

WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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But By Grace

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"There but by the grace of God go I."

I'm sure you've heard the saying. It's always kind of bothered me. Something about it hinted at an underlying current of selfishness. Something about the way it hints at the idea that the only reason I should be concerned with the welfare of my neighbors is because at any moment I could find myself down on my luck.

I always preferred to think we can just do the right thing for its own sake. But with the current state of the economy being what it is, this phrase has been increasingly on my mind.

If the "Great Recession" has taught us anything, it's a lesson in the fragility of the American Dream. I grew up with the belief that anything is possible. Put your mind to it, work hard, and you will be rewarded.

What we've seen in the past few years is that, on closer inspection, this formula for success doesn't always hold up. At this moment we are a country in which nearly one in five potential workers either unemployed or working part time when they want full-time hours. This is not an abstract failure of the equation; these are the lives of our friends, family and neighbors, and they didn't all fail to work hard and apply themselves.

I'm talking about young people who pushed themselves through school, and took on mountains of debt based believing that it would be worth it. They are graduating without the hope of work. They are competing in the job market with people who have spent decades working their way up the ladder, only to find that their jobs have evaporated. Many of these people are home owners who believed their houses were investments not just for their family but their futures and now find themselves trapped in dead-end investments.

To say that we are disoriented as a country would be a massive understatement. People are angry because they feel like the rules have been changed in the middle of the game. They held up their end of the bargain and life let them down. And they are right to feel that way.

The tendency in these scarcer, scarier times is to turn inward. To protect what we have left. To arm ourselves, both figuratively and literally, in response to this failure.

Is that really the kind of world in which we want to live? A place where we cling to our remaining possessions as if they are what most matters? Where we barricade the door and refuse to see the suffering, not only of the "other" but of our friends?

Maybe viewing our possessions and position in life as a gift, rather than something we've earned can help change the way we treat each other. If it is by grace that I have managed to stay in my home, while others have not, maybe I should not stand in judgment of them. If it is by grace that I have a job, when someone equally hard working does not, maybe it is my obligation to share the benefits that job allows me, whether through volunteering, charitable donations, or happily supporting the vital human needs programs our taxes support.

Maybe what we need now is a little more grace.

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