

# *Sacred Spaces*

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Economic Issues and Pastoral Counseling  
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Some people prefer caviar; other people eat Doritos. Obama's advisors told him to stop using Dijon mustard because he would seem snobby among working class Americans. Preferences are only one part of social class, which involves one's income, wealth, and social capital, including one's level of education. Taken together, they are one's socioeconomic status. It is shorthand for what people have to do to survive. Working class people often have only their bodies to depend on for labor, and are thus uniquely exposed to the vicissitudes of illness.

Sigmund Freud famously said that love and work were the cornerstones to our humanness. These essays highlight the work side of Freud's equation, arguably the underdeveloped aspect of modern counseling practice, in one case focusing on a American laborer with an addiction, and in another Thai farmers and prostitutes. These essays suggest that the conditions of work are profoundly psychological, and they are linked to cultural structures.

Psychologist David Smail suggested that we need to develop oversight and not just insight. Insight, the traditional province of pastoral counseling, involves sharpening our awareness of emotional dynamics within the self and family, coming to understand the reasons for our unconscious behaviors. Oversight means that we deepen our interpretation of the way the social world impacts us. Of course, both are necessary, but Smail argues that oversight is increasingly important, since much of our daily lives are impacted by the operations of large corporations, and cannot be changed by shifting our emotional response.

You might be wondering whether this topic is not too political for counseling practice, but Lauren Marie Appio has discovered that working class clients need their therapist to discuss basic needs in the counseling session. Over time, not discussing economic conditions erodes trust in the counseling relationship.

Yet these topics have to be broached with sensitivity, because poverty is so often linked with shame. Wealthier counselors sometimes judge their clients because they do not understand their client's economic situation. Social class countertransference is the story the counselor carries around in their head about the client based on the socioeconomic differences between them.

In order to fruitfully work with this countertransference, counselors need some ways of interpreting the social class circumstances of their clients. Clinicians can ask clients, "What do you have to do to get by?" or, "Who helps you with transportation when you have difficulty getting to an appointment?" When counselors help working class clients, they will most likely be in a cross-class relationship, where the counselor has disproportionate power. The most important

thing that counselors can do is try to share their own experiences of financial distress, of going on food stamps for example, and normalizing the suffering that comes from poverty. Counselors can also share stories about poverty and clearly discuss how they are not the working class client's fault. One counselor had a chart about income inequality on her wall, and this seemed to open the door to conversations about social class.

These essays take the conversation on economic issues and pastoral counseling in brand new directions. When read together, these thoughtful pieces from opposite ends of the world suggest that the entire economic context is at play whenever you counsel a person for individual difficulties. Access to food, health care, and housing, and also influences whether they will face demeaning or dangerous conditions in work, are all at play in pastoral counsel. For example, income, wealth, and social capital, all impact the kinds of anxiety and depression faced in the clinical hour. When clients are working class, they are less likely to have access to life-saving psychotherapy and medications. These essays link social class to broader changes taking place through deindustrialization and globalization.

These essays are prophetic and personal at once. Globalization disproportionately impacts working class people, and so pastoral ministry must respond in fresh ways to this challenge. I think of them as belonging to the prophetic traditions of pastoral counseling, in that they do not simply accept and understand with wisdom the conditions of suffering, they also do what they can to ameliorate it.

When Martin Luther King launched the Poor People's Campaign in 1968, it was with the idea that economic and human rights went together and that people should have what they need to live. His campaign has been revived by William Barber and Liz Theoharis in the Moral Mondays movement, as they challenge our nation to reevaluate its priorities. These essays continue this prophetic tradition, making it easier for people to work as well as love.

By addressing social class, one is not turning away from race, or the important forms of ethnic or cultural differences. One is not changing the subject from women's experience, since with the feminization of poverty women are disproportionately impacted by it. Indeed, it is important to look at how race and class, gender and class, disability and class, and other forms of identity intersect and impact one another. These essays also do not deny that poverty is sometimes the result of personal irresponsibility. Yet, by understanding the systemic nature of economic suffering, it will make it easier for counselors to make a difference without feeling like they have to start a class war. At the very least, a counselor might normalize the pain of poverty. By reading these two articles, you will have a new imagination for economic empathy, attuned to the distinctive kinds of suffering faced by your clients by deepening, in a theoretical and practical way, the importance of economic contexts in the lives of our clients.

## ***Global Economy, Human Trafficking Discourse in Thailand and Panopticon: A Critical Reassessment***

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the regulatory function of the dominant discourse on a population using the issue human trafficking as an example and seeks an application within the therapeutic context of pastoral care and counseling. The discourse on human trafficking often cites the law of supply and demand as the primary factor with figures such as 300 to 500 percent of profit from investment or 70 percent profit margin. The passion for justice is often directed toward perpetrators of human trafficking. This article raises a different type of question by exploring the role of social structure, economics and otherwise that contribute to the growth of human trafficking. Does the neo-liberal economic policy enforced by the World Bank, IMF and World Trade Organization play any role in widening the economic gap and thus encourages migration? Migration within the context of poverty generates a vulnerable population that is at-risk for trafficking. Besides, free trade has landed many corporations in third world countries that continue to exploit for cheap labor. This regulatory and disciplinary process, through economic and political mechanisms, has significant impacts on self-definition that generates a sense of alienation. As pastoral care and counselors, the therapeutic implications therefore need to pay attention to the collective self-identification and normalization through the dominant discourse and assist clients in the reconstruction of the sense of self to achieve wholeness.

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## Introduction

In *Madness and Civilization* (1988), tracing the history of psychology, Foucault suggests that it is not madness that leads to alienation but alienation that results in madness. The archeology of philosophical constructs shows ways in which the dominant discourse has impacted individuals' social and psychological wellbeing and this is achieved through the regulatory process of the discourse. The implication for pastoral care and counselors is essential toward the reconstruction of the self and the depth of spirituality. Foucault shows, in his concept of aesthetics, that the true wellbeing of a person is rooted in the discovery of the true self that comes when we are able to unpack the archeology of ideas, deconstructing its power in order to discover the true sense of self.

This article explores the idea of the regulatory process (the *panopticon*) through the issue of human trafficking using the case of Thailand. The focus will be to show how this regulatory process works and will conclude with cases in order to suggest implications for pastoral care and counselors.

In the early 2000 I returned to Thailand to conduct a research on child prostitution. The result was published in *Child Prostitution in Thailand: Listening to Rahab*, (2003). I discovered a drastic shift on issues related prostitution. The level of coercion has been translated into economic motivation. Poverty was driving many young women into the industry. In the 2010 I conducted another research on human trafficking in Thailand (*Human Trafficking in Thailand: Current Issues, Trend and the Role of the Thai Government*, 2014). Again, I discovered the incongruence between the discourse in public media in contrast to the reality of what is happening. What is significant for me in

the past two decades is the realization that, as caregivers, we really need to take time to explore the issue meaningfully and read critically information that is so readily available through media. Theology of care needs to be multi-disciplinary for our actions to be meaningful to the people we serve.

My struggle with and the exploration of the issue of human trafficking has raised significant questions for me and I wonder if modern day slavery discourse and its discursive practices are disciplinary tools for the current economic system. Is it possible that this discourse is a form of a *panopticon*, in Foucauldian tradition, that polices the economic boundary and thus maintains the system? I must admit that what I'm suggesting is exploratory in nature and an attempt to raise questions but not necessary a truth-claim. I do wish to acknowledge at the same time the massive amount of work done by government agencies and non-government agencies that have positively impacted victims of trafficking all around the world. This question does not de-meritorious efforts and sacrifices made.

I would like to suggest that the philosophy undergirding modernity and industrialization forms a web that impacts the entire discussion on the economic regulatory process. While there are many positive aspects to modernity, modernity, through advanced technology and industry, promotes maximum production and normalizes 'more' as the universal standard. We see this in the quest, through quality control etc., in the 'strive' for efficiency, cost-effectiveness, productivity, and maximum gain. This philosophy stands in contrast to the local Thai agrarian philosophy expressing itself in subsistent living where enough is 'good enough.' Modernity guides the economic system that generates market competition. This competition incarnates itself in

contemporary society through the neo-liberal policies endorsed by the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization and other financial institutions. The competition implies the need for cheap labor. Globalization policies turn the world into one global market with availability of access to resources around the world and thus migration. Migration is both domestic and international. Interestingly it also implies relocation of major companies to foreign countries for cheap labor. Cheap labor and migration are among the most important factors that generate vulnerability toward trafficking. Without the need for cheap labor and without migration, the issue of trafficking may not be at this magnitude. It is within this context that we come to recognize the possibility of viewing the discourse on modern day slavery as disciplinary power. The irony is, this discourse is situated in between the panoptic institutions that promote competition (and thus cheap labor) while at the same time punishes those who seek to compete through cheap labor (outside of corporate negotiation and financial institutions' established policies).<sup>2</sup>

In attempting to show the panoptic role of the discourse, I will be using primarily examples of events taking place in Thailand to illustrate but other examples will be utilized as well. First I would like to describe changes within the country from subsistent living to maximum production, from polyculture to monoculture, and from simplicity to dependency on currency. The second part aims at connecting modernity to the current

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<sup>2</sup>According to CNN, 97% of the apparel bought and sold in the United States are made in other countries while eight out of 10 shoes bought in this country are made in China. Jonathan Mann, Meet the All-American manufacturing company taking on cheap overseas labor, CNN, December 15, 2014. <https://www-m.cnn.com/2014/12/15/business/american-giant-smart-business/index.html>



economic system. Third, the discussion on the mechanism that leads to changes. The fourth section explores the implications of migration and cheap labor in relation to human trafficking. Finally, the article raises the question on the possible role of human trafficking discourse as a disciplinary tool.

