

horizon: people and possibilities [email this article](#) | [printer-friendly version](#) | [previous page](#) | [next page](#)



Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountain and he began to teach them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit,

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,

THOSE DRIVEN
 BY THE RAVAGES
 OF POVERTY TAKE
 COMFORT IN
 MINIMALISM

by monica a. coleman

Blessed! Happy! Lucky! In my experience and from my observation, there is nothing blessed, happy or lucky about being poor. Actually, it's a frustrating existence filled with stress and insecurity. There's nothing exciting about standing in line at a soup kitchen, or wondering whether or not you can pay your rent. There's no joy in asking family members or strangers for money, or getting the bureaucratic run-around from self-centered government and health-care agencies. And, there is no sense of Lady Luck's presence when looking for a dry place to sleep in a rainstorm, or a way to buy new clothes for your children who have outgrown the hand-me-downs. My images of poverty are varied and distinct, but none of them come close to what I think of when I say "Blessed."

So when my former roommate decided to enter the convent, one of my first questions was: "Do you *really* have to take a vow of poverty?"

"Yes," she replied, "but it's not what it seems."

I watched her post the signs for the yard sale and give away what was not sold. When she left, her room was empty – no bed, no linens, no end table. All of her possessions fit into four bags that left excess room in the trunk of my car.



Author Monica A. Coleman

She told me that linens and clothing awaited her in the convent, and she had the books she wanted in her bags. She told me that the nuns owned most of their property collectively, and that the vow of poverty was more aptly a vow against waste. Do you *really* need, she inquired, all those shoes, sweaters, books and papers?

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It struck me then. Her "poverty" is not really about going without. It has much more to do with being conservationist. It's about the bare essentials: having what you really need and having no more. And I couldn't help but think of the environmental slogan: "Live simply so others may simply live." This poverty isn't about lack or homelessness or hunger; it's about simplicity.

So, let's try it again!

Blessed are those who are simple . . . in spirit.

Blessed are those with a simple spirituality for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Personally, I find it hard to have a simple spirituality. As a minister and student of religion, I have spent the last five or six years complicating God. It is my job to ask questions about God: What is God's involvement in our lives? Why does God allow the suffering we experience? How much agency do people have in determining the course of their lives? Does God always reward those who are good? If so, does that mean the poor have no faith?

I deeply believe that the way we answer those questions, the types of answers we give, and the types of answers we receive are important to the quality of our everyday spiritual lives. I am also well aware that many of those questions don't even have answers. But I don't have to have all the answers; I like the questions. I think the questions are an indication of taking one's faith seriously. It's OK to question. It's OK to doubt. It's OK to be unsure. It's OK to change your mind. It's OK for God to seem close and personal, and then distant and mysterious. It's OK when it all seems complex and overwhelming.

But then again, maybe it's not. At 2 in the morning, people do not reach out for a complex God in question; we reach out for something solid and something comforting. At our most desperate moments, we yearn for pat answers and specific directions. We do not want a faith with ambiguities and contradictions. So blessed are the people who don't get bogged down in the answer-less questions. Blessed are they who go straight to what they know, and then say it. Blessed are those for whom the connection between God and action is simple. Blessed are those whose everyday lives are girded by simple statements of faith. Not only are they blessed, but they get heaven, too!

When I picture heaven, I have the traditional images of gold, glamour, wealth, peace and shining white everything. I don't see dingy streets, emaciated bodies or muddy hands. Nevertheless, people who assert that their simple understanding of God puts them to work see more dirt than gold and more sickness than health.

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Twenty-three years ago, Thomas Behrens went to work at 9 p.m. and got off at 5 a.m. He walked the streets of Chicago, hanging out in bars and "bad neighborhoods," and he talked to people. He established relationships with people who live in the nighttime streets, bringing them a little counseling, a lot of referrals, and a voice and ears that care about them. After 10 years of working alone, Behrens and his Night Ministry now include an office with 40 staff persons, 400 volunteers, a shelter for homeless teens and several programs to involve existing social-service agencies and faith communities in meeting the needs of the city's nighttime street population.

