

# BROOKLYN\_BORN

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## My 3 days in a “welfare” hotel

Wednesday, July 31, 2013

Some years ago the principal of our school took a group of us teachers who were also department heads and curriculum coordinators to a conference in Baltimore which was about an hour’s drive away.

She got a “great deal” on a hotel which was “undergoing renovation” and within “walking distance” of the conference. We were dropped off by school bus to keep costs down further. Conference sessions were in the “Inner Harbor,” the city’s reconstruction of their waterfront.

We realized why the price was so cheap immediately on arrival, especially when the clerk at the front desk informed us that the Inner Harbor was to the right as we exited the hotel. “NEVER walk to the left!”

The reaction of my colleagues was varied. My roommate, the art teacher, loved the old building and kept pointing out everything from the unique ceilings to the doorknobs. The history teacher immediately called her husband to come get her.

This memory was prompted by my recent blog about the food stamp program and our opinions about recipients.

[www.sparkpeople.com/mypublicjournal\\_individual.asp?blog\\_id=5435930](http://www.sparkpeople.com/mypublicjournal_individual.asp?blog_id=5435930)

The hotel was occupied by large numbers of women with children. They had been displaced from their low cost apartments by the urban renewal of the area around the Inner Harbor.

In one room I observed several children sitting on a bed with a large bag of potato chips while watching TV. Ten days ago, after my granddaughter’s accident, that’s exactly what I was doing – comforting myself with mindless TV and potato chips (the entire can of Pringles). From what I’ve read here on SP I’m not alone in that type of reaction to a difficult situation.

What if my temporary situation looked permanent like that of the mothers in the hotel?  
What if nutritious, fresh food weren’t easily available? There wasn’t much outside.

I’ve noticed that attitudes toward the obese mirror attitudes toward those in poverty. People don’t want their tax dollars going to the “undeserving” and I’ve heard complaints about medical costs being driven up by the increase in obesity.

I have no idea if the mothers in the hotel were lazy or unintelligent or didn’t care about their children. Sadly, I know that obese people are often characterized as both lazy and stupid just like welfare or food stamp recipients.

SOME in BOTH groups DO have those characteristics, but we know from SP that those epithets do NOT apply to most. Personal struggles with obesity are well documented here. Are not the personal struggles

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to climb out and stay out of poverty similarly difficult? Assorted addictions complicate the problem further.

Of course, SOME people in BOTH groups are able to change their situation. Those stories are often publicized and held up as examples for all. That's as it should be. We need inspiration. However, even as we applaud success, especially of the biggest losers and longest maintainers among us, the stories of yo-yo-ing" continue.

Why don't "THEY" make better choices? That question has been asked about both groups. Here on SP we have shared our difficulties in making the right choices over time. Is there a parallel with those living in poverty?

I hope we can find some solution so that all children are able to eat healthy food regardless of the family they happen to be born into. They don't get to choose their parents.

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**DRAGONCHILDE**



Thanks so much. As a mom who works hard for her family, but still needs a little extra help from government programs, it does my heart good to see someone not villifying those who are on such programs. Yeah, there are abusers, but honestly, most of us are just victims of the economy, or luck, or life... and most of us work. Hard.

It's easy to start complaining about "only let them buy healthy food" - but how do you do that when you live in what's known as a "food desert" - where there are no healthy options nearby? Do we just let those people starve because Rice a Roni isn't as healthy as brown rice and fresh vegetables?

Judge not, lest ye be judged.

And for those of you pointing to the things people on government programs own? Don't begrudge my children their ice cream once a month. I use coupons, like everyone else, and carefully manage my money. You don't know how, why, or when they got those treats. You don't know if those single mothers got their iPads on credit, or if they were gifts from family, or if they were donated, or how they got them. I own computers... that I paid for myself, using credit at first, which I've since paid off.

2870 days ago

Comment edited on: 8/5/2013 9:31:22 AM



**SPEEDYDOG**



What a great blog. You have many insights. I also enjoyed reading the responses. I have been to Baltimore's Inner Harbor several times. Not far from the beautifully restored row houses is an area called the "Combat Zone".

I made the mistake of taking a walk on the fringes of the Combat Zone. I was propositioned by a couple of prostitutes. There were derelict vehicles on the street. There were people just sitting on the steps of their run-down row houses. Most of these people wore dull expressions.