### **Changes in the Lives of Local Thai Farmers**

I sat across from a director of a local NGO (interview, March 16, 2018) in Chiang Rai Province listening to him describing issues faced by many ethnic minorities in Thailand as a result of national development. Along the Thai-Myanmar border many decades ago, he recalled, villagers were farmers living along in remote areas supporting themselves through vegetables, crops and livestock. They had very little need for money except once in a long while, making trips to the city to buy metal in order to shape it for hunting tools and cooking utensils. Then national development came into this region, because of the lack of documents, they were relocated. The new location lacks essential ingredients for cultivation and the space given was limited. This restriction affects food production and their livelihood. Self-sufficiency turns to dependency. Currency becomes the new source of food production and thus subsequently came sickness, poverty, drug addiction and villagers being exploited. It is not only ethnic minorities who face this type of issue.

During the early part of 2015 I drove through 20 provinces in the northern and northeastern of Thailand interviewing over 70 farmers. Similar stories were repeated. When asked about changes that occur in farming methods, a farmer from Khon Kaen joking invoked the song “Head Village Lee.” The song was composed by Suksri Sri-

auksorn, a satire critiquing the development plans imposed by the government. It implies the lack of understanding of local villagers. With deep anguish this farmer kept repeating the phrase, “now everything is about money.” Then he made reference to the common propaganda during Sarit Thanarat’s government, “work is money, money is work, the root of happiness.” But money was not for him to enjoy or for most local farmers even in the midst of hard work because work does not get translated into money for these farmers within the new economic system.

Many farmers fondly reminisced the time when money was not the dominating currency. While farming was difficult due to the texture of the soil and the availability of water, they were of the opinions that life was sustainable. Field seedbeds were tilled by hoeing and weeding. Clay like soil sliced with a hoe, and the slices were then broken up with the side or back of the blade. Rice fields were prepared using buffalos to pull wooden plows. Villagers came together to plant seedlings. The fields were divided by low dikes into small squares which permit precise control over water level. Again during harvest time, villagers came together helping one another harvesting rice. Reapers grasped a bunch of rice in his/her left hand, holding the sickle in his/her right hand, he/she pulled it in a quick upward motion which cut the stalk about 2 feet below the ear. Rice was then left drying on the stubble for about two days before being placed in the shocks for threshing. Farmers brought the rice home to the granary in bullock carts. Rice was produced primarily for their own consumption. Extra rice was sold in the market. Without the convenience of technology, plowing, transplanting and harvesting were difficult, but it was manageable. There was plenty of food available such as frogs, snails, fish, and vegetable in the fields. Expenses were low. They were able to spend time with

family members and all worked together for sustenance.

Then came development with the use of chemical fertilizer and pesticides. These chemicals kill fish, snails, frogs and other vegetable. Polyculture is replaced by monoculture. Rice gets converted to cash in order to buy food in the market. “The way of life has changed. Sufficiency is not the current practice unlike before. It was manageable. I wish I could go back in time. We used to live sufficiently. There was very little expense.” A farmer in Chiang Rai talks about the availability of resources in the past. “In the past there were plenty of crabs, shrimps and fish in the field. But because of the use of chemical, there are very little left. Certain species are pretty much gone. Before, we did not have to invest too much money. Right now we need to buy vehicles and equipment. We need to really invest. We use to walk to the rice field. Now we need motorcycles. The competition is so high that without investment in modern technologies, we just cannot compete.” A farmer from Viangpapao describes food situation in the past. “We used to grow rice and catch fish. There were in abundance. I used to gather cherry snails. Right now, fish is contaminated with chemicals. Chemicals in the field kill everything.” A farmer from Loei recalls her grandfather’s description of the availability of food in the past as being abundant.

Satawat Yu-on (1993) conducted a research on the transformation through technology and its impacts on farmers in Sansai Yao, Chiang Mai. According the results, Satawat Yu-on found that the villagers’ life style has changed dramatically. Where once they lived in simplicity, now they compete in order to survive. Within the new economic system, they have to invest heavily. Economic gap and class system started to emerge. Religious activities related to rituals within the tradition of Buddhism, slowly disappear.

In its place comes consumerism. The expectation for material gain generates conflicts within the family and community. These changes were closely related to the National Economic and Social Development Plans, the plans that focused primarily on economic growth resulting in transformation of farming methods through technologies (cited by Wachirawach Ngamlamom, 2013). These changes initiated by the process of modernity have significant impacts on access to resources, increased expense related to farming, income levels and day-to-day expenses.

As a result of change that comes to their local villages, villagers are now forced to sell their rice fields or migrate to the city for their survival. It is common to find older people in the village taking care of young children while adults migrate to big cities to work in fishing industry, factories, construction sites, night clubs etc. And this is where they become vulnerable. What is the mechanism that results in this altered life style among local farmers?

### **Modernity and Economy**

Western modernity, in all its diversity (from theological to secular frames, from the common code of all the disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, the professional schools, performance, art and visual studies), with all the implied consequences of imperial diversity, has been built since the sixteenth century, and increasingly it is being viewed as the only and best options for the entire planet. A set of key concepts has been advanced such as Christian God, Humanitas, Democracy, Socialism, Sciences, Reason, Beauty, Faith, Freedom, Progress, Development, and so on. While there have been internal debates on the politics of knowledge, within Western

civilization around each of these concepts, the internal ‘differences’ and debates have been carried on under the presupposition that Western civilization has it and that the rest of the world, all coexisting civilizations, languages, and epistemologies had nothing to contribute (Mignolo, 2011: 296).

Mignolo offers examples of ways in which knowledge rooted in modernity turns hegemonic. In 1590 the Jesuit Father Jose de Acosta published *Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias* suggestive of nature as object to be graphed. But the concept was foreign to the native Aymaras and Quechuas within their metaphysical system. For them there was no separation between them and nature. Nature to them is “Pachamama” or mother earth. Nature is organic. However in Western Christianity, nature existed contradistinction to culture and remains outside the human subject. For the Aymaras and Quechuas they did not perceive themselves standing separated from nature. They were a part of this nature, this *Pachamama*. Western colonization implanted this Western concept of nature and eliminates *Pachamama* from their cosmology.

Twenty years after Acosta, Sir Francis Bacon published his *Novum Organum*, in which he proposed a reorganization of knowledge and clearly stated that ‘nature’ was ‘there’ to be dominated by Man. During this period, before the Industrial Revolution, Western Christians asserted their control over knowledge about nature by disqualifying all coexisting and equally valid concepts of knowledge and by ignoring concepts that contradicted their own understanding of nature. At the same time, they engaged in an economy of brutal resource extraction (Mignolo, 2011: 11).

The binary thinking of the Western hemisphere divides the world into the first and the third world. Within this division is the subtle insinuation imbedded within the

development ideology, the first world as progressive and the third, backward/barbaric. This thinking process was instrumental within the binary conceptualization that maintains power. Through defining self as progress, others were forced, ideologically, to catch up in trades, economy and politics (Thirayut Boonmee, 2002: 19).

Modernity, for Thirayut Boonmee (2002), results in a form of Cultural Revolution. At the core of this revolution is the transformation of arts, aesthetics, entertainment and life's qualities into commercial productions. Industry dictates cultural productions and thus, economy becomes the single factor that controls every aspects of human life. It is this monocentrism that generates homo-economicus. Within this monocentric cosmology, there is a close relation between knowledge and economy that has dramatically reprioritized our value system. Once nature became domesticated, how people relate to nature changes as well and so does the concept of labor. Before the emergence of modernity people worked to live but the industrial world mutated this concept into enslavement and waged labor. "Enslaved and waged labor became naturalized in the process of creating an economy of accumulation that is today recognized as capitalist economic mentality" (Mignolo, 2011: 12). Then came Industrial Revolution. While industry needs to fuel its mechanism, Acosta and Bacon's concept of nature offered that viability by turning nature into natural recourses. "Nature became a repository of objectified, neutralized, and largely inert materiality that existed for the fulfillment of the economic goals of the 'masters' of the materials," writes Mignolo, and the "mutation of nature into natural resources in the West was a sign of progress and modernization and at the same time a sign that other civilizations stagnated and were falling behind the West" (pp. 12-13). The hegemonic construction of knowledge based on

modernity has significant implications in terms of classification of knowledge itself and the elimination of polycentricism. This movement toward monocentric cosmology is suggestive of a single supreme form of knowledge that acknowledges no other form as equal or valid. It turns the production of knowledge into something ontological. All other forms of knowledge were conceived as lacking behind. Western knowledge was modernity and thus “became a commodity of exportation for the modernization of the non-Western world” (p. 13). This knowledge significantly transformed the agrarian life-style and approach to farming. It forced methods of production from subsistent to maximization, from labors for living to labors in exchange for cash, from crops for food to crops for market consumptions and then further on to fuels.