When asked about his spiritual motive for the work, Behrens says that it was just a logical extension of his Christian upbringing. On deeper reflection, he adds, "What I am coming to realize more and more is that, as Mother Teresa said, loneliness is the worst poverty. There is a way to deal with loneliness and that is in building relationships. The act of giving out coffee or condoms in the middle of the night is very meaningful to many people who are feeling alone and isolated." So why is the



word "ministry" in the name? "Because," Behrens says, "We come from a faith perspective and people understand that it's not only a bunch of individuals, but somehow God cares as well."


 Thomas Behrens

Although Neely Ann Williams works during the day, many of her clients can relate to Behrens' nighttime friends. Williams is the coordinator of [The Wellness Center of The First Response Center](#), the only identified faith-based HIV/AIDS service provider in the southeast region. Based at Metropolitan Interdenominational Church, Williams works with persons living with and affected by HIV/AIDS in Nashville. From rent assistance, nutrition, transportation, vouchers for grocery items and referrals to medical agencies, she helps clients to acquire the services they need in their everyday lives. "Even if this were not my job," she says, smiling, "I would do it because the gospels mandate operating in love to serve where there is a need. That's it."



Neely Ann Williams of The Wellness Center, a faith-based HIV/AIDS service provider

But it's easy to lose hope, Williams adds. "Sometimes it feels like I am not having any effect or like I am not reaching anyone." After another pause, she remembers the time volunteers made a fancy Christmas dinner for the clients. Crystal, china, linens and centerpieces decorated the transformed church sanctuary. The clients cried and cried because they couldn't believe that all of that was done for them: "It was joy for me," Williams says, "because they thought – some of them for the first time – that somebody thought something of them."

"It's one thing to care for a friend who's sick or a dog that's sick, but it's really hard to care for an unhealthy ecosystem – regardless of the size. I don't see immediate results. I rarely ever do." Tanya Marcovna Becker, program associate for [Earth Ministry](#), confesses that the discouragement in her work sometimes weighs heavier than the rewards. Some days are spent teaching church members to value nature as an equal part of creation. Other days are spent behind the desk, developing curricula for worship services and Sunday-school classes. Still other days are spent at the river banks removing some plants and planting other trees – trying to restore the hills and wetlands of the greater Seattle region that have been decimated by decades of industrial activity – for which poor people typically must bear the consequences. Overall, she concludes, "I do a lot of consciousness-raising."



Tanya Marcovna Becker doing salmon habitat restoration near Seattle.

nNoO sSmMaAlLlL gGIloOrRyY

But it's not fruitless work, either. One time she organized a songfest in a church of older members who had no interest in environmental concerns. "They just sang their hearts out to this music they had known all of their lives – music that was creation-centered – and they rediscovered their faith." For Becker, that environmental consciousness is directly related to God: "I think that the creation is a reflection of the Creator, and if I love The Creator, I have to love creation."

Behrens, Williams and Becker face the typical challenges of nonprofit, social-justice work: funding needs, incessant grant-compliance requirements, low salaries, endless work, volunteer dependency, and chronic discouragement. But they are chipping away at the iceberg-sized problems in their communities, and they all say that they are blessed by the work they do. What is social work for some people is ministry for them. They walk along the same path as many others whose activism was inspired by their faith. Beneath the fame and visibility of world leaders like Mother Theresa, Mohandas Gandhi, Desmond Tutu and Martin Luther King are the unsung workers in local, faith-based initiatives.

Their motives are simple. They know there's no glory in poverty. Their understanding of God translates into anti-poverty work. Working in the name of God inspires both them and the people with whom they work. It's not complicated, but it's not without difficulty either. Their rewards are sporadic and unique: conversation over coffee, crystal and china, the off-harmony voices of the elderly. Yet they experience a place where the lonely have company, the sick are made well and the trees grow tall and wide. No, there are no harps, no golden streets or fluffy clouds, but I think they have a good glimpse of heaven.

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