I beat a hasty retreat.

I am sure that Baltimore has "cleaned" this area. Likely threw out the poor tenants and sold the row houses to a developer that restored the old buildings. The developer sold the row houses to Yuppies.

Sounds to me that they moved the old tenants into your hotel.

Thanks, Bruce  
2870 days ago



**MBSHAZZER**



Wow, great post - this one and your one on food stamps! I have a few thoughts to share. I feel like I have some good insight as my BF and I own 25 rental properties in a low income area and several of our tenants receive Section 8 vouchers and food stamps.

1. First off, I think it is DISGUSTING that corporations like Walmart get tax breaks to come into a community because they provide "jobs" - and then those jobs pay so little that their employees still receive food stamps and medicaid. Corporate welfare is what that is!

2. The welfare system is not set up in a way to encourage people to engage in positive behavior. Our tenants with Section 8 are all single mothers but there is ALWAYS a man around. They will NOT marry the guy because his income will mess with their benefits. The woman provides a heavily subsidized home and food stamps and the guy provides all of the extras such as very nice cars, iPhones, takeaway food, etc. I had one tenant that was getting a full ride on the rent. Section 8 changed her subsidy so she was supposed to pay \$35 out of a \$1,425 monthly rent. She told me, "I've never paid rent in my life and I'm not starting now"

3. We went over to look at a fridge that wasn't working for another tenant that gets Section 8 and food stamps. Her 4 children were sitting on the couch playing with iPhones or Pads or whatever. In the freezer was a box of Haagen Dasz ice cream bars that I saw at the market the day before cost \$6 for 4.

There is a need for assistance but the system is broken. There needs to be a big change so that receiving assistance actually makes one's life better, instead of making it worse.

2872 days ago

Comment edited on: 8/3/2013 10:30:03 AM



#### BOILHAM

It is not justice to advocate taking someone else's money to do what you want with it. That is theft. I still believe in the goodness of my fellow Americans, that they will do what is right. Well, except most politicians, that is.

2872 days ago



#### HAYBURNER1969

I love this from SaraWalks!

"To me, it is fundamentally unjust to reward some for their 40 hour week with less than is required to survive, and to reward some for their 40 hour week with more than anyone should require, ever."

Amen!

2872 days ago



#### SARAWALKS

Thank you for a really thoughtful blog on an important subject.

Re. BOILHAM's comment:

Davy Crockett lived in a world when people still said things like this:

"Mr. Speaker, I have said we have the right to give as much of our own money as we please. I am the poorest man on this floor. I cannot vote for this bill, but I will give one week's pay to the object, and if every member of Congress will do the same, it will amount to more than the bill asks."

It was a smaller world, in which generosity was still valued. The question, I believe, is "what kind of society do we want?" And also a question of "what is justice."

Davy Crockett writes: "we must not permit our respect for the dead or our sympathy for a part of the living to lead us into an act of injustice to the balance of the living."

This is a matter of proportion. In a society in which many if not most of the less-skilled jobs pay less than is required to provide the basic essentials of life, and in which many more profit from these low wages as they see the result in improving company balance sheets and thus in earnings for stockholders, the question becomes: "what is injustice in regard to the many who consider it absolutely essential to be able to afford second homes, second or third cars, apartments for their college-age children, etc. etc. etc." To me, it is fundamentally unjust to reward some for their 40 hour week with less than is required to survive, and to reward some for their 40 hour week with more than anyone should require, ever.

It is a question of balance. If Davy Crockett had seen the wealth that surrounds us, and dared to speak to it, would he have been laughed off the floor of the House of Representatives? Today he would probably not have even been elected, never mind listened to with respect. As a poor man, he couldn't have afforded to run...

2873 days ago



#### BOILHAM

Nowhere in the constitution is it written that the people of the US should be taxed in the name of charity. We've eagerly jumped on that slippery slope, and now find ourselves in serious financial trouble. Still, we cannot stop ourselves from spending beyond our capabilities.

We're a nation of folks who are shocked when someone like me suggests we should not give (by way of forcible taxation) to feed, house and in every way support those less fortunate than ourselves.

