

Whatever

THIS MACHINE MOCKS FASCISTS

UNCATEGORIZED

Being Poor

SEPTEMBER 3, 2005 JOHN SCALZI 571 COMMENTS

Being poor is knowing exactly how much everything costs.

Being poor is getting angry at your kids for asking for all the crap they see on TV.

Being poor is having to keep buying \$800 cars because they're what you can afford, and then having the cars break down on you, because there's not an \$800 car in America that's worth a damn.

Being poor is hoping the toothache goes away.

Being poor is knowing your kid goes to friends' houses but never has friends over to yours.

Being poor is going to the restroom before you get in the school lunch line so your friends will be ahead of you and won't hear you say "I get free lunch" when you get to the cashier.

Being poor is living next to the freeway.

Being poor is coming back to the car with your children in the back seat, clutching that box of Raisin Bran you just bought and trying to think of a way to make the kids understand that the box has to last.

Being poor is wondering if your well-off sibling is lying when he says he doesn't mind when you ask for help.

Being poor is off-brand toys.

Being poor is a heater in only one room of the house.

Being poor is knowing you can't leave \$5 on the coffee table when your friends are around.

Being poor is hoping your kids don't have a growth spurt.

Being poor is stealing meat from the store, frying it up before your mom gets home and then telling her she doesn't have to make dinner tonight because you're not hungry anyway.

Being poor is Goodwill underwear.

Being poor is not enough space for everyone who lives with you.

Being poor is feeling the glued soles tear off your supermarket shoes when you run around the playground.

Being poor is your kid's school being the one with the 15-year-old textbooks and no air conditioning.

Being poor is thinking \$8 an hour is a really good deal.

Being poor is relying on people who don't give a damn about you.

Being poor is an overnight shift under florescent lights.

Being poor is finding the letter your mom wrote to your dad, begging him for the child support.

Being poor is a bathtub you have to empty into the toilet.

Being poor is stopping the car to take a lamp from a stranger's trash.

Being poor is making lunch for your kid when a cockroach skitters over the bread, and you looking over to see if your kid saw.

Being poor is believing a GED actually makes a goddamned difference.

Being poor is people angry at you just for walking around in the mall.

Being poor is not taking the job because you can't find someone you trust to watch your kids.

Being poor is the police busting into the apartment right next to yours.

Being poor is not talking to that girl because she'll probably just laugh at your clothes.

Being poor is hoping you'll be invited for dinner.

Being poor is a sidewalk with lots of brown glass on it.

Being poor is people thinking they know something about you by the way you talk.

Being poor is needing that 35-cent raise.

Being poor is your kid's teacher assuming you don't have any books in your home.

Being poor is six dollars short on the utility bill and no way to close the gap.

Being poor is crying when you drop the mac and cheese on the floor.

Being poor is knowing you work as hard as anyone, anywhere.

Being poor is people surprised to discover you're not actually stupid.

Being poor is people surprised to discover you're not actually lazy.

Being poor is a six-hour wait in an emergency room with a sick child asleep on your lap.

Being poor is never buying anything someone else hasn't bought first.

Being poor is picking the 10 cent ramen instead of the 12 cent ramen because that's two extra packages for every dollar.

Being poor is having to live with choices you didn't know you made when you were 14 years old.

Being poor is getting tired of people wanting you to be grateful.

Being poor is knowing you're being judged.

Being poor is a box of crayons and a \$1 coloring book from a community center Santa.

Being poor is checking the coin return slot of every soda machine you go by.

Being poor is deciding that it's all right to base a relationship on shelter.

Being poor is knowing you really shouldn't spend that buck on a Lotto ticket.

Being poor is hoping the register lady will spot you the dime.

Being poor is feeling helpless when your child makes the same mistakes you did, and won't listen to you beg them against doing so.

Being poor is a cough that doesn't go away.

Being poor is making sure you don't spill on the couch, just in case you have to give it back before the lease is up.

Being poor is a \$200 paycheck advance from a company that takes \$250 when the paycheck comes in.

Being poor is four years of night classes for an Associates of Art degree.

Being poor is a lumpy futon bed.

Being poor is knowing where the shelter is.

Being poor is people who have never been poor wondering why you choose to be so.

Being poor is knowing how hard it is to stop being poor.

Being poor is seeing how few options you have.

Being poor is running in place.

Being poor is people wondering why you didn't leave.

571 thoughts on “Being Poor”

mythago says:

SEPTEMBER 3, 2005 AT 12:27 AM

Thank you, John.

uhura says:

SEPTEMBER 3, 2005 AT 12:39 AM

Thank You.

Bruce Arthurs says:

SEPTEMBER 3, 2005 AT 12:59 AM

“Being poor is hoping the toothache goes away.”

That one raised some memories. Back during my Army stint, I met a fair number of people who had joined the military, not for the training, not for the steady income, not for three hots and a cot each day, not for the GI Bill, but because *the military would repair or replace the teeth rotting away in their head*. Having bad teeth is one of THE major indicators of living in poverty.

Soni says:

SEPTEMBER 3, 2005 AT 1:02 AM

Whatever

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UNCATEGORIZED

"Being Poor," Ten Years On

SEPTEMBER 3, 2015SEPTEMBER 3, 2015 JOHN SCALZI 93 COMMENTS

Ten years ago today, I put the essay "Being Poor" on Whatever (<https://whatever.scalzi.com/2005/09/03/being-poor/>). I wrote the piece, as I explained later, in a rage at the after-events of Hurricane Katrina, when so many people asked, some genuinely and some less so, why many of the poor people didn't "just leave" when the hurricane smashed into the Gulf Coast and New Orleans flooded. I wrote it not to offer a direct explanation but to make people understand what it was like to be poor, as I had been at various times in my life, and could therefore speak on with some knowledge. The piece wasn't about how people *became* poor, or why there *were* poor — simply what it was like to *be* poor, and to then try to get through one's life on a day-to-day basis.