In *The Birth of Bio-politics* (2001) social theorist Thomas Lemke shows how our social world was once divided into various domains such as education, religion, politics, family, social relations, economics etc. However the design of neo-liberal policies has collapsed all these domains into one, which is economics. Referencing Foucault, Lamke (2001) writes:

Foucault suggests that the key element in the Chicago School’s approach is their consistent expansion of the economic form to apply to the social sphere, thus eliding any difference between the economy and the social... Here, the economy is no longer one social domain among others with its own intrinsic rationality, laws, and instruments. Instead, the area covered by the economy embraces the entirety of human action (p. 197).

And now, argues Lamke, all domains of life are defined in terms of cost-effectiveness, productivity and maximization. How does this philosophy get translated into the global market?

## **Globalization**

Globalization is often thought of as interconnectedness of global network sharing whereby through rapid transportation and advanced technologies a platform is erected for exchange of ideas, cultural practices, ideologies, languages, perspectives and trades of goods. In my view, globalization is an insertion of hegemonic ideology aiming at transforming the world to reflect her image and to maximize capital gain through military, legal, economic and cultural means.

Kofi Anan, former UN Secretary-General stated in 1998 at Harvard University:

Throughout much of the developing world, globalization is seen, not as a term describing objective reality, but as an ideology of predatory capitalism whatever reality there is in this view, the perception of a siege is unmistakable. Millions of people are suffering; savings have been decimated; decades of hard won progress in the fight against poverty are imperiled.

David Keeling, in “Latin American Development and the Globalization Imperative,” divides globalization into two stages. First the historical stage that can be traced back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century in the form of economic capitalism and the geographical “expansion of division of labor, access to raw materials, industrial production, and the circulation of capital” (para 3). The second stage of globalization is what he called the ultra-modernist globalization of the 80s driven by capitalist consumerism made possible to advanced technologies that makes possible the monopoly of financial markets of corporates. He writes “For the first time in human history, multinational corporations can produce anything anywhere on the planet and can sell anything anywhere on the planet” (para 4).

For a visual confirmation of historical globalization, in 1850 Sir John Bowring, representing the British Empire, approached King Nanglao requesting for trade agreement. The King declined but that did not deter Bowring who returned in 1855 with



gunboats anchored in the gulf of Thailand requesting diplomatic agreement on trade. The King signed trade agreement reducing tax and allowing imports. Opium, in the agreement, was tax-free.

Perhaps the second wave of globalization gathered its ideological force from post Second World War economic reconstruction of the world through the creation of World Bank and other related international agencies with the emergence of visionaries driven by epistemological modernity seeing themselves as globalists. Globalists are those who practice globalization because of their beliefs in globalism. “Globalism,” according to Ulrich Beck is “the ideology of rule by the world market, or the ideology of neoliberalism.” Manfred Steger describes globalism as ‘an Anglo-American maker ideology that reached its zenith in the 1990s and was inextricably linked to the rising fortunes of neo-liberal political forces in the world’s sole remaining superpower.’ (cited by Mignolo, p. 281).

It is, according to Walter Mignolo, an invisible hand that regulates global economy (p. 281). And this regulation is a reawakening of colonialism in the form of economy. Mignolo writes, “Currently, the transformation of colonial differences is entrenched in what we now call globalization in such a way that it makes sense to think in terms of global colonialist. It continues to be reproduced by global capitalism” (p. 616). Speaking of the impact this global economy has on developing countries, Mignolo further states:

Thus when we moved from ‘good governance’ to globalism, we put Homo economicus in the front row and the underdeveloped in the back. At that point, ‘babarians’ of all kinds lost their appeal and their force: globalism was not so much concerned with taming the barbarians and with the legality of international relations, but with reducing costs and increasing gains under the rhetoric of developing the underdeveloped. And when ‘barbarians’ in the global scenario

questioned the rhetoric of development and acted on it, they became, first, ‘communists’ and later, ‘terrorists.’ ... These labels not only targeted specific sectors of the population, but served to identify whoever disputed global designs, whether he or she was a ‘communist’ or a ‘terrorist’ according to official discourse (p. 282).

For the above stated reasons globalization, colonization and neoliberalism are interconnected in functions. Colonialism seems to have its root in the epistemology of modernity. The objectivization of the world and the quest for its objectivity can be translated into hegemonic linear universalization of an ideology that propels itself into domination and eliminates all forms of multiplicity. In *The Missing Chapter of Empire*, Santiago Castro-Gomez writes:

The co-existence of diverse ways of producing and transmitting knowledge is eliminated because now all forms of human knowledge are ordered on an epistemological scale from the traditional to the modern, from barbarism to civilization, from the community to the individual, from the orient to occident... By way of this strategy, scientific thought positions itself as the only valid form of producing knowledge, and Europe acquires an epistemological hegemony over all the other cultures of the world (cited by Mignolo, p. 80).

In its deep conviction of its universality, it has no other choice but to export its cultures, values and ideology globally through Hollywood, supermarkets, chemical products to maximize crop outputs, technologies, cultural practices, fashion, lifestyle etc. It is an epistemological re-colonization of an ideology. According to Mignolo, the world of multiple cosmologies has been replaced by what Vandana Shiva called “monocultures of the mind” resulting in one supreme universe while all else become inferior and hence we have developing vs. developed, third world vs. first world, primitive vs. civilized nations. And the neo-liberal economic policy of the Chicago School of Economic has played a significant role in translating this ideology into reality globally. This is due, primarily because globalization, by definition, is “the flows of goods and services, capital

and people across national borders.” (Anderson, Cavanah and Lee, 2005, p. 5). Small capital does not flow up stream. Big capital flows down stream. Some one once said “Free trade is truly free when we are free not to trade.”

The self comes to define itself by its entrepreneurial skills. How much can I produce? Values become quantifiable. While I was interviewing local farms in rural Thailand I learned that productivity was initially not a part of their value system. The values they embraced were simplicity, sufficiency, generosity and loyalty. They used to live simple and help one another. Now they compete, taking up loans hoping for big gains, getting into debts due to changes in the market price. Many lost their lands and migrated to city to work as laborers. From freedom to bondage, from respectable members of the society to the stereotype: poor and uneducated. In his research of the World Bank’s approach to poverty reduction, Christopher Collins observes that a country is judged on how well it performs strictly by GDP regardless of the social dimensions. It is how much one earns and not how well one lives. Mignolo writes:

In the era of neoliberal globalization it has become one of the main weapons to promote competition, thereby encouraging fast speed and success, consuming the energy of millions of people who live their lives constantly thinking of going faster and getting ahead, to being a winner and to avoiding the shame of being a loser. (p. 178).

## **Migration**

In *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System* (2007), Raj Patel documented the impact of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on Mexico. The rationale for NAFTA was reasonable: “The spark of wealth would, it was argued, jump across the border, bringing freedom, enterprise and the Good Life from a country of high-potential to one a little less charged” (p. 48). And while the flow of

wealth affected some across the border, the heart of Mexico agriculture was negatively impacted. Before NAFTA, 60% of the land in Mexico was used for the cultivation of corn. With free-trade, local corn has to compete with those produced in the US where the cost of production per bushel was 2.66 dollars but sold for 1.74 dollars. On the first of January 1994 when NAFTA came into effect, Mexican Peso crashed with 42 % devaluation against the dollar. As a result of NAFTA, about 1.3 to 2 million Mexicans were forced off their land. For many, border-crossing was their only hope for survival. Labor migration follows the flow of currency. Raj Patel writes, “NAFTA has encouraged migration from the country to the city (often then to live in the growing shanty towns)” (p. 60). We see similar phenomenon of the interrelatedness between economic policies and migration in India, Africa, South America and some countries in Asia.

Migration is a common practice among farmers for the past many decades. Seasonal migration to the city for construction work, seasonal migration to the coast for fishing industry, or migrating overseas are common practices in the past few decades. Why do farmers migrate? It was King Ramkhamhaeng of Sukhothai who stated, “In the field rice, in the pond fish” (Phatanarat, 2003, para 9). The land was plentiful. Mr. Sombat, a victim of human trafficking once said to me, “When I was growing up we were poor. But we could survive on our land. But that is no longer possible?” He migrated to the US in hope of finding the promised financial gain that could save his family only to be exploited and in deeper poverty than he once was. What has changed?

There was a time in Thailand where rice was not a commodity but for consumption. Thai farmers did not have to migrate. Their lives were governed by Buddhist cosmology promoting simplicity and charity. Simplicity made life sustainable.

Goodness was measured by compassion and not GDP. Then came The First National Development Plan and the Green Revolution. Agriculture was translated into commodity. A new discourse was set in motion. Goodness was redefined as maximum output. Productivity has become a new norm. Charity has become idealized but not prioritized and simplicity, marginalized or relegated to the religious realm. Technology has manipulated gene structure of plants for high yield. Farmers were reeducated to see farm products as commodities. And high productivity was the name of the game. The newly designed seeds need chemical fertilization and pesticides and double the amount of water.

#### Used of Chemical Fertilization

1971	128,139 Tons
1982	321,700 Tons
1999	1,763,028 Tons
2007	3,400,000 Tons

And while it was good for a while, farmers soon realized the gap between dependency on chemical fertilization and yields keeps getting bigger and bigger. The yield was not much differed from what they were used to but now they have to depend on expensive chemical fertilization and pesticides and the dependency keeps increasing together with price tags on these agricultural products.

