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M A R V I N O L A S K Y

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The Tragedy of American Compassion.

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FOREWORD

By Amy L. Sherman

SEVEN-YEAR-OLD JAMAAL ran out of our ministry center, hefting two sacks even bigger than the grin stretching across his face. “Look what I got for my grandma!” he shouted at me, pulling up breathlessly and digging into one of the bags. I admired the collection of fancy bath soaps and reveled in his delight in being a giver.

Jamaal had been working hard for months in our ministry’s after-school tutoring program, earning Blue Bucks for good behavior, consistent attendance, and homework completion. Now it was December, and time for our annual Christmas Store. There Jamaal and other kids could use their Blue Bucks to purchase presents for their friends and family members. In years past, Jamaal’s family was one of many from his inner-city neighborhood who’d be “adopted” by some better-off, typically white family from the suburbs at the holidays. The “haves” would pull into the neighborhood and unload their Santa bags for the “have-not” kids, feeling so good about their compassion that they typically didn’t notice the parents’ mixed emotions. The Christmas Store approach returned dignity to the community. Now kids were givers as well as receivers; now there was pride among parents who could affirm their Blue-Buck-wealthy children for their hard work and accomplishments.

I’d borrowed the idea for the Christmas Store from a similar model practiced at the Center for Urban Missions (CUM) in Birmingham, Alabama. Run by Reverend Gerald Austin, CUM works among residents of the city’s largest public housing complex. Austin grew up with eight siblings and a single mom in the projects but got out because his mother refused to make peace with poverty. Shaped by her faith and ethics, Austin is a firm believer in hand-ups. “What families need is not a handout to make them comfortable in their poverty,” he argues. “Rather, they need to be challenged, equipped, and inspired to become everything God created them to be.”

Rev. Austin has looked backwards in order to plan his current approach to poverty fighting. His childhood experiences with a deter-

mined mom committed to hard work, thrift, tough love, neighborliness, and faith in a living, active Jesus form the foundation of the convictions by which he runs CUM today. Marvin Olasky has similarly looked backwards in order to present advice for today's attempts to assist the poor. *The Tragedy of American Compassion* explores the wisdom of saints gone before in order to define an approach to benevolence that is both biblically faithful and effective.

Digging through the stories of innumerable charity agencies in the 1800s, Olasky uncovers the keys to effective compassion—that is, the kind of help that actually helps. This is the compassion that is personal, relational, accountable—the kind that helps people escape their poverty, not just manage it better. And it's the kind of compassion that's expensive—not necessarily in dollars, but in time and emotional energy. It's the kind of compassion nineteenth-century benevolence guru Octavia Hill advocated—one that seeks not just to *help* the poor but to *know* them.

This compassion has a very hands-on touch. Like the Good Samaritan, it gets up close and personal rather than tossing canned goods and a religious tract to the wounded traveler across the street. It emphasizes bonding with the supplicant, assuming there's no real way to assist apart from sharing in his suffering and learning enough about his situation so as to identify genuine, long-term solutions.

It's the kind of compassion that takes “the theology of the one” seriously. I've been using this little phrase since meditating on the character of Jesus as it's revealed in Luke 4:40. That verse reads: “When the sun was setting, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and, laying his hand on each one, he healed them” (*New International Version*). Since Jesus was planning on getting up before dawn the next day (see verse 42), one could imagine a more efficient way to handle the townspeople's wounded. What about a mass healing? Jesus came to earth with every heavenly authority and power in His hand. He could have stood at the doorway to Simon's mother-in-law's house, waved His arms over the crowd, and pronounced them all well. Zap—a two-second cure for the whole group, then a nice relaxing chat with the disciples, and early to bed. But that wasn't Jesus' way. Luke tells us that Jesus healed everyone *one by one*. For Jesus, healing was a personal business. For Olasky and the nineteenth-century poverty fighters *Tragedy* teaches us about, true compassion can only be a personal business.

These principles seem unassailable, until one realizes how often congregations ignore them in practice. The number of churches with

commodity-based benevolence and food pantries is, sadly, greater than the number with relational ministries that seek friendship with poor families and offer opportunities for personal and community development. Effective compassion is rare because it takes a lot of time. It's just so much easier to give money instead. To all of us in our tendency toward such selfishness, *Tragedy* confronts us with this nineteenth-century guideline for evaluating any scheme of help for the poor: "Does it make great demands on men to give themselves to their brethren?"