Davy Crockett said, in response to suggested appropriation of funds for a widow:

"Mr. Speaker—I have as much respect for the memory of the deceased, and as much sympathy for the sufferings of the living, if suffering there be, as any man in this House, but we must not permit our respect for the dead or our sympathy for a part of the living to lead us into an act of injustice to the balance of the living. I will not go into an argument to prove that Congress has no power to appropriate this money as an act of charity. Every member upon this floor knows it.

We have the right, as individuals, to give away as much of our own money as we please in charity;

but as members of Congress we have no right so to appropriate a dollar of the public money. Some eloquent appeals have been made to us upon the ground that it is a debt due the deceased. Mr. Speaker, the deceased lived long after the close of the war; he was in office to the day of his death, and I have never heard that the government was in arrears to him. This government can owe no debts but for services rendered, and at a stipulated price. If it is a debt, how much is it? Has it been audited, and the amount due ascertained? If it is a debt, this is not the place to present it for payment, or to have its merits examined. If it is a debt, we owe more than we can ever hope to pay, for we owe the widow of every soldier who fought in the War of 1812 precisely the same amount.

There is a woman in my neighborhood, the widow of as gallant a man as ever shouldered a musket. He fell in battle. She is as good in every respect as this lady, and is as poor. She is earning her daily bread by her daily labor; but if I were to introduce a bill to appropriate five or ten thousand dollars for her benefit, I should be laughed at, and my bill would not get five votes in this House. There are thousands of widows in the country just such as the one I have spoken of, but we never hear of any of these large debts to them. Sir, this is no debt.

The government did not owe it to the deceased when he was alive; it could not contract it after he died. I do not wish to be rude, but I must be plain. Every man in this House knows it is not a debt. We cannot, without the grossest corruption, appropriate this money as the payment of a debt. We have not the semblance of authority to appropriate it as a charity.

Mr. Speaker, I have said we have the right to give as much of our own money as we please. I am the poorest man on this floor. I cannot vote for this bill, but I will give one week's pay to the object, and if every member of Congress will do the same, it will amount to more than the bill asks."

2874 days ago

Comment edited on: 8/1/2013 8:51:49 AM



**MERRYMARY42**

another great blog,

and the part about making good choices, we don't always want to, usually we are sorry we gave in to that little demon telling us to go ahead but sometimes it is just plain good to eat that can of



pringles (that is exactly why I don't have them in my house and quite often, it is a lack of knowing anything different and lack of knowing how to prepare something better.

as I said something to think about again. Thanks

2874 days ago



**WATERMELLEN**

What a thought-provoking blog: just look at all the substantive comments you've generated!!

It is so easy to blame and point the finger and chastise: one of the ways of identifying "us" as the worthy people (not just the lucky people) and "them" as the not-deserving. So we don't need to feel any guilt or responsibility to help in ways that would be meaningful or respectful.

2874 days ago



**DR1939**

Excellent post. One of things we know is that poor nutrition in infancy and childhood results in lower IQ as well as many health problems. Our failure to fully fund WIC and school lunches costs us in dollars and other ways, e.g., prisons, welfare. And I agree that we are all too quick to condemn a group rather than to see the individual situation.

2874 days ago



**MJZHERE**

Well last night I sat in my recliner and finished off the container of icecream that sat in my lap - response to the stress of my dd accident. Not best of choices - but then haven't we all made choices which weren't the best. I truly believe the answer lies in walking alongside others in love...compassion pushes us to action.

2874 days ago



**CD13545024**

They are really in a catch 22. and a lot of the obesity in this country come into play here. Very sad, but good that you brought it to our attention....this conversation needs to continue in our communities.

2875 days ago



**PHEBESS**

The whole issue of food availability and cost (as well as education and nutritional choices) is so complex - and so contingent so much more than what meets the eye. Differs regionally, and I swear how we metabolize foods depends on our ethnic heritage.

BUT - I just had to laugh when you described the art teacher being enthralled with the architectural details of the building, despite the neighborhood and the plethora of welfare families in the hotel.

Because it sounds exactly like something I, retired art teacher, would do! Just the way we literally SEE the world!

So thank you for that little lighthearted moment in what really is a serious and important discussion.

2875 days ago

**GINIEMIE**

Thanks for giving us food for thought. I do not believe in birth control, and I certainly wouldn't mandate it for anyone. I do think that a woman/man on welfare should be made to go to classes to learn about certain things. I would hope that some of the lessons would help them find a way to climb out of their black hole.

