

# The Rich and the Poor, Connected

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**...your poor are so very poor! This should not be. On the one hand you have wealth, and great luxury; on the other hand men and women are living in the extremities of hunger and want. This great contrast of life is one of the blots on the civilization of this enlightened age.**

**You must turn attention more earnestly to the betterment of the conditions of the poor. Do not be satisfied until each one with whom you are concerned is to you as a member of your family. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Abdu'l-Baha in London*, p. 91.**

If you want an education about how your government works and what your country's values truly are, just do some work with poor people.

My family first started doing that in Santa Monica, California when our children were small. In our privileged, often materialistic culture we wanted to give our kids a sense of what it was like to be poor, so my wife and I and our three sons began participating once a week in a feeding project for the homeless.



A friend who owned a high-end restaurant started the project. She saw homeless people with nothing to eat; and every night her restaurant threw food away. She couldn't stand that contradiction, so she canvassed her fellow restaurateurs, and they all agreed to donate leftover food. It was a feast! Every Saturday we would serve dinners on the City Hall lawn. People were incredibly grateful, and not only for the food—the project made the people we fed feel cared for and loved, something they didn't experience very often.

But the neighborhood around City Hall didn't like it. A few of them complained bitterly, fearing that the presence of poor people might somehow diminish their property values or promote crime or lower their neighborhood's status in some way. The pressure mounted for us to stop the feeding program.

But wait, we asked—doesn't City Hall belong to everyone in the city?

Apparently not, because the City Council, under pressure from realtors and nearby homeowners, soon made our feeding project illegal. They threatened arrests and jail for anyone who attempted to commit the heinous crime of feeding poor people in a public space.

So we were forced to move. We found a building with a kitchen that could accommodate the feeding program, and even though people had to walk two miles to get there, we rented it and kept going.

And guess who made that possible? A small handful of Hollywood celebrities paid the rent. I won't identify them here, because they made their contributions with no desire for recognition or publicity, but you would immediately recognize their names. It turned out, as I talked to each contributor, that every one of them had once been poor themselves. Their talents as actors and musicians had made them very wealthy, but they hadn't forgotten what it felt like to go hungry. Their generosity, and even more their lack of any desire to publicize their contributions, made me realize that the fundamental force we need to eliminate our society's gross inequities between the very wealthy and the very poor is love:

**Strive, therefore, to create love in the hearts in order that they may become glowing and radiant. When that love is shining, it will permeate other hearts even as this electric light illumines its surroundings. When the love of God is established, everything else will be realized. This is the true foundation of all economics. Reflect upon it. Endeavor to become the cause of the attraction of souls rather than to enforce minds. Manifest true economics to the people. Show what love is, what kindness is, what true severance is and generosity.**  
– Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 239.

This experience, along with many others like it that I encountered in a quarter-century of homeless advocacy and service projects, absolutely convinced me of the spiritual veracity of the Baha'i approach to the question of wealth and poverty:

**...in the divine teachings equality is brought about through a ready willingness to share. It is commanded as regards wealth that the rich among the people, and the aristocrats should, by their own free will and for the sake of their own happiness, concern themselves with and**

**care for the poor. This equality is the result of the lofty characteristics and noble attributes of mankind. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Foundations of World Unity*, pp. 43-44.**