According to Kanoksak Kaewthep (1987) in 1965 34.8% of products were agricultural and 22.7%, industrial. In 1995, 10.3% were agricultural while 39.5% were industrial. Since 1989 to 2009, the number of Thai farmers dropped from 67% to less than 40%. In 2008, the average debt per family was 107, 230 baht. 80% of farmers are in debt and have difficulty repaying. 60% of farmers have to rent land for farming. There are 546, 942 agricultural families without land and 969,355 families with insufficient

land for farming. On average 90% of farmers own one rai of land while 10% of farmers own 200 rai. Between 2007 and 2008, farm rental has gone up 2-4 times. This figure is not surprising when taken within the context of the economic policy of neo-liberalism. Since the initiation of this economic policy, the income gap has increased dramatically. Based on this policy, the top 20% are the winners while the bottom 80% will be negatively affected in proportion according to their income level.

United Nations Development Program (UNDP) figures illustrate this point. For example, in 1960 the gap between the richest 20 percent and the poorest 20 percent of the world's population was 30 to 1. By 1991 this had grown to 61 to 1 and by 1994 to 74 to 1. In 2004, the gap between the richest 10 percent was 103 times that of the poorest 10 percent (Brubaker 2007, p. 40).

Poverty is one of the primary motivators for migration. Survival often implies movement and relocation. In the process of this geographical transition, people with capital are able to transition smoothly. However this is not the case for those on the margin who lack capital (economics, social, cultural and otherwise). Many of the women working in nightclubs, karaoke bars, massage parlors and other forms of sex industry in major cities in Thailand come from rural villages in the north and the northeast. Without education, money, and skills for modern industrial society, their options are limited and sex works become one of the more viable options for them. This is particularly true since modern development makes subsistence farming the thing of the past.

Writing on the relationship between migration and neoliberalism John Tirman (2015) states:

Many attribute the massive exodus into the Mediterranean as a consequence of violent actors. And many do migrate to escape civil war and repression. Likewise, the so-called war on drugs in Latin America has backfired; an illegal drug culture thrives, enforced by violence.

Much of the migration, however, results from unsustainable livelihoods, the disruption of traditional forms of agriculture, production, and government services that for decades provided adequate — in many cases, barely so — incomes in the developing world. The triumph of neoliberalism has changed all that. And such policies as “freeing” economies for direct foreign investment, movement of capital, deregulation, privatization, and reducing the size of the state were devised in Western capitals, London and Washington most prominently (para 6, 7).

### **Cheap Labor**

The challenge to compete in an environment where policy requires deregulation, reduction in subsidy, reduction in tariff, increase in-flow of products by opening market for external competition is steep and requires a certain measure. This is where cheap labor comes into the picture. It is interesting to note that cheap labor is made available where people no longer have a bargaining power. Farmers who have no land to cultivate, the price of agricultural products no longer generate sufficient income, the debt level demands movement for repayment and where survival is no longer possible within the scope of their community living. Another important matter to consider is the level of education. Most marginal population has little access to quality education and thus are not competitive upon applying to good universities. Further within the context of poverty among those living in remote areas, it is very common for many students to drop out in order to help support their families. Perhaps it is coincidental that the neo-liberal policy, when applied, aims at reducing subsidy for education.

Competitive market and the idea of maximum production have changed the fishing industry in Thailand dramatically. For decades, Thailand fisheries have been limited to small-scale subsistence fishing along coastal villages. Most were done near-shore waters. Equipment was restricted to simple fishing gear where fishermen would go

out to the sea on small boats without engine. Records show abundance of fish along the coast and the simple way of living within fishing villages (Morgan and Staple, 2006). However dramatic change took place and now Thailand is among the largest fishing industries in the world. And this shift has mainly to do with the trawl technology and the rising demand for fish. Thailand exported approximately 90 percent of seafood with the United States being one of the main destinations. In 2004, the United States imported US \$55 million of seafood from Thailand making it the largest market for Thai seafood followed by Japan (Thailand Investment Review, 2005).

The profit and the competition in the fishing industry have led to numerous cases of human trafficking in this sector. One of the main reasons is the demand for cheap labor. I met Mr. Samart at a conference on migration in December of 2016 (Interview, December 15, 2016). He was standing at the booth showing activities of a local NGO in addressing the issue of trafficking in the fishing industry. While conversing, Mr. Samart told his personal story. He came from the northeastern part of Thailand. It was off harvesting season and he needed an income. He boarded the fishing boat hoping for a sufficient return on his income so he could support his family not realizing that it would be 8 years later before he could see his family again. There were about 30 employees in the fishing boat who were forced to work 20 hours per day, seven days a week. They earned 6,000 baht per four months. They were forced to work hard in order to make profit for the captain whose earning depends on the percentage of the catch. He jumped boat twice and got caught. Violence was a common practice in order to maintain productivity. He was finally rescued by an NGO and now assists other victims of trafficking. Where



income depends on profit margin, cheap labor becomes the mean within the context of deregulation, reduction of subsidies, reduction of tariff and competitive market.

The protection of labor therefore does not quite correlate with the idea behind free trade. Labor cannot be that cheap if worker rights are fully implemented. According to an analysis of the relationship between neoliberal economic policy and labor rights, Robert Blanton and Dursun Peksen (2016) write:

In all, excluding the policies associated with the legal environment and security of proper rights, we find a consistently strong, negative relationship between neoliberal policies and respect for core worker rights, as more “market-friendly” policies are damaging to labor rights. In addition to the extent that countries follow neoliberal norms, the shifts towards such policies – free-market reforms – are also of interest. Such reforms swept through the world economy during the 1980s and 1990s, widely seen as the heyday for the “Washington Consensus”, as East and Central-European countries transitioned into free-market structures while many other states drastically reformed their economies in line with IMF and World Bank programs. We find that such transitions, measured by yearly changes in our indices of neoliberalism, are likewise damaging to respect for worker rights. Thus, both the overall levels of neoliberalism in an economic system, as well as moves towards a more free-market system, have deleterious effects on worker rights (para 9).

It is interesting to note therefore that the push for deregulation, competition, and privatization in itself generates vulnerability toward trafficking. Cheap labor and workers’ rights are not compatible concepts. A well-regulated labor, a reasonable working hours, good benefits, good pay do not get translated into maximum production, good margin and good competition. People do not go for cheap labor if they have a choice. They often find themselves in the situation and the coercive force is often at play at some level for cheap labor to continue.

### ***Panopticon: The Discourse as a Disciplinary Tool***

If we were to reflect on the human trafficking discourse we will find emphasis places on identifying and prosecuting perpetrators while protecting victims (including

prevention). The moral issue attached to trafficking is stated as the primary driving force in the discourse, protecting the rights of the workers and rescuing victims of this monstrous crime. The 2017 TIP report (2017) on Thailand states:

However, the government did not demonstrate increasing efforts compared to the previous reporting period. It did not aggressively prosecute and convict officials complicit in trafficking crimes, and official complicity continued to impede anti-trafficking efforts. Officials identified fewer victims compared to the previous reporting period, and although forced labor investigations slightly increased, the number of labor trafficking investigations was low compared to the scale of the problem. Although the government continued to increase the number of inspection centers at fishing ports, inspections resulted in relatively few identified victims and criminal investigations. Therefore, Thailand remained on Tier 2 Watch List for the second consecutive year (para 1).

On the prevention side, TIP reports:

Critical gaps in Thailand's labor laws preventing migrant workers from forming labor unions may contribute to exploitation. In addition, NGOs and international organizations widely reported that the government did not adequately enforce the application of minimum wages in sectors with high employment of migrant workers (para 15).

The focus on prosecution is disciplinary in nature whereby power is able to regulate behavior of those within the system toward compliance. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977) Foucault suggests that panopticism takes place in various institutions such as schools, military and society at large. Commenting on Foucault's panopticon Nicky Marshall (2012) writes, "However, it could also be argued that the bureaucratic nature, and the amount of monitoring that takes place in society today could class contemporary society that we live in today to be one of panopticism" (para 3). What might be the purpose of this disciplinary process? At a glance it is moral in nature and this is where the moral force gathers its strength through public discourse to fight against human trafficking and encourages prosecution of perpetrators for the great harm they have

caused. However, might there be other possible implications for this panoptic intervention?

A quick glance at *Global Slavery Index* (Walk Free Foundation, n.d.) shows countries with low identified slavery are mostly Western developed countries while countries with high level of slavery are underdeveloped or developing countries where cheap labor is readily available. Linda McQuaig observes that since the days of Reagan and Thatcher, US Department of Treasury has been remodeling the world in accord with the market line, forcing poor countries to adopt market reforms (Brown 2006, p. 75).

Gary Burtless (2001) in discussing workers' rights shows the non-moral argument for standard practices relating to international labor:

A trading partner that fails to enforce basic protections for its workers can gain an unfair trade advantage, boosting its market competitiveness against countries with stronger labor safeguards. Including labor standards in trade deals can encourage countries in a free trade zone to maintain worker protections rather than abandoning them in a race to the bottom. If each country must observe a common set of minimum standards, member countries can offer and enforce worker protections at a more nearly optimal level (para 3).

Besides serving the moral purpose, it does play a role in regulating market-competition for the sake of profits. This is better understood within the context of trade agreement that implements deregulation and increased competition between third world and first world countries. On this note it is interesting to observe where TIP points out that a stronger union in Thailand can help protect the workers' rights. TIP also suggests an enforcement of minimum wage in Thailand. It seems, the disciplinary process within a system that encourages competition leaves developing countries without little bargaining power especially when market mechanism is morally framed.

