

The Spokesman Review

*Children have been robbed, says **Marvin Olasky**, and no government program can repay them for what's been lost: fathers, faith and a respect for hard work.*

Welfare is the gift that keeps on taking

Creators Syndicate

As Congress debates welfare reform, liberal journalists are muddying the discussion by describing welfare, in the words of one headline, as "a gift to the nation's children." Why can't we, instead of proposing new "gifts" to poor children, think through ways to give back the gifts they once had?

Most poor children once had the gift of a father living with them, a powerful figure who offered a mysterious combination of love and discipline. Poor fathers in generations past often had hard and boring jobs, but they almost always stuck by their families because they were the difference between their kids eating and going hungry. This is important: No matter what happened to the father during the day, he had the satisfaction of coming home and seeing the difference his work made.

This changed in the 1960s, when government offered a new gift: entitlement programs that made it economically advantageous at times, in the short run, for women to become mothers without husbands. In the great movie "It's a Wonderful Life," George Bailey (Jimmy Stewart) contemplates suicide when told that his family would be financially better off if he were dead. The government told hundreds of thousands of young men in entry-level jobs that their families would be



**Marvin
Olasky**

just as well off financially if they ran off. Many did.

The second gift most American children received until the 1960s was a sense that work is valuable not just to bring home the bacon but to separate man, made in God's image, from walking bacon — from hogs, content to wallow. Some Americans derived that understanding of work from the description in Genesis of what people did all day even before sin entered the world: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." Others saw work as the moral equivalent of war, with people showing what they were made of as they fought for success in the marketplace.

This belief in the centrality of work changed in the 1960s, as Americans tutored by liberal academia and media came to believe that shining shoes, taking in laundry or flipping burgers were demeaning activities. Many also viewed higher-paid tasks as merely a way to keep adults straight-jacketed in offices, when they should be free like children to play all day. Middle-class folks often tuned in and dropped out for a short period without any dire results, but irresponsibility among the poor often left them far behind. Those freed from demeaning work ended up as degraded, long-term welfare recipients.

The third gift for previous generations of children was teaching — at home and at church or synagogue, supplemented by school — that acknowledged the existence of God and the sense that our purpose in life comes from him. In the 1960s, no one had statistical evidence of what difference that gift of purpose made in the lives of

children; today, we do. Numerous studies show that religious involvement and belief among young people cuts rates of out-of-wedlock pregnancy, juvenile delinquency, crime, drug use and alcoholism by half or more, with socioeconomic indicators held steady.

It makes no sense to deprive children of the gift of knowing that history has a purpose, that our humanity does not result from chance mutations, that even mathematics reflects the order of an intelligently designed universe. It makes even less sense for children to be stuck in schools that don't recognize God when the schools add to their moral despair an inability to teach the basic tools for employability: reading, writing, arithmetic and a modicum of manners. But maybe a lack of respect for God inevitably translates into a disrespect for man, created in God's image.

In any event, children already troubled by the absence of fathers and low regard for work languish further without knowledge of their Faith in heaven.

How does all this add up? Remember the controversy over the song, "Short people have no reason to live"? Apart from these three gifts, almost every person becomes a short person; meanwhile, government grows and towers over us all. So beware of politicians bearing gifts, and certainly beware of receiving new ones by special delivery, while the old ones remain lost or stolen.

■ Marvin Olasky is a senior fellow at the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and editor of *World* magazine.

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