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Overcoming Poverty: Difficult Yet Possible

by Laura Dubberke

(English 1102)

The Assignment: Write an MLA-documented, descriptive synthesis essay on “working” that must include sources from: *The Working Life*, *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*, Jones’s *Chicago Tribune* article, a personal interview, a food pantry observation, and an in-class guest presentation.

My mother and father have always taught me that I have to work hard to accomplish my goals in life. As a child my family was not rich by any means but my parents always worked hard to make sure that our family was provided for. While we may not have taken expensive vacations, worn designer clothes, or owned fancy cars, we always had food on the table, clothes on our backs, and a home to come back to each night. My father worked as a mailman for over thirty years and even though he is retired from the postal service, he still works full time delivering auto parts to mechanics. My mother has worked for several years raising my brother, sister, and me, managing a house, and working as an administrative assistant in the busy cardiology department of a hospital. Unfortunately, about four years ago, an injury left my mother unable to work, and my family realized how difficult it was, financially, to not have both parents working. For the past four years, my parents have been struggling to make sure that all of the bills are paid and, even though my parents’ income is technically above the federal poverty line, it has been very difficult. Without my father’s job delivering auto parts, my family would be eligible for government assistance, such as welfare, but my parents will not give up and let an agency take care of them. My parents have taught me, even when times are tough, we have to keep going and not give up. Even though poverty can be extremely difficult to overcome, through personal perseverance it is possible.

America’s poverty problem is becoming increasingly worse, especially since the majority of workers are shifting from the middle to the working class. Professor at the State University of New York at Stony Brook and economist, Michael Zweig, in an excerpt from the first chapter of his book, *The Working Class Majority: America’s Best Kept Secret*, evaluates the various classes to claim that income is the best way to distinguish the power in each class. Statistics from the 1996 U.S. Department of Labor report revealed that out of the 133.9 million people who were either working or unemployed but looking for work, 82.8 million were working class and 51.1 were middle class or above (Zweig 187). Prior to reading Zweig’s excerpt, the assumption might be made that most people in the United States are middle class; however, Zweig clearly explains that the majority of working people in America are part of the working class. Tim Jones, a *Chicago Tribune* national correspondent, discusses in his special report, “The Working Poor,” the issue that poor people in America are invisible. According to Jones, the federal poverty line is \$12, 490 for two people and \$18, 850 for a family of four (*Chicago Tribune*). The federal poverty level is unrealistic because people who make more than this level can barely survive. Statistics from the U.S. Department of Agriculture reveal that between 1999 and 2002, the number of Americans who are “food insecure,” which means they do not know how they will pay for their next meal, has climbed from thirty-one million to thirty-five million (Jones). These statistics are quite startling because no one should have to worry about not having enough food, which is a primary need of every human being; yet millions of Americans do every day.

Poverty does not discriminate against anyone. All different types of people can be struck by poverty, even if they were previously financially secure. Pulitzer Prize winning author David K.

Shipler, in his book *The Working Poor: Invisible In America*, examines, through personal testimonies, the problem of poverty in America. According to Shipler, just because people work particularly hard does not mean they are going to be able to overcome poverty, and this is represented through a woman named Debra Hall who worked extremely hard in a bakery for years yet did not financially benefit from it (46-50). The wages Hall received from her bakery job were barely enough to cover her expenses which, at times, caused her to use a store that sells the poor money before they receive their earnings. People who work hard should not have to live from pay check to pay check but, unfortunately, this is often the case. Jones describes a man, Danny Palmer, who, as a result of losing his twenty dollar per hour job as a welder, had to work at a Wal-Mart in Cheshire, Ohio, earning \$5.95 an hour and who lost his health insurance and had to visit a food pantry regularly (*Chicago Tribune*). In an interview with Paul Glynn, a regular visitor to the P.A.D.S. in Grayslake, IL, he explained that just two years ago he “never would have dreamed that [he] would ever have to visit a food pantry.” Two years ago Glynn, who is a single father of two children, lost his fair paying job with a construction company and now works at a grocery store for minimum wage. He finds it extremely difficult to pay his bills and support his children, so he visits the food pantry once a week to help with his problems. He is currently looking for a better job, but he has not yet found anything. These stories show how easy it is to have financial security and the very next moment to have nothing.

A variety of factors make it difficult for people in poverty to break free from the vicious cycle. Zweig states that only about two hundred thousand people are on more than one governing board in the eight hundred largest corporations, and approximately thirty-thousand directors are on two or more boards, forming a powerful class of people (181). Since Zweig argues that approximately two hundred thousand positions are available to become “captains of industry” and only about thirty thousand positions available to become part of the “ruling class,” is it feasible for any American to obtain one of these prized positions? Probably not because only a limited number of high position jobs exist in America, and since over one hundred thirty-nine million people are in the workforce, it is very difficult to acquire one of these jobs. Even a person highly educated and qualified for a desirable job, cannot become part of this highest class because simply not enough of these jobs exist. Americans are told growing up that they can become anything they want to become with a lot of hard work, but this is not always the case. In his essay, “Summertime Dues,” written for the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, author of three novels, critic, and literary editor of *GQ Magazine*, Walter Kirn argues that the lessons young people learn from working part-time summer jobs are valuable though not what he expected. In a personal anecdote, Kirn describes a summer job in which the task was transferring books from one floor of a college library to another; since Kirn and his fellow co-workers completed the job early, they decided to empty the shelves and begin again, teaching them the importance of acting busy in the workplace (364). Perhaps many working class Americans feel a loss of integrity while working in many low paying jobs. They may become cynical because they are not taken seriously and are often thought of as stupid or incapable based on their job title. Shipler describes a woman, Caroline Payne, who, despite being called a “self driven” motivated employee by her Wal-Mart supervisor, has never been able to progress in the workforce (51). Shipler states that a large portion of Americans stop believing that they can move up in the workforce, which causes them to gradually regress to welfare (51). When people have the mindset that nothing can change, it is hard for them to climb out of poverty because they no longer believe in themselves. It is difficult to overcome poverty because many factors are a part of it, including aspects such as low education, low wages, bad jobs, limited jobs, not enough savings, frivolous spending, bad housing, bad parenting, a lack of health insurance, and unhealthy households (Shipler 285). With so many factors contributing to poverty, people become caught up in the vicious cycle unable to find a way to break free.