Burtless (2001) concludes:

If we insist that developing countries meet immediately the labor standards that the richest countries achieved only gradually, we will keep some of them out of the world's best markets. The poor countries that agree to abide by ILO standards will occasionally be challenged-sometimes by representatives of rich countries more intent on protecting their own workers from "unfair" overseas competition than on improving the lot of third-world workers. While the moral case for requiring our trading partners to respect labor rights is compelling, the case for removing trade barriers that limit the product markets and income of the world's poorest workers is just as powerful (para 30).

### **Implications for Pastoral Care and Counselors**

In this article, using the example of human trafficking, I attempt to show the regulatory mechanism that affects the social and psychological dimensions of a population transformed us into *homo economicus*. Within the current economic system GDP is the unit measurement of our value as defined by our productivity. And while we may not be slaves in the trafficking sense of the word, the discourse and its regulatory process has entrapped us with its advertisement on success through accumulation and the charm of high productivity. Within this context, the therapeutic process and the care call for the discovery of the self through deconstructive process both individually and collectively. I would like to offer a few scenarios for our consideration.

A 16 year old girl was recommended to me for counseling. She met all the criteria for human trafficking even though she was raised by her relatives. She shows symptoms of PTSD. Due to the level of poverty, her family migrated to a slum near Bangkok city providing cheap labor. Because of her mom's addiction, she was transferred to her relative where she was forced to do all domestic work for the family with no pay while enduring constant verbal and physical abuse since she was 4 or 5 years old. As a young girl, she would try to earn income within the community doing odd jobs. Whatever she earned, she had to split with the family. Her only value since she was young was primary

defined by her ability to produce and earn extra income for the family. There was no other value outside of this productivity. While her self-definition is limited to domestic abuses and labor exploitation, there is additional essential consideration to deal with such as the economic gap in the region where she migrated from, the level of poverty, the changing discourse, the transition from sufficiency to consumerism within the community. While her PTSD has to be addressed, as a pastoral care and counselors, there is also the need for collective deconstructive work to shift the discourse in order to provide a more sustainable values system that can maintain the community.

Sitting across from me in a small upper room at a famous massage parlor along Petchaburi Road, a sex worker told me her story of how she was a trafficking victim. While working in a bar, she was approached by an acquaintance inviting her to work as a sex worker in Singapore. The pay would be much better. She gathered her resources and entered with her tourist visa. Once there she was forced to work 12-15 hours a day. The location was heavily guarded. Most sex workers did not have much of a choice. The living quarter was heavily congested. The bedrooms, while shared with other sex workers, were also used to entertain clients. Under constant watch and threat, she and her friend managed to escape and returned to Thailand. Looking back, she said, if an opportunity to return to sex work in Singapore comes, she would take it but this time she will be wiser. She never reported her case to the police because she wanted to continue her work as a sex worker.

If her case were reported, the perpetrator would be sought and once identified, prosecuted. She would be placed in protection and asked to attend vocational training program. She would also be asked to be a witness. Her case will be reviewed and more

recommendations made on how to better provide care for her. However the reason she migrated to the city from the north would not have come up. Nor will there be a discussion on the increasing income gap, the economic disparity, the lack of access to resources and the system that perpetuates vulnerability. May be it is because the system that perpetuates enforces disciplinary power to the point where we have internalized the discourse. As a result, the system can maintain itself under the claim of moral indignation. And yet this is critically important especially within the field of pastoral care. We need to raise structural questions and seek critical analysis of the discourse so that we can better serve those who are vulnerable.

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## Prophetic Sickness: The Effects of Low-Socioeconomic Status in Substance Addiction

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### Abstract

Substance addictions are commonly viewed as an individual problem, located in the brain or the will of the individual. In theological reflection, this leads to explanatory frameworks for addiction that are focused on the interior spiritual life. This focus on the individual prevents the pastoral caregiver from sufficiently considering context in care. This article reviews the connection between low socioeconomic status and stress proliferation as a particular pathway to addiction. I use Nancy Boyd-Franklin's multisystems model of expanding circles of context to situate the individual and family within the broader effects of low socioeconomic status. Socioeconomic status is then held in place by even larger circles, such as systemic racism and the economic practices of a neoliberal culture. The poor addict becomes a kind of "identified patient" in the national family, manifesting the toxicity of the system. Through the prophet Jeremiah, I introduce the framework of prophetic communication to better explain the poor addict as one whose abject condition communicates the economic injustices of the nation. I illustrate the subject matter throughout the story of an alcoholic.

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## Substance Addiction – Low Socioeconomic Status – Stress Proliferation – Nancy Boyd-Franklin

### Introduction

I remember the day that Brian got a car because I was his usual Sunday ride home. He would stuff his massive frame into my old Honda sedan and proceed to talk about his life, nonstop, from the AA meeting at the Lutheran church all the way to his favorite record store. He never let me drive him to the shelter where he lived, nor later to the row-house in Trenton where he rented a room. Instead, I would drop him off at the corner of the grimy storefront just north of the city, driving away in blessed silence while he reminisced with the store owner about everyone from the Beatles, to the Grateful Dead, to the Dead Kennedys.

Brian was an eager talker, and often didn't require a response. So I knew a lot about Brian. He had drunk away his money in a cheap motel somewhere in the run-down routes toward the Jersey Shore. When the money ran out Brian was homeless for weeks, riding the bus routes back and forth to stay warm in the cold evenings. He was laying on a bench when a Christian evangelist approached him and—as he put it—his Higher Power saved him that day. He asked for help and the man took him to a local hospital to detox.

For three years, Brian and I sat next to each other at every Sunday meeting. A nod in greeting from the open door, a gesture to the empty chair, cleaning up the coffee in the kitchen, and the ride home where Brian talked nonstop—music trivia woven around his problems at work, missing his ex-wife, his understated struggles to rebuild a stable life.

The day when he finally got that car was a day of celebration. It had taken four years of sobriety to meet that goal. One more brick laid in a long road of struggle. Then Brian got in his car that late summer day and disappeared into a relapse.

#### The conversation on addiction

Substance addictions are commonly viewed as an individual problem, whether a medical disease, a mental health condition, or a personal choice. From a medical perspective, addiction is considered a neurobiological disease related to brain dysfunction (Longo, et al. 2016). Medical research focuses on genetic propensity, how addictive drugs change the brain, and research new drugs to rebalance it. From a mental health perspective, addiction follows a particular symptomology based on the Diagnostic Statistical Manual V (2013). The symptoms describe craving, withdrawal, failed attempts to moderate, poor decision-making, and practical consequences. The focus remains on the individual whose internal and external functioning is failing them because of their substance abuse. Finally, the personal choice perspective believes that people choose to use substances for the pleasure of the experience and later find that they become learned behaviors (Heyman 2013). Rather than a disease that takes long-term treatment, individuals can choose to stop just as they chose to start.

Theological reflection on addiction also follows an interior focus, often pondering the role of excess appetite or desire in the formation of addictions. Augustine's concept of misdirected desire is used to describe addictions as a kind of longing for our true union in God that has gone awry. Desire that is properly ordered through our actions moves toward its Divine resting place, while disordered desire moves the passions toward poor

substitutes like alcohol or drugs (Plantinga 1995, Cooper 2009). Thus, addiction tries to fill “a yearning we can't quite name and yet are quite aware of” and God is the source and destiny of this yearning desire (Nelson 2004, p.28). We become attached to our addictions, and they become a false god to us (May 1988/2007). Theological reflection focuses on an interior spiritual yearning that is disconnected from any contingency in the individual's lived experience.

There are truths to neurobiological and psychological models of addiction and they capture the most observable points of Brian's experience. He has made some self-destructive choices in his life. He has a particularly immersive pattern when he drinks, as if he might flip a genetic switch that winds him into a tight craving-withdrawal loop, solved only by obliteration. His brain functioning is most likely compromised from decades of binge drinking. But none of these models alone explain why Brian repeatedly chose alcohol until he became addicted. They do not help us to understand why, after four years of sobriety, he finally locked himself in his tenement room and proceeded to drink himself almost to death. How one gets to this state of addiction—and how one gets back out of it—is not an individual but a contextual question.

If it is true that our diagnostic categories produce rather than describe problem people, then how we understand Brian's addiction will affect how we categorize both his problem and his personhood (Foucault 1961/1988, 1963/1994). An interior perspective might limit our curiosity to questions about Brian's agency or his self-defeating patterns. Why did Brian sabotage his hard-earned recovery? What irresponsibility or immaturity led to this moment? Spiritually, we might wonder what happened after his initial “turning his will and his life over to God” as directed by the 12-Step program of recovery. Why

had he stopped going to AA meetings when he had previously found both the emotional and practical support of his comrades so valuable, and the friendships so rewarding? We might imagine that Brian has separated himself from God or tragically failed to claim God's grace in times of need. Even if we attempt our best to sit with Brian, replete with unconditional positive regard, a focus on his individual problem might gently shade our experience of Brian as something of a failure, a wasted life, an inevitable loss.

