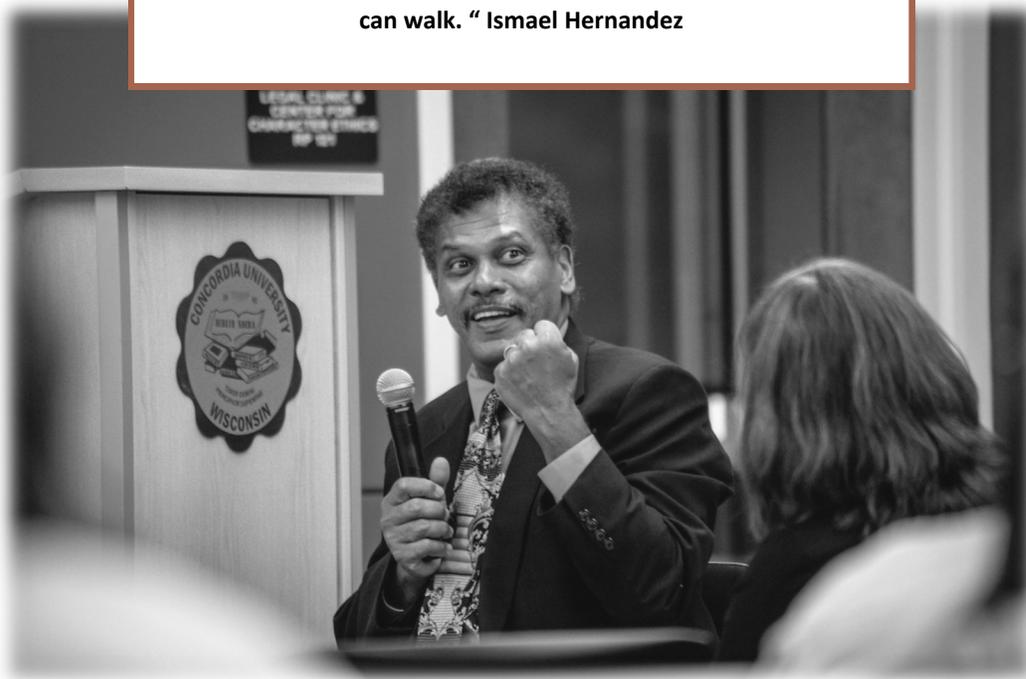


"We are more interested in fighting for the trail that is not in our power and we don't see the trail that is right in front of us that we can walk. " Ismael Hernandez



True Compassion and a Better Way to help the Poor, Ismael Hernandez

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 District Jesuit Order...

This is the mid-1980s. Liberation was brewing in Central America and the District was the forefront of that influence. I was supposed to be going to school for philosophy at the University of El Salvador, right there on the border between Nicaragua and El Salvador. And you can imagine I am going to the heart of the revolution ... I was studying with the masters of liberation and theology ... Liberation and theology started ... in the universities in Europe... Then they brought these ideas and scattered them into barrios of Central America and convinced the people that this was the way. But I was not to be part of that influence.

The only thing I remember is that seven guests were murdered in El Salvador in 1987. I was going to be living in the home where they were massacred. Out of concern for us, they decided not to send us to Nicaragua. They decided to send me to Oregon in the United States, and I did not want to go to Oregon. I told them, "That is crazy. I am not going to go to the gut of the monster," as we used to call America ... so I decided to ... go back to ... Puerto Rico. Some friends of mine ... convinced me to come to America anyways to further my studies ... I landed at the University of Southern Mississippi, of all places. You can imagine this black, Puerto Rican boy, who hates America in Mississippi ... It was a real cultural shock ... At the same time, my lungs were filled with the breath of freedom when I came to America ... For the first time in my life, I had an opportunity to challenge the safe assumptions of my ideology ...

Certain things began to happen to me that are not squared with the safe assumptions of my ideology.... I knew how to intellectually understand and explain Marxism because I had never lived in the context of a different reality. Ideologies are something strange... You and I can be looking at the same reality and we will see different things... It is like a pair of glasses you put on yourself... If you take off your glasses... and grab a different pair... it is difficult, especially when you are a Marxist...

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...

Sometimes we do that with the poor... We are labeling people and making all kinds of assumptions based on that label... We do not see them as unique individuals made in the image and likeness of God with the moral capacity of self-realization. And that is what I began to discover... that there is a different way of being human. The first thing that happened to me was... I had good grades and one day they called me to the Dean's office and offered me a full internship... and I said, "This is not supposed to be happening." I hate their guts, and they are rewarding me...