Overspending and a changing work ethic have worsened America’s poverty problem. In the

essay, "Value-Free," written for *The New Republic* magazine in 1999, journalist and senior editor for the magazine, John B. Judis, examines the changes that have occurred in America's work ethic from the nineteenth century through the twentieth century. Judis states that in the beginning of the twentieth century, the Protestant idea of denying oneself had changed and industrial output had increased (358). Judis believes that because of an increase in advertising and a new accessibility to consumer credit, a new work ethic was created (359). America's constant advertising is another problem that needs to be addressed. Americans constantly see images, in magazines and on television, of expensive materialistic items causing people to feel as though they need these expensive items to fit into society. Judis makes sense when he explains that America's work ethics have changed in many ways since the nineteenth century Protestant ethic that preached saving money instead of spending it on recreational activities. People no longer had to follow the Protestant work ethic of denying oneself and their needs to spend. Perhaps we should go back to a time when denying oneself was important and overspending was not. Shipler explains that overspending can be a large problem for poor people like Sarah Goodell, a young mother of three who lives with her grandmother (33). While Goodell does not have enough money to fix her grandmother's broken shower, dryer, or washer, she does have enough money to buy a variety of toys, C.D.'s, and an expensive stereo and television set (Shipler 33). Many poor people today are not spending their money wisely and are actually worsening their poverty situation. If people, perhaps, spent money on essential items instead of on impulse buys, they would not be as far in debt.

The problem of poverty has always existed in America and while there are many programs in place that help poor people, no one has ever figured out how to completely solve the problem. Numerous food pantries exist across America, but because a large portion of seniors and working citizens do not earn enough money to buy food, the pantries have become overcrowded and there is not enough supply to go around (Jones Tribune). In a classroom interview, Bill Spearman, a volunteer at Loaves and Fishes, a food pantry in Naperville, IL, described how the food pantry operates. Spearman explained that the food pantry is a great way to fight the hunger problem in America and that many volunteers, two hundred people per week, are willing to help in the Loaves and Fishers food pantry; however, a main problem is there is not always enough food to be distributed. Many organizations and programs are being used to help poor people, such as America's Second Harvest, a Chicago based relief organization; welfare; Medicaid; food stamps; food pantries; and WIC. However, these programs do not solve the problem; they only help it. These programs were never intended to be long-term solutions to poverty, but currently that is how they are being used.

Many people, even though it seemed impossible, have been able to fight their way out of poverty and find a better way of life for themselves. Shipler explains that Richard Blackmon, director of options for people, which is a job-training program, is an example of someone who was able to get out of poverty (263-4). As a child, Blackmon lived in Cabrini Green, a Chicago housing project; was on welfare; and was constantly surrounded by drugs and violence. However, Blackmon attended law school, worked as a corporate attorney, and was a part of law practice in juvenile court (Shipler 265). According to Shipler, when the Tran family came to America from Saigon, within four months, three of the five family members were working jobs that paid the family \$42,848 per year combined (282). According to Shipler, the Tran family was able to succeed because of their strong work ethic, close-knit family, ability to find jobs, manage money, and never give up, even when times were tough (282). Talk show host, Oprah Winfrey, in the "Millionaire Woman Next Door," interviews various women who, through perseverance, demonstrate that it is possible to overcome poverty. In an interview with Winfrey, Rosie Herman, former manicurist and stay-at-home mom, showed that it is possible to overcome poverty ("Millionaire Woman Next Door"). After accumulating seventy-five thousand dollars in debt, Herman, who constantly cleaned her hands while caring for her twin babies, decided to develop a treatment, called One Minute Manicure, to cure her dry skin; she earned over

twenty-million dollars in profit (“Millionaire Woman Next Door”). These personal stories all show that it is possible, with personal perseverance, to overcome poverty. These people did not sit back and collect welfare or wait for the government to come up with a solution to end poverty; instead, they believed in themselves.

Poverty may always exist, but it is possible to get out of it. We cannot simply leave it up to the government to solve this complex issue. According to David K. Shipler, it is important that people develop not only “hard skills” but also “soft skills” (7). While the hard skills, like using a computer, are important to learn, it is also important that people learn “interacting with peers, following orders willingly...to get out of poverty, they have to acquire dexterity with their emotions as well as their hands” (7). Furthermore, it is important for parents to teach their children good work ethics. Parents should teach their children to have the mindset that anything is possible because if someone does not personally believe that it is possible for them to overcome poverty, then probably nothing else will help. Even though my family has been struggling to stay above the poverty level, the point is we have been struggling; my parents have not given up. My mother and father have taught me that even when times are tough, I have to keep going and find a way to persevere because no one else is going to be able to do it for me.

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