Interior models contribute to what makes an addiction, but ultimately they limit how we understand an addict's problem and how pastoral caregivers can support the individual as she seeks a solution. Interior spiritual understandings also fail to reflect upon the broader theological content being communicated through addictive behavior. Brian did not relapse because he had an innate longing for God and thought alcohol would better fill that yearning. He did not fail to admit that he was powerless and to turn over his life into the hands of the Higher Power that first met him on that park bench. Instead, his addiction was fueled by his drifting life of economic insecurity and his relapse was precipitated by poverty's accumulating evils. The deficit was not primarily in his will or desire but in the lived experience of his environment. If so, socioeconomic suffering and economic sin must also be part our understanding of addiction and its recovery. Addiction could hold a prophetic communication about the sufferings underlying the vast social inequalities in our nation.

#### Addiction and the stress pathway

Four years ago, Brian moved from his first hospital stay by the Jersey Shore to a shelter in Trenton. He then graduated to a transitional living shelter near the Trenton train

station. After picking up part-time work to pay his minimum rent, he finally got a full-time position in a factory repairing pallets. At a base pay of \$8.50 an hour, he had to repair and load 20 stacks of 11 pallets each to make his daily quota. It was fast, backbreaking labor and at 52 years old he had a hard time keeping up with the young men on the job. There were many “challenging people” both at work and in the long-term shelter. He tried to stay in his room to avoid the insults, the conflict, and the drug using negotiated in public spaces.

Finally, Brian was able to move out of the transitional shelter and live in a room in a row-house in downtown Trenton owned by a friend from the factory. It was “challenging” as he again said. A man was selling drugs out of one room. Another woman worked in prostitution. Another had four kids living in the basement. He told me he was just keeping his head down. Besides, he was glad to leave the shelter. Some of the men stay there forever, but he wanted to get his life together. He had to walk 15 minutes in New Jersey winters to catch the bus to work and used the buses for his AA meetings in the evening unless he walked ten minutes to the Cass Street men’s group. He ended the day exhausted. But he was proud that the work had made him physically strong again, and he was beginning to pay off some of his mountain of debt.

A year ago, he got a better job as a security officer at the front desk of a building downtown. He chatted about how he was just there to scare people— a huge man, with a heavy Neanderthal face and legs like gnarled trees. I told him he’d probably talk someone to death before he touched them. That reminded him of another 70’s B-list song, and off he went into music trivia bliss. Six months later, he disappeared. The Sunday regulars at

the meeting tried to reach out to him, but he never replied. Finally he texted the group to let us know he was back in hospital and sober two days, thanks to God.

When I saw him in the hospital, it took all of my pastor's experience not to show my shock. His large face had shriveled around his skull, his arms skinny, his belly distended from cirrhosis and his legs ballooned with fluid. He had been diagnosed with lymphoma. He had expected it because he had discovered a lump in his neck almost a year ago. He was tired all the time, started holding fluid in his legs, and became incontinent. He started missing work. He got fired from his job. So he bought a bottle of Tequila, locked himself in his room and drank for several months, his car left idle on the street by the welfare office accumulating parking tickets.

Addictive behaviors are coping skills that help people manage stress and regulate negative affect. In other words, substance use helps people to manage situations for which they do not have mental, emotional, or practical resources. While people from all classes become addicted, those from low socioeconomic positions have particular pathways to addiction and particular challenges in recovery related to the experience of chronic stress. Stress is considered a pernicious dynamic in addiction. It can trigger earlier experimentation with substances, increase the risk of transition into recreational use, increase the risk that use will escalate, and diminish motivation to quit (Marijn Lijffijt 2016).

Over time, repeated attempts to engage substances as a coping skill result in neurobiological changes. These changes actually further dysregulate the brain's stress system via changes in the amygdala and HPA axis, which help the brain and nervous system identify and respond to threats in the environment (Koob 2006). Withdrawal and

craving put the body in a chronic stress state. At the same time, the addict is also susceptible to increased affect dysregulation when facing stressful environments, which leads to more substance use in a vicious loop. Past dependence also makes a current relapse more probable when encountering new acute stressors in the environment (Liu, X., & Weiss, 2003; McGrath et al. 2016).

Low socioeconomic status (SES) creates material realities that lead to chronic stress and increase negative affect such as anxiety or depression. Low SES is related to income, educational attainment, and occupational group. Contextual SES measures can also take into account neighborhoods, zip-codes, or census-blocks, measuring for average wealth, social class, single-parent families, unemployment, or home values (Shavers 2007). Its effects are best understood through Leonard Pearlin's stress proliferation model (Pearlin et al. 2005). Stress proliferation is the idea that serious stressors tend to create symptoms or problems that are themselves stressful. These additional stressful problems and their symptoms have effects on one's functioning or environment, thus proliferating more stress.

Some of the stressors of low SES may seem obvious: lack of money to pay bills, high debt, housing instability, poor employment opportunities, food insecurity, or poor access to childcare, healthcare, or nutritious food. Others may be less obvious, including anxiety from insecure work environments, hypervigilance in dangerous neighborhoods, distress over loved ones who suffer without medical care, or marital problems as a result of competing work and family roles (Aneshensel 2015). For those like Brian who hover by the poverty line, practical and emotional stressors hampering recovery span out into



chaotic living environments, lack of job opportunity, poor transportation, and exposure to others who are using substances.

Low SES is one of the greatest predictors of poor physical and mental health. The lower the income and educational attainment, the higher the likelihood for ill-health (Braveman et al. 2010). Reviewing the research connecting social dysfunction to income inequality, Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) show that those on the lower social gradient, especially in more economically unequal societies, suffer greater mental illness, violence, imprisonment, lack of trust, teenage births, obesity, drug abuse, and lower educational achievement. Stratifications in social class produce stratifications in mental and physical wellbeing through the combination of stressors and lack of resources that arise from environments of economic suffering.

If substances help people manage stress and negative affect, then it makes sense that the anxiety and distress attendant to low SES would exacerbate a substance using habit. For instance, in one study of mothers receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) found that neighborhood disorder and stressful life events increased the risk for problem drinking, largely through their effect on psychological distress (Mulia et al, 2007). Addiction treatment completion disparities for African Americans and Hispanics were also largely explained by differences in socioeconomic status, especially unemployment and housing instability (Saloner, B., & Lê Cook 2013). Another set of interviews at an urban community health center found that drug availability in poor neighborhoods, personal poverty, and emotional distress were challenges to curbing drug use (Padwa et al. 2014).

Along with proliferating stress, negative cognitions and negative affect states also increase as socioeconomic status decreases (Adler & Conner Snibbe 2003). Material hardship and its stressors can cause depression and a sense of hopelessness or powerlessness (Hefline and Iceland 2009; Ross & Mirowsky, 2014). These emotional states challenge addiction recovery, because recovery grows from a sense of hope and self-efficacy. Recovery is a balance between personal and social resiliency, exposure to substances, and a shifting sense of self-efficacy when facing the challenges and temptations of sobriety (DiClemente 2006). Over time, stress and negative affect both drain an addict's motivation and tempt her to manage life's challenges with the old coping skill of substances. Brian spent four years intensely engaging recovery activities. He worked every day, began paying his debts, and kept up with his monthly bills. But his self-efficacy was ground down by the practical challenges and stressors of survival and his growing illness destroyed his hope.

Finally, those with less financial stability have fewer means to protect themselves from the harms of heavy substance use or addiction. Lower social class position is much more strongly related to adverse outcomes from heavy substance use than the actual habit of the heavy use itself (Room 2005). The poor have fewer resources to hide their use—fewer flexible jobs, safe houses to use in, or disposable income to buy and use in private. Less access to nutritious food, medical care, and healthy living conditions can lead to greater physical and practical consequences from using substances. Furthermore, a greater exposure to others when intoxicated (using public transportation, walking home while intoxicated, gathering at stranger's houses, sleeping in public areas) can also mean more experiences of victimization. So while all social classes use alcohol and drugs, the

poor may suffer more risk of further adult trauma, health problems, and challenges to life stability from the effects of their use (Bornovalova 2011). They are at higher risk of arrest, poor physical health, greater stigma, and personal victimization as a consequence of their substance use.

### Extending the lens

I admit that parsing out the connection between socioeconomic status, stress, and addiction feels risky to me. First, I fear reinforcing the stigma that drugs are a “problem of the poor.” Consider the crack epidemic in the 1980’s that focused its rhetoric on poor African American neighborhoods, or the methamphetamine epidemic, characterized as a problem of poor rural whites. From the “war on poverty” to the “war on crime” politicians and the criminal justice system have tried to control addiction as a delinquency of the poor, with racist intent (Hinton, 2017). By focusing on addiction or other behavior considered immoral or criminal, society produces the poor as the source of their own social decay, rather than seeking to change the educational and economic inequalities that cause poverty. So it is important to state again that addictions emerge from what was initially a coping skill. They come into being when our resources cannot sufficiently meet our vulnerabilities across the lived experience of our contexts.

The balance between resources and vulnerabilities is not a simple dialectic between personal strength and practical challenge. We are not encapsulated selves facing multiple difficulties in the outside world, batting practical troubles away as they come to us. Instead, our very selfhood emerges through those environments which challenge our growth. African American family therapist Nancy Boyd-Franklin (2006) offers a

multisystems image of concentric circles drawn around the self, situating the individual within her expanding environment. The circles begin with the individual at its center, then core family unit, then extended family and fictive kin. The circles then expand ever-wider around these core relationships, from community, to social institutions, and to broader social systems. Like Russian nesting dolls, each circle is held within the circles that surround it, so that ultimately our core experience of self is inseparable from our experience of family, community, and social context.