I posted it because I had to. I was in a rage at what was happening in New Orleans in 2005, but I was also sick, literally physically sick about it, and for days I couldn't understand why. I had no direct connection to New Orleans and there was no one there I considered a friend, and other, equally terrible disasters had hit the US before and had nowhere near the same effect on me. Ultimately I began to realize the difference this time was that I was aware how differently the disaster affected people along economic lines, and how the lack of useful planning and response to the disaster essentially punished New Orleans' poor.

I was not of New Orleans and I was not of New Orleans' poor. But having been poor in my life, I remembered the difficulties being poor imposes, the lack of options it offers, and circumstances it presents, when no way through is a good one. I had been there in my life, and the lack of understanding I saw radiating out from people about the situation made me sick almost to the point of vomiting. I had to do something or I felt like I would explode.

We had donated money, of course. But it wasn't enough. So I sat down to write something, anything. What I came up with was a list of things from my personal experience and from the experience of people I knew in my life about poverty and what it was like to be in it. Later some people said the piece was a poem, and I can see that, and they might be right. At the time that wasn't part of my thinking. I just wanted to get what was in my brain out into the world. I cried as I wrote it, putting the rage and sickness I felt into words. Then I posted it up on Whatever.

And it ended up going everywhere.

It was reprinted in the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Dayton Daily News* and dozens of other newspapers. It was linked to and pasted onto hundreds of Web sites. It was read out loud on the radio. It was shared in emails and mailing lists. Eventually it made its way into textbooks and other teaching materials. Churches and religious groups by the score asked permission to use it. In an age before Facebook and Twitter (and even MySpace, really), the piece went massively viral. I encouraged this, of course. As famously "pay me" as I am, "Being Poor" is one piece I have never taken money for. I allow it to be freely distributed and when people ask about payment, I tell them to donate to a local hunger or poverty charity. It's meant to be shared and read, and read as widely as possible.

It continues to be read, a decade on. There hasn't been a year since it was posted that it hasn't been one of the most visited entries on Whatever; this year, it's currently the third most-read piece on the whole site. Year in and year out, people find it, or come back to it. This makes me very happy.

Which is not to say that people didn't find ways to try to pick it apart. When the piece came out, I didn't go out of my way to note that the piece was based on my own experience, so a number of people questioned the veracity of the piece, and my right to write it. When I did make it clear that the piece was largely based on my own experience, some folks then wanted to maintain that I hadn't *really* been poor, or that "American" poor is not really poor compared to the poverty elsewhere in the world, or they would focus on one particular bit in the piece and declaim how it was in some way inauthentic, therefore throwing out the whole piece. Others simply wanted to blame the poor for being poor in the first place.

There is of course not much to be done in those cases. I lived my poverty; I don't need other people to decide whether I was poor enough for them. The American version of poverty may be "better" than poverty elsewhere, but it's bad enough, both objectively and in context. And while I understand some people prefer to believe poor people deserve the poverty they're in, I know it's not true, or at the very least, is such a small part of why people are poor. I didn't *deserve* to be poor when I was a child; I just was. The people I know now in poverty aren't there because it's some sort of cosmic or karmic justice; they work hard and try to better their lives. But the fact of poverty is: It's a rough climb out, and a steep fall back, and it's not as if everyone starts out in the same place.

That said, I admit to being an imperfect vessel to speak to poverty in America. I have been poor in my life. I am not now, nor have I been anything close to poor for my entire adult life. In fact I am on the opposite end of the spectrum. You can even say that in many ways my life encapsulates the Horatio

Alger "rags to riches" American Dream narrative that we have embedded into our national DNA: Scrappy ambitious kid takes his chances and makes a few breaks for himself and comes out on top. It can happen to you too!

Except the thing I know that gets elided here is that I'm one of the very few "rags to riches" tales I know of. Anecdote is not data, and the data says that it's tougher to move up the socio-economic ladder here in the US than it is in most other industrialized nations (<http://money.cnn.com/2013/12/09/news/economy/america-economic-mobility/>). Not impossible, and I am here to speak to that. But tougher. And I am here to speak to *that* too — because I know the breaks that I caught, including the fact that I got a scholarship to attend one of the best college preparatory high schools in the country (<https://www.webb.org/>), which I attended while simultaneously living in a trailer park. I was launched into the ranks of the socio-economic elite and I haven't come back down. But I also know that not every kid in a trailer park gets the break I did, a break contingent on one school deciding to let *me* in, not a state or national will to make things better for poor children in general.

I have been poor, and am not. That makes me not the best spokesman for poverty. But I continue to see poverty, where I live and in the lives of people I know, and I am in a position where when I talk, people often listen. So this is a thing I will continue to speak on.

And it is a reason why I'm glad "Being Poor" continues to be part of the conversation on poverty. For what it's done and what it continues to do, I'm proud to have written it. It's one of the best things I've ever written.

93 thoughts on ““Being Poor,” Ten Years On”

Fogeyman says:

SEPTEMBER 3, 2015 AT 1:51 PM

Preach it, John. I've been there too.

Being poor is being unemployed in one of the most depressed parts of the country.

Being poor is being grateful for WIC and food stamps, just so you can feed your family of five, and yet, still being ashamed you need them.

Being poor is being grateful that you finally managed to land a minimum wage job at the sawmill, working your ass off in all kinds of weather with no heat and no air conditioning.

skinnyandsingle says:

SEPTEMBER 3, 2015 AT 1:52 PM