEMENT THAT PULLS TOGETHER ALL THESE STRANDS – THE PEOPLE FIGHTING POVERTY AND THE MEN AND WOMEN OF THE LABOR MOVEMENT AND THE FOLKS WORKING FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY, AND THOSE IN THE FIELDS OF EDUCATION AND HEALTH CARE, AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS GROUPS, AND ON AND ON.

WE HAVE TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO POOL OUR RESOURCES AND COORDINATE OUR EFFORTS AND DEVELOP LEADERSHIP IN WAYS THAT WILL EXERT THE MAXIMUM AMOUNT OF POWER. AND THEN WE HAVE TO USE THAT POWER TO TRANSFORM THE UNITED STATES INTO A BETTER COUNTRY, A COUNTRY THAT ALLOWS EVERYONE TO FLOWER.



YOU THINK THAT'S PIE-IN-THE SKY? IT'S NOT. IT'S DOABLE.

I KNOW THIS IS DOABLE. WE CAN CHANGE THIS SOCIETY.

IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE ME, READ THE HISTORY OF THE LABOR MOVEMENT. READ THE HISTORY OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT. READ THE HISTORY OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT.

ALL OF US HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY IN THIS ESSENTIAL EFFORT. WE NEED TO ORGANIZE MORE EFFECTIVELY. WE NEED TO RALLY THE POOR AND THE UNEMPLOYED AND ALL THOSE OTHER GROUPS THAT I MENTIONED.

WE NEED TO BUILD A REAL CITIZENS ACTION MOVEMENT.

AND THEN WE NEED TO TAKE THIS FIGHT TO THE STREETS. WE NEED TO MARCH. WE NEED TO PROTEST. WE NEED TO BADGER THE MEDIA TO PAY MORE ATTENTION TO THE POOR AND THE UNEMPLOYED AND THE YOUNG PEOPLE OF AMERICA WHOSE FUTURES ARE BEING SO CRUELLY CURTAILED.

[PAUSE]

THIS IS NOT A FIGHT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART. BUT IT IS A FIGHT WE CAN WIN.

THIS IS A STILL GREAT AND WONDERFUL COUNTRY. WE DON'T HAVE TO LET IT CONTINUE TO DECLINE. WE CAN ARREST THAT DECLINE.

WE CAN STOP THE WARS. WE CAN REBUILD THE INFRASTRUCTURE. WE CAN MAKE COLLEGE AFFORDABLE AGAIN. WE CAN PUT AMERICANS BACK TO WORK.

WE CAN DO ALL THESE THINGS, AND MORE. BUT NOT BY REMAINING PASSIVE.

ROBERT KENNEDY SAID THAT EACH TIME SOME INDIVIDUAL STANDS UP FOR AN IDEAL, OR ACTS TO IMPROVE THE LOT OF OTHERS, OR STRIKES OUT AGAINST INJUSTICE, THAT PERSON SENDS FORTH A TINY RIPPLE OF HOPE. AND CROSSING EACH OTHER FROM A MILLION DIFFERENT CENTERS OF ENERGY AND DARING, THOSE RIPPLES BUILD A CURRENT THAT CAN SWEEP DOWN THE MIGHTIEST WALLS OF OPPRESSION AND RESISTANCE.

WE'VE FACED BIG CHALLENGES BEFORE IN THIS COUNTRY. THIS IS NOT AS BAD AS THE EARLY DAYS OF THE LABOR MOVEMENT. WORKERS ARE NOT BEING GUNNED DOWN IN THE STREETS OR SET UPON BY MILITIAS.

THIS IS NOT THE GREAT DEPRESSION. WE DON'T YET HAVE HOOVERVILLES SPROUTING UP ALL OVER THE COUNTRY.

THINGS ARE NOT AS BAD AS THEY WERE IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT. PROTESTERS ARE NOT FACED WITH FIRE HOSES AND SNARLING DOGS.

BUT THINGS ARE PRETTY BAD AND WE NEED TO MAKE A STAND BEFORE MATTERS GET WORSE, BEFORE FURTHER DISASTERS COME OUR WAY. BECAUSE WE'RE HEADED IN THE WRONG DIRECTION.

[PAUSE]

AS IMPERFECT AS IT IS, THIS IS STILL A DEMOCRACY, WHICH MEANS THAT YOU HOLD THE FATE OF THE U.S. IN YOUR HANDS. DON'T LET THE FORCES OF GREED AND ENTRENCHED ECONOMIC POWER MAKE ANY MORE HEADWAY. DON'T LET THEM TURN WORKING PEOPLE AGAINST ONE ANOTHER – UNION MEMBERS AGAINST THOSE WHO ARE NOT YET ORGANIZED, THE MIDDLE CLASS AGAINST THE POOR, BLACKS AGAINST WHITES.

TAKE YOUR CUE FROM BOBBY KENNEDY AND MAKE YOUR PERSONAL STAND AGAINST INJUSTICE. SEND OUT THAT TINY RIPPLE OF HOPE. LET IT JOIN WITH THE RIPPLES THAT I SEND FORTH, AND THOSE OF THE MANY OTHER MEN AND WOMEN ACROSS THIS COUNTRY WHO ARE COMMITTED TO ECONOMIC FAIRNESS AND JUSTICE AND THE DIGNITY OF WORKING PEOPLE.

LET THOSE RIPPLES MERGE WITH THE ENERGY OF THE YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE SO MUCH TO CONTRIBUTE TO OUR SOCIETY, WITH OUR SONS AND DAUGHTERS AND BROTHERS AND SISTERS AND NIECES AND NEPHEWS, AND ALL THE OTHER GOOD MEN AND AND WOMEN OF AMERICA. THERE ARE SO MANY MILLIONS OF THEM.

PRETTY SOON, WITH HARD WORK AND CREATIVE STRATEGIES, AND AN IMPROVED CAPACITY TO ORGANIZE, THE COLLECTIVE POWER OF THOSE RIPPLES WILL CREATE THE GIANT, UNSTOPPABLE WAVE THAT WILL CARRY US INTO A BETTER AMERICAN FUTURE. I BELIEVE THAT.

THE IMPORTANT THING IS TO GRAB THIS CRUCIAL MOMENT IN HISTORY AND NOT TO LOSE FAITH, AND NEVER FORGET THE TREMENDOUS POWER THAT IS IN YOUR HANDS.

THANK YOU SO MUCH.