If we add economic realities to Boyd-Franklin's ecosystem, we can imagine that these circles of personal and social contexts are embedded in the larger embrace of socioeconomic status. Low SES deeply effects our circles of personal and social experience, adding significant stress to families, contributing to the decay of communities, and limiting access to institutional resources like good schools or positive employment opportunities. Low SES is then held in place by the broader circle of social inequality, from the historic and systemic racism that leads to financial insecurity to city- and state-wide policies that under-fund education and cut out safety-nets and services for the poor. These realities are further embedded in the national effects of a global market economy that focuses on corporate profit or shifts living-wage jobs overseas. Finally at the macro-level, these economic and public policies are encircled by a broader neoliberal worldview that privileges the rich and claims that the poor can, by the force of will, find the resources they need to build economic success.

This extended ecosystem complicates how we understand the causes of addiction. At the closest circle of the individual, genetics are theorized to play a large part in who becomes addicted (Heilig, 2013). Individual temperament, such as impulsivity or

novelty-seeking, is also a risk-factor for initiating substance use (Hesselbrock & Hesselbrock 2006). But we do not grow straight up from the seed of our genetics. Our personalities, including self-regulation and coping abilities, are formed through our experiences of family and community. Thus expanding to the family circle, rejecting or insensitive caregiving can leave a child with less ability to think flexibly, regulate negative affect and stress, or manage the self in its social relationships, potentially making substances an appealing coping skill for these deficits (Howe, 2011; Gill, 2014). At the extreme, childhood abuse and neglect, chaotic homes, or substance using caretakers predict the early onset of substance use and thus put a child at risk of a later addiction (Mills et al. 2014; Sartor et al. 2013; Darke et al 2014). Expanding to the community, drug availability and peer-modeling is another factor that may influence the decision to initiate substance use.

The experience of a child's family and community is further embedded in the broader context of socioeconomic status. Low SES will affect a child's nutrition, her educational opportunities, the health and safety of her environment, and the mental, emotional, and practical stability of her caretakers. Children who grow up in low SES conditions may experience more stress proliferation from both within and outside of the home, as caretakers experience distress and the neighborhood itself is under-resourced or dangerous. For instance, a community study across nine public schools from socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods (1143 high school seniors) found high levels of childhood adverse experiences, which included parental unemployment or substance use, abandonment, witnessing or experiencing assault or abuse, and experiencing rape or sexual abuse (Schilling, 2007). Increasing frequency of these

experiences was significantly associated with increasing depressive symptoms, drug use, and antisocial behavior. This effect was strengthened when a respondent had experienced multiple adverse childhood experiences.

Low SES is also held into place by other expanding circles of inequality, such as systemic racism. Poverty is officially defined by the “poverty threshold,” which currently is \$12,486 for a single individual and \$24,339 for a family two adults and two children. In 2016, the percentage of a demographic in poverty included: 22% of Blacks (9.2 million), 19.4% of Hispanics (11.1 million), 10.1% of Asians (1.9 million), and 8.8% of non-Hispanic whites (17.3 million people), making whites the lowest percentage in poverty (Proctor , 2016). Thus, while whites like Brian actually make up the numerical majority of those living below the poverty line, the effect of historic and institutional racism is evidenced in the high proportion of people within minoritized groups who live in poverty.

This segregation between rich and poor is evident in my state of New Jersey, following a long history of systemic discrimination that pushed African Americans into under-resourced urban areas. For instance, exclusionary zoning policies and barriers to affordable housing, job discrimination, and the transformation of the economy from factory to service work are some of the dynamics that have created vast gaps between rich and poor in this state, drawn on racial lines (AJP, 2017). Since addiction builds through multiple vulnerabilities, poor minoritized groups’ pathway to addiction includes the experience of both racial oppression and its socioeconomic effects. For instance, poor African American youth who also experience rage or depression from racial discrimination may begin to cope by using substances (Hardy & Quereshi 2014; Sanders-

Phillips et al. 2014). Furthermore, substance use is theorized to progress into addiction towards mid-life, as African Americans find fewer options for socioeconomic stability and success across the life-course to help mitigate the appeal of substance using (Gibbons, 2016).

The poor, especially African American and Hispanic poor, are also the most likely to experience arrest and incarceration (Williams 2006; Gottschalk 2015). The War on Drugs attempts to control the social ills of poverty while also perpetuating it, as incarceration strips individuals of years of education and job opportunities needed to gain financial security or hope for the future. Individuals with drug charges are often released under onerous probation regulations, attempting to rebuild financial stability and find safe housing while fulfilling drug court and treatment requirements. Many drug court participants who live in the treatment centers and halfway houses in my area suffer these proliferations of stress. They supply the transient minimum wage jobs in Princeton: the Shop-rite, Burger King, and Dunkin Donuts. They serve in the local diners where the university students gather. They add to their socioeconomic stressors rounds of court appointments, probation officers, required attendance at 12-step meetings or treatment centers, efforts to find a job with a criminal record, and loss of child custody.

Before we expand our circles further, it is important to note that the correlation between poverty and addiction is sometimes reversed: chronic substance use can cause socioeconomic insecurity. Or as in Brian's case, the two can exacerbate each other in a cycle of social stressors and substance using. For instance, in a simple pathway, one might have relational and financial security as a child but have a hardship at a vulnerable age, like moving to a new state or losing a parent. Natural impulsivity or the modeling of

one's peer group can lead to substance use in an attempt to cope with that problem. Over time, one might lose employment, stable housing, and spousal or parental financial support as a consequence of a growing addiction. One might be charged with drug possession and further burdened with drug-court requirements while a criminal record hampers the search for new employment. Socioeconomic stressors begin to proliferate, exacerbating further substance using in an attempt to manage the anxiety or distress attendant to socioeconomic precarity.

### Neoliberalism's Broad Circle

In the 1990's, Brian worked at a music distribution warehouse in New Jersey until the company closed it down to relocate, laying off all the employees. Rumor had it that the warehouse was moved in order to break the last labor union functioning in the company's many branches. Brian drank a lot even then, but everyone did after the shift ended. He felt he could binge on the weekends but control it for work. After he lost his job, he moved to Houston to live in a house owned by his wife's family. He got another position working for \$7.50 an hour for a smaller distribution warehouse. The job only hired part-time with no health insurance, but he quickly made himself invaluable and moved to full-time work. By then, he was drinking every day. The company slowly downsized and then filed for bankruptcy. He held on during the rounds of layoffs for as long as he could, looking over his shoulder for the day they finally called him into the office. At this point he was drinking all day long, hiding bottles around the house and in his car.

After the warehouse closed, he started another job but found it unbearable. He quit two days later. This meant that he lost his unemployment benefits from the layoff.



He moved back to New Jersey for another warehouse job, his already jovial and talkative personality masking the fact that he was intoxicated at the interview. He was now working for \$10.50 an hour in 2003. Over the next ten years he descended further into alcoholism. His wife divorced him. When his father became terminally ill, he quit his job and moved into his father's house to care for him. Brian drank every day, throughout the day, for a year until his father died. He then shifted from couch to couch until he received his inheritance. He moved into the motel to drink himself to death.

Let me pause briefly at the farthest cultural circle, into which all others are embedded. Families and communities suffer from socioeconomic marginalization because America's economic and social policies are built around neoliberal values. Bruce Rogers-Vaughn's *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age* (2016) describes how neoliberal values feed a pervasive sense of socioeconomic insecurity through deregulation, privatization, and competition:

The deregulation of the economy means that governments reduce or withdraw laws and rules requiring corporations to consider any purposes other than the pursuit of profit. This includes the reduction or removal of taxes on corporations and their wealthy owners, which by definition are levied for the public good rather than benefit of corporations...this leads to the reduction or removal of social services and welfare programs... it also means the removal of trade barriers that create a level playing field for laborers and privatization also denotes removing properties and services from public control. (p.17)

Brian's experience was a tiny pinpoint on the circumference of this economic and political trend, as warehouses closed, labor unions broke, and Brian drifted from job to job, living paycheck to paycheck. In sobriety, he attempted to rebuild his life in the blighted neighborhood of an abandoned manufacturing town, five minutes from the proud

logo “Trenton makes, the world takes” before the global market economy left Trenton behind.

Neoliberal policies help to secure the wealth of corporations while increasing the socioeconomic gap between the rich and poor. In a review of 16 OECD countries, Wilkerson and Picket (2014) map how the decline in trade union membership correlates with an increase in socioeconomic inequality over time.<sup>2</sup> This trend does not simply reflect the positive benefits of these worker’s groups, as their efficacy varies. Instead, it reflects the broader circle of neoliberal values at work. The loss of trade unions points to “the weakening of the overall political and ideological influence of the left in society” and the concurrent rise of neoliberalism under the Reagan and Thatcher administrations (p.19). This inequality is an indicator of poorer physical and mental health in these nations, especially concentrated at a society’s lowest socioeconomic point.

Neoliberal values cause the material inequalities that lead to stress and negative affect, but it is also a culture that soaks into our subjectivity, changing how we imagine the self in its suffering. Rogers-Vaughn calls neoliberalist distress a “third-order suffering.” First-order suffering arises from events commonly considered outside of our control, such as natural disasters and sicknesses. Second-order suffering comes from agentic evil such as violence, oppression, or war. Third-order suffering is more insidious and diffuse. There is no violent person to confront nor individual system to oppose. Instead, it is a sense of unmooring from communal identity, a spiritual homelessness that leads to despair. Studies indicate that when the income disparity in a country is smaller,

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<sup>2</sup> The Convention on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, instituted in December 1960.

the community life is stronger and people feel that they can trust others (Wilkinson & Pickett 2010). In contrast, a culture of intensified individualism and competition means that suffering is experienced outside of the support and meaning that it could find in community. Suffering has in a sense become privatized and deregulated, requiring the sufferer to manage her own pain and to be responsible for getting whatever assistance she may need (Rogers-Vaughn, p.100).

