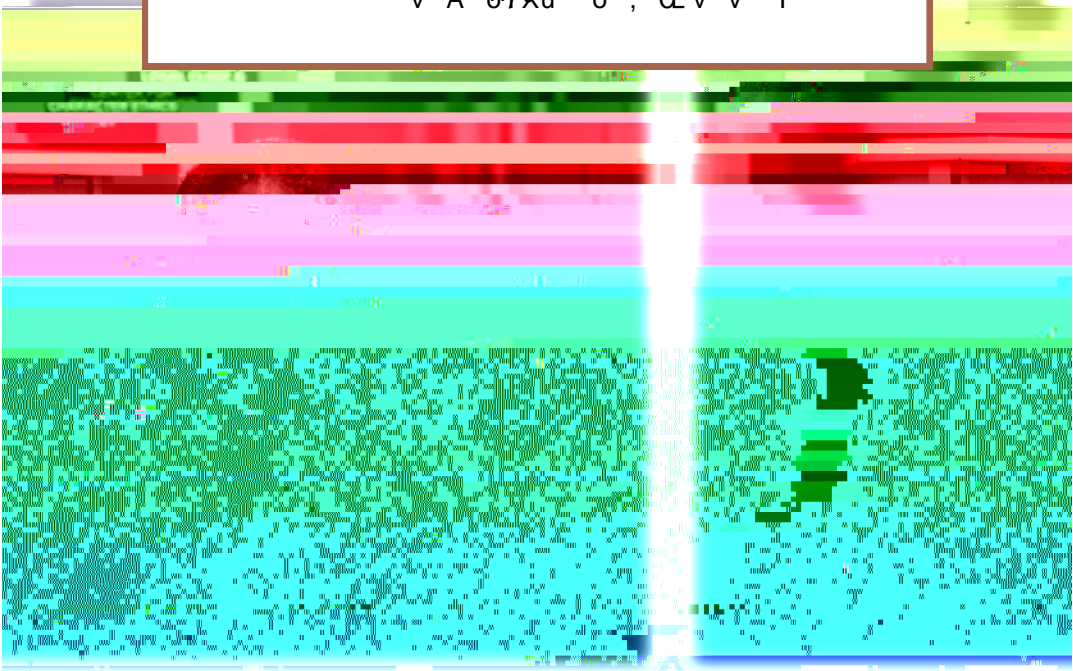


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Transcription By Ione Hoy

This article is transcribed from a talk given by Ismael Hernandez at Concordia University Wisconsin's Liberty, Virtue, and Economics (LVE) Summit on September 19, 2019. Ismael Hernandez is the founder and president of The Freedom & Virtue Institute. The Institute exists to challenge the paternalistic, condescending, and statist way of attending the problems of poverty in America. His writings have appeared in various newspapers and Crisis Magazine, World Magazine, and the Washington Times. He is the author of the book *Not Tragically Colored: Freedom, Personhood, and the Renewal of Black America*. Ismael is an affiliate scholar at Acton Institution.

I... like to start... by telling you a little bit about myself... I was born in the 1960's in Puerto Rico into a Communist household. My father was the founding member of the Puerto Rican Communist party... My father used to tell me that America was the enemy of the human race. It was the sacred duty of all good persons to destroy America. I believed him; he was my dad ... Deep inside of me I wanted what my father was offering. It was something different, intoxicating, and it gave me the sense that we have this capacity to change the world... There are many other stories I can tell you, seeing my mother crying in the middle of the night and running out of the home to talk to men that were always inside cars parked in front of our home, and making deals. I later discovered they were FBI agents always checking on my father, and I hated them... I blamed them for the poverty of Puerto Rico in the 1960s. I blamed them for the battles between mom and dad... I joined him in fighting America and destroying liberty because capitalism was evil ...

Mom did not care about socialism, but she would sneak me and my brothers to go to mass ... "Religion is the opinion of the people that keeps you thinking of heaven while the capitalists are having a good time here and now." That is what my father used to say. So, he would not have allowed ... us to go to mass. I developed a sort of double consciousness of Marxism and Jesus. Of the Kingdom and the revolution at the same time. It was a very difficult time for me ... Even when I grew up, I went to the University of Puerto Rico to study political science because I was going to intellectually defeat America. After that, I decided ... as a good catholic and communist to join the ...

I would say the best place in the world to be a Marxist is the United States, where you can think like a Socialist; you just do not have to live like one. My family was a real Socialist, Marxist family. That was the identity... You are a drop in the great wave of revolution, and apart from that wave your life has no meaning...

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But what is poverty?... Lack [of something]?... This has always been my answer and that is normal... When we define poverty that way, we are defining the problem and missing the person. Because if it is lack, I have to lose what? Fill the hole of need and there will not be any more poverty. But is that what we experience? No. We experience that the lack remains, and then I.. have to come again and again to fill the hole... The problem is... we are the protagonists of the story. And we have to change that exercise. We see poverty more as ... an opportunity for us than [for the] person who has the capacity to mobilize himself...

When we see poverty in that light, we change things, and more important, why do not we ask this question?... What makes me wake up in the morning and want to be engaged with the world?... You know when you see someone who is thriving. No one has to tell you. You know that person is going places. And you can see someone who... is not trying and you know... that person is going down because that person is not... mobilizing himself to take on human fulfillment. That is what human flourishing is...

I am not interested in eliminating your poverty. I am interested in you flourishing as a human being, because in that process you will find... answers to the problems of poverty...

Let me give you an example... Six years ago, I went to a massive distribution of school supplies... in the black community... I saw a sea of black and brown kids getting the free school supplies from a small gathering of white people. And I say, "I do not like this. Why is it always us on the receiving end? I want to be on the giving end." ... Why do not we make this... work for them? Why do not we make them productive, so they can be not needy?" ...We have to renew our minds to see the idea with a different pair of glasses... Opportunities are right... in front of us... We are more interested in fighting for the trail that is not in our power. And we do not see the trail that is right in front of us that we can walk...So we... see people as possibilities not as problems to be solved...

In the year 2010, we had about 46 million people who were in poverty in America... There are over 50 million now... Now do not blame the government for it... It is our fault. We have surrendered that responsibility

You know what Christians used to do in the 1800s when an able-bodied man came for help? They would give an axe to the person, and say, “Go out and cut some wood because we have women here who are elderly... They need wood for winter... You are going to show me whether or not you are ready to change your life, and then we will talk.”

So, they had to do something for the benefit of somebody else to demonstrate that they were ready to change. If you went... to the soup kitchen, a chef would make the food intentionally not that tasty... They wanted to keep you fed but they wanted you to hate that condition. Because that was a springboard to mobilize you to search for something better...

Let me finish with this... even school supplies, they did not appreciate... So, they did not treat them with respect... Now what they do, they join our clubs, they work in an entrepreneurial internship, earn money, and... we go at the end of the year on a massive field trip to a bank. We hand them their earnings for the year at the door. They go and open their own savings account, and now they can buy their own school supplies.

They can spend dollars and say... I earned this. This is good. Do you know what happens when we do not do that? The people begin to learn that the normal way of meeting human needs is that we stand in line, and someone else meets those needs for you... That is so horrendously against human dignity, and that is what I really wanted to communicate to you. Respect the poor... as full human beings capable of changing their lives by the choices they make. Be... present in that wonderful journey of self-realization.