As the eldest of 10 we lived rather poorly, or should I say my parents chose to spend the money on "important" things like our education. We were fed many home made foods, of course we lived in the country, and daddy had us all working in the garden. We were blessed with some apple trees, plum trees and two non-producing peach trees-they were on the property when my parents bought it. Of course one of our lesser appealing things were we slept on army style bunks, 6 girls in one room and 4 boys in another. The boys closet space was old school lockers. Daddy built one for the girls.



2875 days ago

**MISCHAKEO**

It is a complex problem..Even people who have jobs but are paid minimum wages need food stamps. I think we should raise the minimum wage to help these people get out of poverty.

2875 days ago

**AMARILYNH**

A very thought provoking blog. It is SUCH a complicated issue and certainly one with no easy solution. I think DMeyer4 has one good suggestion - that food stamps only be valid for healthy food choices. Again, no easy solution. How do we teach ambition? How do we break the cycle of hopelessness? Very sad!!

2875 days ago

**FITFOODIE806**

This brought tears to my eyes. You've hit on several complex issues. I have not lived in poverty or even been morbidly obese so I do not truly understand what either entails; the stress, the sadness, the hardships.

I teach at a Title 1, urban school. It's very easy for us (meaning middle class, white people) to say who should have children and how many at that! and who "deserves" welfare and what they should spend it on. But if have never lived the experience, we just don't know. We simplify the problem by saying what food stamps should be spent on. We can't tell people to buy produce, but then not provide the produce.

"Don't ever go left." Wow. What about the families that LIVE to the left? My guess is that there are not markets or even chain grocery stores to the left. I guarantee there are plenty of liquor stores. These children live under constant stress, which affects brain development. On top of that they come to school hungry and sleep deprived: not ready to learn. Yet they are expected to perform. And when they don't, we label them failures and close their school. And the cycle continues.

I am doing my best to educate young children on the benefits of fitness and nutrition. I focus more on fitness because it is an easier reality.

Thanks for making me think so early on this summer morning ;)

2875 days ago

**ONEKIDSMOM**

There are many elements to success... many of them internal. The question is: how do we spread the internal attributes around. Elements like "hope", the feeling that it is possible to climb out of the situation (be it poverty or obesity). Selling hope makes charatans rich at times.

I read of some research into "learned helplessness" where dogs in cages were punished whenever they moved beyond a particular square with an electrical shock between them and their food source... whenever they reached toward the food, they were shocked. Then the shock was removed, but the dogs would do nothing but just lie there. They had "learned" helplessness, learned hopelessness. Cruel experiment? Absolutely. But instructive.

For those of us who "fell" for the sellers of false "hope", we may have some "learned helplessness" going on. For those in poverty, who tried and failed to get out, the same may be true.

Hope, and real help, are hard to come by... and as you say, SOME seem to be able to climb out and stay out... but it's not an all or an easy thing. Deep thoughts for a pre-work morning. I don't have answers, just another piece of the puzzle. And as you point out, for children, even more puzzling, as they do not get a choice, and their caretakers are the deciders for them, often.

This story highlights the "don't go that way, ever" aspect of fear... how do you get your children out and active if you live in an unsafe area?

Oh, no, I'm getting started on one of my rants... I shall stop. But I'm glad this is being THOUGHT about, and pondered. Because we all need a little help discovering genuine hope, and acting on desire and overcoming "learned helplessness". We are NOT victims. But the message has to get to each individual.



2875 days ago

Comment edited on: 7/31/2013 7:21:04 AM



**TRAVELGRRL**

I believe the root of the problem is people having children they cannot afford.

In a day and age where birth control is readily available, there is no excuse for having multiple children if the parent(s) have no means to support them. They immediately go on welfare, food stamps, WIC, no-cost breakfast and lunches at school, etc. etc. etc.

The vast majority of people in poverty in this country are CHILDREN, and this is a direct result of babies born out of wedlock. The fact that it's now socially acceptable to have children outside of marriage contributes greatly to this problem.

