

The Bootstraps Myth

One of the most foundational aspects of the American myth is the perpetuation and veneration of the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality. We love a story of someone who comes from childhood poverty and, through some magical combination of grit, hard work, and God’s favor, achieves greatness. There’s a reason that J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* is a best-seller that Ron Howard adapted into a major motion picture.

At their best, stories like that inspire people to look beyond their immediate circumstances. They dig deep into their wells of internal resolve, seek out and take advantage of available resources. This helps create financial stability for themselves and their families. These things do happen; otherwise, the trope would not exist. However, as is almost always the case, reality is vastly more complicated than best-selling memoirs or Hollywood blockbusters would have us believe.

Growing Up Poor: The Lifelong Impact of Childhood Disadvantage

[Study](#) after [study](#) has shown that people who are raised in impoverished circumstances have a very difficult time escaping poverty as adults. In a study published by the National Center for Children in Poverty, [Wagmiller and Adelman](#) write, “Poverty rates for adults who were poor during childhood are much higher, especially for those individuals with high levels of exposure to poverty during childhood.”

There are myriad reasons that people who experience poverty as children face seemingly insurmountable obstacles in trying to rise out of it as they enter adulthood. They tend to have attended under-funded schools and lived in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Additionally, their parents may have had fewer resources to invest in them. Because of these childhood disadvantages, young adults who grew up in poverty often do not have ready access to the kinds of social and professional connections. These connections help so many of us to move ahead in life relatively frictionlessly.

People who experienced poverty as children and are unable to escape it as adults are then forced to raise *their* children in poverty. The cycle perpetuates itself.

Our Spiritual Call to Action: Turning the Tide on Generational Poverty

The issue of childhood poverty and its insidiously self-perpetuating nature is a seemingly intractable one. However, there are things that we can do to help move the needle. We can donate to programs like [BackSnacks](#) that provide food to help fill the gap during times when school breakfasts and lunches are not available. We can volunteer with organizations like [Agape Youth & Family Center](#) or [LaAmistad](#) who tutor students attending underfunded schools. This helps better equip children to successfully apply to colleges and trade schools. We can lobby our representatives to change systems that perpetuate the cycle of poverty.

We are not helpless. In fact, as people who have vowed in our [baptismal covenant](#) that we will, with God’s help, respect the dignity of every human being, we are uniquely qualified, equipped, and, in fact, duty-bound, to use the resources at our disposal to help all of God’s children partake of the abundance of creation.



The Rev. Colin Brown (he/him) is a past Treasurer on the ECF Board of Directors and is the Head Chaplain, Upper and Lower School at The Lovett School.

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