

For richer, for poorer

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [December 9, 1998](#) issue

About a dozen years ago, I took a bunch of rich kids from midtown Atlanta on a mission trip to rural Kentucky. To be fair, many of them did not know they were rich. Because they had only each other to compare themselves to, they thought all teenagers received cars for their 16th birthdays and went on cruises to the Bahamas for their senior class parties. Without exception, they were well fed, well educated, and well supplied with everything their hearts desired. The only thing they were missing was an experience of poverty, so we drove to Appalachia to get them one.

Ten of us met in the church parking lot one hot August morning. After exchanging sticky hugs with anxious parents, we piled into our late model Ford rental van and drove to the land of tar paper shacks with skinny dogs in the yard. Our destination was Barnes Mountain, where a rural mission had been set up in an abandoned farmhouse in the woods. Our job was to finish chinking the log cabin that would serve as a home for the new minister in the fall. We slept in an old chicken house across the clearing.

Although I did not realize it at first, part of the reason for our being there was to draw local people out of the woodwork. Come see city slickers trying to mix 50-pound bags of mortar in a rusted-out wheelbarrow! Watch rich kids climbing rickety ladders with loaded trowels in their hands! The ploy worked. Within 24 hours we had attracted three helpers from the pool of local teenagers, including one particularly sweet boy named Dwayne.

Dwayne was as fascinated by our stories as we were by his. We told him about the dining room at the top of the Marriott Hotel that goes around once every hour. He told us about his uncle, who had fallen into an abandoned coal mine and broken his hip. We told him about the Braves. He told us about the pet barn owl he had raised from a baby.

About halfway through our time on Barnes Mountain, Dwayne made the ultimate sacrifice: he let the Atlanta girl who had been teasing him all week give him a city haircut. Before our eyes, he was transformed. One minute he was a farm boy with

shaggy bangs and the next he was one of us, with a layered look that made him grin in the mirror and duck his head.

He worked with us, played with us, ate with us--and at the end of the week he prayed with us, as we gathered for a communion service before we got into our van to go home. There was lots of crying that Saturday morning. We had discovered a kind of community with one another that many of us had not known before and no one wanted to let go. When we got to the prayers of the people, they lasted a long time. Everyone had a chance to say something, and quite a few of the prayers had to do with what a privilege it had been to serve the poor people of this area, upon whom we asked God's special blessing.

Under the circumstances I guess that sort of thing was predictable, but later I learned that it was also tragic, at least for Dwayne. When I asked him afterward what was wrong, he said, "You all called me *poor*! I swear, I never thought of myself that way until you said it. I have all these woods to run around in. I have a grandmama and a granddaddy who love me. I got a whole shed full of rabbits I can play with any time I want. Does that sound poor to you? It don't sound poor to me. You all should save your prayers for someone who needs them."

No one meant to hurt him, but our language gave us away. We thought of "the poor" as people other than ourselves. We separated ourselves from Dwayne in our prayers, and our partiality stung him to the quick. By setting him apart like that, we withheld the one thing he really wanted from us, which was simply to belong--not one up or one down but just one of us--a member of the community, not a mission project.

Our prayers also exposed our narrow definition of poverty as not having enough money (does anyone ever have enough money?), along with our false assumption that wealth does not hurt people the way poverty does. It was not entirely our fault, either. Most of us learned to pray in church, where the general consensus seems to be that the poor and the oppressed are in much greater need of prayer than the prosperous and the privileged. The Beatitudes notwithstanding, it is difficult for me to remember ever hearing a petition for the rich who have received their consolation.

Ever since Dwayne raised my consciousness, I have wondered what it would do to the Christian community to hear ourselves praying for the rich as earnestly as we

pray for the poor.

For those in bondage to their assets, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For those whose success does not satisfy, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For the entitled and the comfortable, for the isolated and the elite, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

All I know for certain is that prayers like that would confront me in ways that prayers for the poor never do. If I heard them over and over again, they might even lead me into another reality where categories such as first and last, rich and poor, lost and found, began to change places in my mind. At the very least, I am pretty sure Dwayne and I could pray those prayers together, and both say "Amen" at the end.