

Colbert King: Thank you, Senator.

Leila McDowell referred to Senator Harris's run for the presidency. I remember that very well. Senator Harris said that he was going to win because he had the support of the little people and so after the election reporters asked Senator Harris, What happened, Senator? You had the support of the little people. He said, Oh, they were there, they turned out in large numbers, except that they were little people and they couldn't reach the lever to pull the vote, if I recall it. So, that's why he's here and not revered in some Presidential library.

We were asked to address two questions today. Why has the quantity and quality of media coverage, the poverty, inequality and race since the Kerner Commission Report declined? You might get an argument from some in the media to say that there hasn't been that much of a decline in media coverage of poverty, inequality and race since the sixties. You won't hear that argument from me.

I believe something has changed, but I also noticed the same kind of changes taking place in the way in which we have covered events in the developing world. The observations I made during my experience as a non-journalist, a chief of policy and vista where we sent volunteers into poor communities in the seventies. And also my experience with the World Bank and the Treasury Department working on international development issues.

My observation about this change is reinforced by my sixteen years with the Washington Post as an editorial writer and as a columnist. My observation of why this has happened is going to sound like heresy to my colleagues in the media, but it's this.

We now have people who write about and report on poverty, inequality and race who know nothing personally about those issues. They lack the real-life experience of what it's like to be poor or black or brown or to be discriminated against because of color. And I submit that there's a difference, a huge difference between knowledge gained personally and knowledge acquired through the classroom or through news clips or through a dispassionate observation from a safe distance.

I'm also suggesting that personal experience informs the vigor and urgency that we bring to the subject that all those things have a qualitative impact on what we write and report on. For some time I've been struck by the language we now use in stories written about poverty and inequality. Today's stories are peppered with references to statistical indices, growth rates, legal definitions, absolute statistical terms. Poverty as someone said, is more than just a shortage of money and race is more than just a color of a wide receiver.

Stories that are chock full of bloodless statistics tell little of what it means to be poor. What it means to have your spirit robbed by a denial of a chance to earn a decent living. What it means to be denied a chance to feed your family. What it means to not be able to function as a parent as you know you should. Poverty is, after all, not where you rank on an income scale. Poverty is knowing that your father has a wife and three children, has been laid off his job as a laborer at the Naval gun factory, has taken a job shoveling coal that at \$19 a week, has him coming home covered in soot.

Poverty is taking a seat at the kitchen table and watching your mother place in front of you a plate of fried apples and fried potatoes and onions and knowing that that's your dinner. And watching her turn away from you, turn her back to you and see her shoulders hunching and she's crying because that's all she could put on the table for her children. That's poverty.

Poverty is wearing sneakers with holes in them and having your father find something that he could paste on the bottom of your shoes to cover the holes and you're wearing half-sole sneakers. And all your friends are laughing at you.

I know all those feelings because those are my experiences. Today's reporting by and large misses the social and the psychological consequences of poverty, inequality and race. Am I suggesting that today's reporting should glorify misery? Of course not, but I'm suggesting the stories of today don't really reflect what the undereducated and what the unskilled, the poor and the desperate are really up against. That's because the people writing these don't know themselves.

Missing from much of today's journalism, and kept away from the public at large, is the pain and the rage that's associated with being poor or black or brown in American society. And the difficulty in escaping from poverty and the debilitating impact of racism. I'm going to leave you with a current example, which I try to make my point.

Two weeks ago I wrote a column headline, A Christmas Wish for Carver Terrace . It's was about a neighborhood in Northeast that had once again experienced a rash of shootings. The column ran the same day the Washington Post wrote a story about Carver Terrace. My column, however, was based on a story based on a story published in the Washington Afro-American, written by a reporter named Valencia Mohammad. What caught my eye in the Afro story was a feature of seventy-five children in the neighborhood, Charles Young Elementary School, walking through the community, protesting those shootings, shouting the slogan, Put the guns down, stop the violence. We love life and we want to live, too. The Post story, which came a week after the Afro story, the news story, focused on police coverage of the neighborhood, suggesting that Carver Terrace would be a good place for the new Police Chief to try her hand at community policing. The Afro story, in my judgment, captured the real pain in Carver Terrace. What violence means to little children at a time when children their ages all the across the country are getting ready for the holiday season. And all those little children at Carver Terrace could think about was to demand, We want to live.

Now the Post reporter, I happen to know, is a very competent reporter and lives in the suburbs. Felicia Mohammad, I also know. She knows the pain of those children because she has lost two children herself to violence. And what I'm suggesting is that reporters bring to their work some of their own experiences and I suggest also that those experiences are reflected in the work that they do. And we don't have enough of that kind of journalism now because we don't have enough of journalists like that who have those experiences.

The Afro story was based on, my column was based on that story, drew a strong reader response, including individuals who called and said, We want to volunteer, we want to bring money, we want to do something for those kids. That was because they knew about those kids and that's because the Afro caught that.

The Post story was another dispassionate piece turning around police coverage. And that's the difference and I'd like to take this up a little bit more when we get into the discussion, probably defending myself against my colleagues in the press, but that's all right too. I'm an old man.

(Laughter.)