I began to see they had rewarded what I had accomplished. I began to understand the connection between reward and accomplishment. That is so necessary if we are going to respect the poor... They are esteemed human beings capable of making choices for their lives... They are the most powerful antidote against their poverty... Sometimes we look at the problem, then our program, and then the poor... We instrumentalize the poor for the satisfaction of our own ego or our own emotions... but it is not supposed to be about yourself. It is supposed to be about them... We manage people's poverty, and we keep them more or less well fed, but still below independence...

Sometimes we treat the poor the way we treat our pets... You give them a bowl of food, and the pet comes every time and eats its food. And you give him a pat on his head and it makes you feel good... Get out of the business of trying to help them, because you will do more hurt than... good. You have to really believe in people.

Believe that they have what it takes to challenge themselves for a better life... You do not go there, grab the poor, and rescue them, and bring them to the promised land... It is not our job to save people. It is to be there with the one who suffers as he walks a journey that only he can walk. It is his responsibility. He is doing his calling. God has given him or her what it takes to live that life... God has given us the capacity to reason, that we can know the truth... I can put my hands in the dirt, and I can recreate my environment. I become a co-creator with God himself...

I am a proud black man too and my wife, a black Puerto Rican... from the South side of Chicago... But we also use the ideas of race and sex to be biased. My... daughter... had good grades in a good catholic school and she was accepted into a university... She was invited to the scholars' night to explore going to this university. We were so proud of her. My wife went... to the scholars' night, and... she saw a sea of black and brown. And she thought to herself, "... There are no white scholars in this university." They assumed she was common... They did not see her accomplishments... They tried to solve the problem; they missed the person. That is what happens when we attempt to help the poor the wrong way. We try to solve the problem. We miss the person. We try to fill every hole of need, but if you fill every hole of need...

Why bother getting out of poverty? I become a passive recipient of your magnanimity... You are using me, in an instrumental way, to feel good about yourself. And I remain as your dependent and I remain down...

I love this quote... "God has made us free and when the systems we have created reflect our nature, people prosper." I believe that with all my heart... What is then our nature? Our nature is to reasonable and be creative... Imagine if you have a nonprofit ministry... and instead of telling people how you may help them... you tell them... "I am so glad to see you." "We were waiting just for you." Suddenly the person who had the need, is needed. That is changing the exercise very radically... Now you are involving them in the process of meeting their own needs. They see themselves again as able...

Another thing we should never do, is blame the poor for their poverty. We have created these systems that incentivize poverty and we blame them for responding to the systems we have created. It is because we do not create systems that reflect the nature of the human person. If you do that, people will prosper.

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 towards each other because it is easier to connect the government to it, and then blame the government for not doing it. The government is not doing a good job, because it is not... supposed to be dealing with people because only people can love people...

Do not tell me about your existential needs... I know that you need food. I know that you need clothes... but we are more than mouths to be fed and bodies to be clothed. We are human beings that... cannot be saved by the government... This is what is happening in America... You work with welfare? Then, here is... the check. Here is the reward for your poverty...

We spend about \$900 billion a year in public alleviation in the United States from the federal government. And with the states and the nonprofits, it's about \$1.3 trillion a year in poverty alleviation, but... we have more or less the same percentage of poverty that we had 40 years ago. Obviously, money is not the answer... If a family is going to receive more help, that family has to get weaker and weaker... so more benefit comes to that family.

So, what is the incentive? To be strong or to be weak? The incentive is to become weaker. Why do not we change those incentives? Let's say that you are on welfare, and you get a job, we are going to give you more money as a reward for that accomplishment. If you keep that job for one year, more money will come your way. If... you get a two-year degree, more money. You are becoming stronger and less money is needed by you. Eventually, the money will disappear, but now you have a job, you have a degree. You do not need the system anymore. The system is incentivizing strength, instead of incentivizing weakness.

We do the same thing at our churches. They come to us... and all their needs are met by one program in our church, and then they... exit... And we do not see them anymore, we probably do not even see them on Sunday... So, we are mirroring the same, impersonal, bureaucratic ideas and concepts of democratic states... People themselves are primary...

We need to look at the poor as unique people with personhood and a point of view...

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.