2875 days ago

**GINA180847**

There is a lot to think about in your blog. I was brought up so poor and of course made a lot of foolish choices but eventually was able to drag myself out of the muck. My ex chose to continue in the poor choices and I could only leave him behind. My children have mixed it up somewhat with some good and some not so good choices. But one of the children of my second husband had a huge inheritance which he chose to blow on silly stuff and is now living in his car with equally foolish wife. We buy them food but my hubby refuses to let them live with us as it would make us beyond crazy. It is so true that children have no choice to whom they are born.

2875 days ago

**LINDAKAY228**

Children do need access to healthier foods. Many years ago, when my kids were young (youngest 3 1/2 at the time, oldest living with me was 11) I was going through a divorce. I had 5 kids, but my 14 year old wanted to try living with his dad, because he thought if it was just the 2 of them he could have the relationship with his dad he never had. Didn't work out well but that's not the point here. I live in New Mexico, and it is overall a poorer state, with lots of minimum wage jobs. The small town I live in is the same. I decided I had a choice to go to college and be on "welfare" and live in a low income apartment, or get a minimum wage job and with 4 kids living with me still need to supplement my income with food stamps and low income apartment. I chose to go to college (I was 35 years old then) because the resources for low income would be needed for a certain period of time and not for the rest of my life. So I have lived in that world. I didn't get any child support so my only income was the small welfare payments I hated it, but it was a temporary means to a better end. This started in 1989 and I graduated in 1992. I took summer classes to graduate in 3 1/2 years. Then I was able to get a better job with a degree. It paid more than minimum wage but not a lot. Then I got another job a couple of years later and slowly was able to get completely off all benefits. But I lived in the midst of low income. I had to a large degree most of my teenage and adult life anyway, because of the area we lived in. But I made poor choices in buying food at times with food stamps. Like I said, this was back in the early 90's and I didn't know what I know now. But I also made some healthy choices. It was really hard to stretch the stamps out over the month to feed all of us. Somehow we made it. This is long I know, but just a little more. One of the things that bothered me the most was attitudes of some women I went to school with or lived by. At that time, once the youngest child was 6 years old, the mother had to go to school or get a job. Of course, some chose to have another child when their youngest was close to that age because they really didn't understand that there was another world out there. They had been raised by mothers in the system and so on. My youngest child was 3 1/2 and I didn't have to do anything, but that wasn't my goal. But as I went to college, I would meet some women (not all, some really took advantage of the chance they had) who complained that they had to do one or the other and figured school was easier than a job but that's the only reason they were there. That would upset me so much that they didn't realize how great an opportunity we had. Our schooling and books were paid for by grants. We had the same benefits as if we were doing nothing. Not a lot, but it enabled us to survive and work toward a better future. Anyway I've had experience in that world and know how sometimes the parents can't give the kids toys and other things that other kids get and so they try to give them treats of junk food. They often really don't have any clue that their "treats" are bad for the kids. I'm not condoning what they do, but trying to explain a little of the mindset. Education on health, fitness, effects of obesity, etc have come a long way since the early 90's, but still needs more to go.

2875 days ago

**LANNIEMANUEL**

2875 days ago

**DMEYER4**

My opinion on food stamps are they should be for people really in need and should be used for healthy food not junk food. People should not be able to purchase junk food with food stamps. I work very hard every day and do not buy junk food and could not even afford it even if I wanted to which I do not. They should have more programs to train people in poverty to help them overcome life problems and how to make better choices for their children. I am not a person to judge other people because there might be situations we do not know about. Thank you for giving me something to think about. Have a great day

2875 days ago

**CD12146214**

Very thought provoking post! I think part of the obesity problem is that farmers do not get compensated the way that they should. As a result, we are seeing farms disappear here in Canada at an alarming rate due to funding etc. The less our farmers produce from the land, the more expensive fruits and vegetables at the store; which in turn, makes them out of the reach of those at the lower end of the disposable income scale.

I often wonder what happens to kids that are on our breakfast program in the summer when school

is out. Yet in order to be part of the solution, I ensure that our food cupboard at school is always stocked with nutritious food for those who have "forgotten" their lunches. We use that term as aids in alleviating the shame the child might feel.

As you say, finding healthy solutions for kids is the key and if we can provide it through our schools that is the first step.  
2875 days ago




**DIANNEMT**

Wow--you are SO right. Without money--and therefore without much hope--what can THEY do? There are no decent grocery stores near the Inner Harbor....  
2875 days ago



**NANNABLACK**

  
2875 days ago



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