Addiction may be one of the symptoms of this broader existential and identity loss. According to Bruce Alexander in *The Globalization of Addiction: A Study in Poverty of the Spirit* (2010), addictive behaviors arise from the dislocation and lack of psychosocial integration that come with the cultural shifts of global market capitalism. We are objectified, separated from meaningful labor, socially alienated, and transient in our search for socioeconomic security. Individualism and competition become the greatest goods, devaluing loyalties to family and friends, or higher values of religion, culture, ethnic group, or nation. Alexander claims that dislocated people “struggle valiantly to establish or restore psychosocial integration,” to try to create a sense of identity, meaningful life, and sense of relationship with the social body (p. 60). They attempt to manage dislocation by narrowing themselves into chronic habitual behaviors, from drug and alcohol use to the obsessive accumulation of goods, in an attempt to defend against this floating sense of loss and alienation.

In the midst of a national opioid epidemic, one might contend that we are reclaiming our communal responsibility to care. It may seem like the government has expressed its concern about this crisis, funding research and treatment centers. However, adopting Boyd-Franklin’s family systems language, the media attention given to drug

epidemics merely reinscribes addicts as the “identified patients” of the larger neoliberal society. They are the ones in whom the anxiety and toxicity of the national family have manifested. They are symptomatic of the broader sickness. Addicts—especially poor addicts—are triangulated as each new epidemic hits the nightly news. Through an over-focus on this national patient, we can avoid directly addressing the harsh socioeconomic inequalities that predict poor physical and mental health. Instead, we attempt to solve addiction through the criminal justice system. We wring our collective hands over whether 12-Step programs work, or whether pharmaceuticals can rebalance the brain, or whether prevention programs help our youth from experimenting with the latest fearsome drug. This focus on individual treatment continues to give witness to the encircling of neoliberal culture. As a nation, we have no intention to alleviate the racial and economic injustices that lead to the harsh environments of poverty and socioeconomic insecurity strongly associated with addiction’s hold.

#### Expanding pastoral care

Brian often describes that day he was sleeping homeless on a bench, approached by a wandering evangelist, as the “day I was saved.” But he does not mean a disembodied kind of salvation. His desire was not re-ordered to the greater good of God. He did not repent or receive forgiveness for his idolatrous life. Brian means literally saved from his homelessness and alcoholism. It was his Higher Power’s doing that the evangelist was also an emergency medical technician at the local hospital. He was saved because the man drove Brian, filthy and sick, into the emergency room and helped him find a bed to detox from his alcoholism in safety.

Brian tells a similar story about this current hospital stay. He tells me that God helped him to reach out and tell the truth when he realized that he was too sick to walk up the stairs to his room, weighed down by a backpack full of liquor bottles. He “admitted everything” to another recovering addict who immediately took Brian to the hospital. Even today when I visit his hospital room, he is not interested in devotional books or scripture and has no curiosity about who God is in the abstract. But he can talk incessantly, as only Brian can, about what God does through the people and situations God brings his way. For him, “the day I was saved” marks the day that God directed him to others who could help him find medical care, shelter, and a community of recovery.

An ecosystems informed addiction perspective extends pastoral care out to the practical stressors that block recovery. Brian has parking tickets. He needs to file for unemployment. He needs to sell his car and his adored record collection. He needs to ask his friend to let him stay in the house for a few more months as he tries to find a treatment center. It is not enough to tell Brian to go to treatment, to stop using or to get better, without being able to address the roadblocks to his care. Finally, Brian’s broader history encourages pastoral caregivers to advocate for those who suffer economic oppression to prevent these stressors from proliferating in the first place. Philip Browning Helsel (2015) suggests this kind of solidarity model for pastoral care in economic suffering: “working to change the conditions of work, what one has to do to survive, and also foregrounding the *voice* of those who are in working-class positions” (p. 41). Extending care to problem-solving and public action responds to the realities of Brian’s lived experience across the concentric circles of his life.

## Addiction as Communication

Extending pastoral care brings us back to the question of how we develop a broader spiritual understanding of addiction. Let me begin by a disclaimer. By placing Brian within these socioeconomic circles, I am not suggesting that he is merely an innocent victim of external forces, exonerated of his will. Instead, as we seek a theological framework to engage pastoral care, I am saying that using terms like victim or villain, disease or choice, put us in the wrong conversation altogether. Instead, Brian's suffering communicates something to me about his broad history. It nags at me to pay theological attention, not to the interior line of his desire but to the circles of his context. So I want to conclude with an alternative starting point to our theological reflection drawn from the framework of prophetic communication.

Substances are engaged as a coping skill. Thus, when pastoral caregivers work with addicts, we must begin with the assumption that their behaviors once helped them to survive. If addicts are survivors then we might change the questions we bring to the problem of addiction. We might ask what their efforts to survive communicate to us. Those who abuse substances tell us about their suffering by reenacting a pattern with substances. They tell us about a traumatic past or pitiless present. They tell us about hopelessness, shame, or useless futures. Or, like Brian, they are a cry against the grinding efforts at economic survival and the fear of ultimately dying in a tenement room alone.

If addictions are trying to tell us about histories of suffering, then we might frame them as a kind of sign-act, a prophetic communication. While prophets spoke through the Spirit of the Lord, they were also on the edges of society, and their message was carried through the symbols of socially unacceptable, sometimes offensive behavior (Nissinen

2017). For instance, consider Jeremiah, that most offensive of prophets. Jeremiah's prophetic sign-acts are images of breakage and pain: a loincloth buried by the Euphrates, useless and ruined (13:1-11); unceasing tears (14:17); celibacy (16:1-4); the clay vessel spoiled in the potters hand (18:1-4); the smashed earthenware jug (19:1-10); a yoke of straps and bars around his neck (27:2). Suffering and lamentation also marked the whole life stories of the latter prophets. Gerhard von Rad (1965) observes, "when the prophet's life entered the vale of deep suffering and abandonment by God, this became a unique kind of witness-bearing" (p. 36). Jeremiah's own conditions of suffering—his personal complaints as a prophet and the abuse he experienced by those in power—were all a part of the message that the people were headed for destruction, as they abandoned their cultic and ethical commitments to God.

For the Hebrew prophets, economic injustice and oppression were clear signs that a society had fallen away from the will of God (e.g. Is. 1:1-17; Ez. 22:29-30, Mic. 6:8-9). Jeremiah confronts those who do violence to the poor, take over the goods of others, amass wealth unjustly, and rely on dishonest gain (Jer. 2:34; 5:26; 17:11, 22:17.) He declares calamity on those who build their houses with unrighteousness, "who makes his neighbors work for nothing and does not give them their wages" (22:13). Whether in word or deed, the point for the prophet is that strange, socially unacceptable messages shock the people out of religious and ethical complacency. They reveal through signs of brokenness the ethical and religious sins that have been shamefully smoothed over. They warn the people of the destructive consequences hanging over the whole ecosystem when they forget the fear of the Lord and live only for personal gain.

Thus, God's communications come to a complacent society in socially unacceptable and abject forms. As a manifestation of the toxicity of a neoliberal ecosystem, Brian's addiction could be seen as this kind of prophetic communication. It is a failure we would prefer not to see, a socially unacceptable sign of the nation's growing chasm between rich and poor. Like Jeremiah smashing the earthen jug, I am reminded that something is broken that cannot be easily mended. I am sitting with the shards of a deep inequality and it is an accusation that we as a nation have been careless with the wounds of our people (Jer. 8:11). If addictions say anything about desire, then theologically they are an expression of God's desire for humans to begin the work of caring for one another and for every circle of our systems with equity and justice.

## Conclusion

I don't want to make this easy. It is easier to decry the effects of neoliberalism from the desk in my middle-class house on a leafy street. It gets more complicated when I sit with Brian in that old brick hospital on a street of boarded-up houses, with his sunken eyes and extended belly. He wants me to bring him double-stuffed Oreo cookies. He's found another friend to take the car. He wants to move to North Carolina to work in a warehouse where his friend also builds pallets. He seems to know little about his chemotherapy for stage 4 cancer or the extent of his liver damage. He reminisces about his father's slow progress into death. I am in the midst of a sign-act, reminded that my own privilege has cost something and the cost sits next to me, chatting about his life on that grubby hospital bed.



I listen and wonder about the last three years we have spent together. Brian was my comrade and friend and yet, in the midst of the Sunday music trivia, I wonder if I missed the message that he was trying to send me. Perhaps I just didn't understand upon which circle we stood, as he talked in my car nonstop about his lost jobs and failed marriage. Or his suicide-by-inheritance, locked in that motel drinking his one small financial windfall away. Or his years lived on the social edge one day at a time, suffering understated "challenges." Pieces of his life scatter around the floor between us. Was I careless with his wounds, unable to see the difference between his personal problems and the social suffering that surrounded him? If I admit it, I never asked myself *why* Brian would not let me drive him all the way home. It is here in my failure that Brian becomes a prophetic communication for me.

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