

FORUM

Recognize your blessings



Nigel Alston
Motivational Moments

"As I grow older, I pay less attention to what men say. I just watch what they do."

— Andrew Carnegie

One thing often leads to another. For example, I read the story that follows (author unknown) before an annual on-site visit by the advisory board of the Kate B. Reynolds Poor and Needy Charitable Trust recently to three agencies it has funded. It helped change my perspective about what we take for granted.

According to the story, two old friends bumped into each other on the street one day. One friend looked downhearted, almost on the verge of tears. It was cause for concern for the other friend.

As you would expect, he was curious, asking, "What has the world done to you, my old friend?"

The sad fellow responded with an unexpected answer: "Let me tell you. Three weeks ago, an uncle died and left me \$40,000."

"That's a lot of money."

"But you see, two weeks ago, a cousin I never even knew died and left me \$85,000 free and clear."

"Sounds like you've been blessed..."

"You don't understand!" he interrupted. "Last week my great-aunt passed away. I inherited almost a quarter of a mil-

lion." Now he was really confused. "Then, why do you look so glum?"

"This week ... nothing!" That's the trouble with receiving something on a regular basis. Even if it is a gift, we eventually come to expect it. That is until you get a different perspective of what's real.

As we go about our daily routines during this holiday season, shopping for presents, attending holiday parties and enjoying family, friends and good foods, it is easy to lose sight of little things that make a significant difference.

During this time of year, when we should be recognizing our blessings, we often find ourselves caught up in the activities of the holiday season. After the site visits mentioned earlier, we were reminded how blessed and fortunate we really are.

Our on-site visit to Cancer Services became more than a tour, and update on how grant money was being used and people were being served. We sat around a table, in an intimate setting, listening to a breast cancer survivor share her story. She informed us of how her pride almost prevented her from asking for help, the financial challenges she faced, being out of work and then on long-term disability (at a reduced salary), and how thankful she was for an agency, like Cancer Services, to be there for her in the time of need. She is back at work now and also volunteers her time at the agency, helping others.

"We don't have anything to complain about," I thought, as

another board member made a similar remark. Especially during this time of the year, when parking spaces become a premium at shopping malls, as shoppers hurriedly drive around looking for any available spot, preferably a space close to the entrance, for a quick in and out.

Long lines form to get gifts wrapped. Tempers sometimes flare as shoppers search for that special gift, arriving in the early morning hours to storm stores for special deals. Some of us shop until we drop or run out of money, whichever comes first, looking for that special present.

Others volunteer their time at the Second Harvest Food Bank of Northwest North Carolina. As we walked about the facility, three developmentally disabled men, Curtis, Bill and Billy from the ARC of High Point, were being escorted in. I understand they have been showing up for almost 10 years now to volunteer their time.

The tour took on a different meaning after witnessing them put stickers on canned goods while another securely held a box, with both hands, for another person to take items out of it. You could see the joy in their faces.

Santa Claus is working overtime in department stores and shopping malls, listening to children (and some adults) share what they want under the tree. And they are mailing letters to the North Pole, in anticipation of Santa and his crew sliding down the chimney with all the goodies on Christmas Eve.

Not all children, though, especially the ones at Horizons

Residential Care Center, an intermediate care facility for the mentally retarded (ICFMR). Horizons, our last stop of the day, is a home for disabled children that operates 24 hours a day, staffed by people who are underpaid, which has led to a turnover rate as high as 60 percent.

Well, the visits are over. It's time to put up the tree (if you have not already) and decorate it with your favorite trimmings, stockings, colorful ornaments and bright lights. For some families, that process is a tradition. Candles adorn windows as fine jewelry complements a woman in a Sunday dress. Front and backyards for some become a live canvas with colorful scenes of the season.

Unfortunately, for too many, a few days after the holiday is over, their gifts become just another item they have received — another thing we have come to expect.

Make an effort today to recognize the blessings you've come to take for granted. Think about Curtis, Bill and Billy; the cancer survivor who herself lost a sister to cancer and now helps others; and the children who are being cared for each and every day at Horizons. They don't take anything for granted. They just show up each day and count it a blessing.

There is a reason for the season.

Nigel Alston is a radio talk-show host, columnist and motivational speaker. Visit his Web site at www.motivationalmoments.com.

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Economy still in the doldrums



Julianne Malveaux

Guest Columnist

Don't believe the happy talk about the economy — unless you're on Wall Street. New home sales are up, business revenues are rising, and any broker worth her salt is able to put a positive spin on the way things are. The Dow Jones Industrial Average has been ticking upward and the NASDAQ has revived itself from the mid-2002 doldrums.

But millions of folks are dizzy from the economy's failure.

One in eight of all Americans lives below the poverty line. Poverty rose by 1.7 million in 2002, from a rate of 11.7 percent to a rate of 12.1 percent, according to the Census Bureau. There were 34.6 million poor people in the United States last year, and the number is likely to be rising. Median income dropped, too, from \$42,900 to \$42,409. The reduction seems small until you break it down.

Overall income dropped by 3 percent for African-Americans, down to \$29,026. The poverty rate for African-Americans rose to 24.1 percent, which means that nearly one in four African-Americans lived in poverty in 2002.

Like black income, Hispanic income fell by 3 percent (to \$33,100). The poverty rate among Hispanics was 21.8 per-



cent.

Analysts are talking about the upswing in the economy, suggesting job numbers are "lagging" indicators that are likely to recover when stock markets do. Tell that to the people who are trying to live through recovery.

Nationally, President Bush's request for \$87 billion for Iraq crowds out money for social spending, for urban rebuilding and for education here at home.

At the state level, cuts in block grants from the federal government mean cuts in state services. Tuition costs for state schools are rising in the double digits, and state legislatures are cutting services for the poor,

the elderly and the disabled.

At the local level, there is little more than trickle down, and the trickle comes drop by drop. Most cities struggle with hunger and homelessness and now know that there are scant federal funds to apply to unmet needs, and many cities are having to cut back even on police and fire departments.

The income and poverty data are just the tip of the iceberg.

Equally disturbing are data on the increasing number of Americans who lack health insurance. A year ago, 14.6 percent of the population lacked health insurance. Now, this is up to 15.2 percent — or 43.6 million people — who lack

health insurance. Many lack health insurance because they have temporary or part-time jobs. Meanwhile, many health-related stocks are up.

The analysts are speaking of recovery, and poverty rates are rising.

Wall Street is fiddling while Main Street burns.

Julianne Malveaux, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology-trained economist, is author of several books, including "Wall Street, Mean Street and the Side Street: A Mad Economist Takes a Stroll" (Independent Publishers Group, 1999). She can be reached at pmproj@progressive.org.

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