Hunger Dialogue - Two Narratives

by Julie Fiske, January 2017

**Introduction**

Oftentimes when trying to learn about a new topic, we search for facts. Upon discovering the facts, we think we are on our way to understanding the subject. But, that is not always the case. When facts involve people, facts must be coupled with a face. The following two narratives are an attempt to combine a few facts about poverty and food insecurity in Jefferson County with a face. The end goal of these narratives is to open our eyes to see that the issue of poverty is much broader and complicated than mere facts and statistics can fully express. While the narratives are most likely based on "actual events", I have not personally met any of the people in either story. Or, perhaps I have but just didn't realize it.

**What Do We Know About Free or Reduced Lunch?**

*by Julie Fiske*

"Attention, everybody!" Paul tried to holler over the din of the party. "Attention, everybody!" The chatter turned to a mild buzzing as the crowd quieted down. "Susan and I want to thank everyone for coming to our annual harvest party. It's so fun for us to see everyone enjoying themselves; reconnecting with old friends, and hopefully making new ones." "Here here!" someone shouted from near the back. "What have you got for us this year, Paul?!" hollered another.

Paul was a retired professor of sociology who recently moved back to Iowa after spending close to 40 years in the Boston area. Paul smiled as his friends had come to learn that while the professor in him had retired, the sociologist in him had not. No longer a teacher, he went back to being a student - a student of life and communities and how people interacted with one another.

"Bobby is going to come around with a small slip of paper for each of you. If you came as a couple, please only take one slip of paper."

"That's Robert, dad" chided Paul's son who was a successful computer programmer living in San Francisco. He had been born in Boston but had always enjoyed the family trips they would take back to Iowa each summer. The crowd laughed at Robert's "protest."

The slips of paper were handed out to the nearly 75 people who had gathered together on Paul and Susan's acreage that late October evening. "First, a little background on my latest project. I recently learned that in our local school district, 43% of the students are on free or reduced school lunch."

Murmuring bubbled up from the crowd. "What?" "Seriously?" "How can that be?" Most of Paul and Susan's friends were highly educated and highly successful, representing a wide variety of professions.

"I know, I was shocked myself. But, I am trying to make heads or tails of the statistic. And, I am starting with you, my friends. The question I have for you tonight is a simple yes or no question and I want you to write your answer on the slip of paper provided. Then Bobby, sorry, "Robert", will be around with a basket to collect your responses. The question is this - if you were to attend school tomorrow, just as your life is right now, would you qualify for free or reduced lunch? The minimum income level to qualify is just under $30,000 annually for a household of two. So, simply write YES or NO if this would apply to your household as of right now."

The people fell silent as they contemplated their answer. Not contemplating whether or not they would qualify, for that answer did not require extensive deliberation, but contemplating the weight of Paul's subject matter. Most of them knew Paul well enough, and knew his work well enough, to know what he was after. He was wondering if his gathered group of friends were representative of the population as a whole. They understood that if 43% of students received free or reduced lunch, and if his group of friends WERE representative of the population as a whole, then somewhere around 43% of his guests would qualify for free or reduced lunch. The silence of the crowd reflected the fact that they all understood what his findings would reveal - that his social circle was NOT representative of the population as a whole. And they all knew Paul well enough to also know he would not rest until his findings were used for some greater purpose.

Robert made his way through the crowd with his basket and collected all the slips of paper. He brought them to his father who was still standing at the front of the crowd. "I want to thank you all for indulging me in my constant quest for understanding humanity. You are good sports, which is why I have to throw a party for you every year!" Paul smiled and grabbed a nearby wine glass, raised it above his head, and said, "to friends." The crowd echoed back, "to friends!" They all drank. One voice hollered out from the back of the crowd, "So, Paul, are you going to write another book?!" Chuckles from the group, and from Paul himself. "Who knows?," Paul replied in a contemplative tone, "who knows?" And the party continued on into the wee hours of the morning.

**What Does Poverty Look Like?**

*by Julie Fiske*

I didn't get my spelling assignment done tonight because I had to read to my little sister before she would calm down and go to sleep. You see, she's only three years old and my mom was upset tonight. And, whenever my mom's upset, my little sister gets upset, and the only way to get her calmed down enough to go to sleep is if I read to her. I read "Goodnight, Gorilla." My sister always laughs at the picture of the gorilla grinning at the end of the story. I have to admit it is pretty funny.

The reason my mom was upset tonight is because when she came home from the grocery store she realized that she was missing some money. "What the ----?", she said when she reached in her pocket. She pulled out coins, but no bills. "Where is the seven dollars?!"

I feel so guilty. You see, it's my birthday tomorrow (I'm going to be nine) and I asked my mom if I could bring treats to school. First she looked at me like it was a huge favor I was asking. Then her eyes started shimmering, like they were wet. So, she took the ten-dollar bill that was hanging on the fridge by a magnet and stuck it in her pocket. She said, "what kind would you like?" I got a little smile and said, "Laffy Taffy's"! This was a pretty big deal. I know what the ten-dollar-bill is for. Whenever my mom is down to her last ten dollars, she always hangs the last ten-dollar-bill on the refrigerator door, "to remind us it's only a few more days 'til payday!" I don't know if she does it to make us feel excited or worried. I'm not sure if she knows which. All I know for sure is that she went to the store to buy a bag of candy for me to bring to school tomorrow for my birthday treat and somehow she lost the change - the last money she, we, had until she gets paid again - six days from now. I know that, too, because she also hangs that news on the refrigerator.

When my mom gets upset, she gets impatient. Then, pretty much anything makes her yell. My little sister was in the bathroom getting into my mom's make-up when my mom was frantically looking for the seven dollars. That's when my mom hollered. My little sister started crying and I went and took her by the hand and took her into our bedroom (we share a bedroom). I told her it was time for pajamas and bed. She refused to put her pajamas on! That's the way she gets when she's upset, when mom's upset. So, she slept in her clothes. The only way I could get her to lie in bed was to give her my favorite stuffed animal and offer to read her "Goodnight, Gorilla." Thankfully she fell asleep quickly. But, by this time I was tired, too. I knew I hadn't finished writing my spelling words, but I was too tired to dig out the sheet from my backpack. (I always get super-tired when mom gets upset. Usually a headache, too. It is exhausting for all three of us.)

If only I hadn't asked my mom if I could bring treats tomorrow, then she wouldn't have gone to the store and she wouldn't have lost that last seven dollars and she wouldn't be upset and my sister wouldn't be upset and I wouldn't have a headache and I would have gotten my spelling assignment done.

That's what poverty looks like.