That's an uncomfortable query that I, for one, would love to avoid. It shines a spotlight on why, in our personal lives, we too often equate material generosity with compassion. It reveals why, in our public policy, we too often define compassion as increased government welfare spending. It's the kind of burr-under-the-saddle question that makes most of us normal, still-too-fleshy Christians irritable. And it's exactly the right question for every Christian to ask of ourselves and of our church when it comes to judging how well we're living up to Jesus' call to love our neighbors.

Tragedy has made effective compassion by the church more possible, for at least two reasons. The first is that it provides practical instruction on what works: re-affiliating people with family where possible; developing deep relationships; insisting on accountability; moving from relief to development (eschewing handouts in favor of hand-ups); discerning the different forms of aid, encouragement, and discipline needed in responding to supplicants of all sorts; assisting the able-bodied poor with employment; and connecting, or reconnecting, all supplicants with God. The second reason is that it has spawned a wonderful mechanism for identifying concrete models of effective compassion: the annual Samaritan Awards competition. This grants competition gathers information on how well entrants foster personal change in the individuals served, how well they evaluate their outcomes, how they incorporate faith into their programming, and the degree to which they implement the principles of effective compassion outlined by Olasky. The Samaritan Awards *Guide* lists nearly one thousand high-scoring programs, demonstrating that effective compassion is possible. Christians desirous of launching effective ministries to serve low-income families can turn to these models for ideas and advice. In short, a great deal of the "how-to" knowledge needed is available. What we Christ-followers need to pray for now is a huge dose of Spirit-induced "want to" for making the sacrifices necessary for implementing effective compassion.

When *Tragedy* was "adopted" by former Congressman Newt

Gingrich, the book suddenly was poised to advise not just the faith community in its efforts to help the poor but policymakers inside the Beltway as well. Gingrich distributed copies of the book to all incoming freshmen Congressmen in 1994. Olasky began showing up regularly on TV—*CBS Evening News*, *CBS Morning News*, *60 Minutes*, *NBC Nightly News*, *Dateline NBC*, and various CNN and Fox programs including *Hannity & Colmes* and *The O'Reilly Factor*. His ideas were variously lauded and censured in the prestige press, and Olasky himself published articles in the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Los Angeles Times*. In 1999, the *New York Times Magazine* referred to him as the “grandfather of conservative compassion.”

Olasky did serve as a domestic policy adviser to George W. Bush during W's first run for office. The faith-based initiative launched by Bush ended up incorporating Olasky's ideas only partially, however. Certainly the initiative reflected tremendous respect for private, faith-based charities that employed Olasky's principles. Bush used his bully pulpit repeatedly to praise such groups and charged his administration to clear away unnecessary bureaucratic regulations that could hog-tie such Good Samaritans. And in his third month in office, Bush proposed one of Olasky's favorite public policy proposals: the charity tax credit. But the administration couldn't get traction for that effort.

The White House Office for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives began focusing increasingly on creating a level playing field so that faith-based organizations (FBOs) could compete on equal footing with secular nonprofits for federal grants and contracts underwriting social services. The level playing field idea had been embodied in the 1996 federal welfare reforms with the “charitable choice” provisions. These rules provided new rights to FBOs that competed for and obtained federal dollars under the government's main welfare program, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). The White House fought unsuccessfully to pass legislation applying the charitable choice guidelines to all federal social welfare programs. In 2003 it changed tactics. If the policies couldn't be put into law through Congress, at least the President could get temporary compliance by issuing executive orders to apply charitable choice to roughly \$20 billion worth of HHS programs and \$8 billion of HUD programs. Since Olasky had never been a fan of private charities accepting direct government funding (he advocates indirect public funding via vouchers), he wondered whether such a victory was a glass half-full. In an online column in October 2003, Olasky praised Administration officials for seeking

protection of FBOs' hiring rights and other equal treatment provisions but worried over the fact that fairer access to public dollars still kept social welfare powers centralized in Washington. "It would be ironic," he wrote, "if the triumph of one version of compassionate conservatism were to create additional support for the century-old liberal project of building and now maintaining Washington clout in social services."¹

Olasky's vision of federal charity tax credits hasn't materialized (though three states, most notably Arizona, do offer them). The fight to structure some government funding programs as vouchers to individual clients, who can then choose social service providers, continues too—but so far without a lot of wins. In this narrow sense, Olasky's policy ideas have had limited impact.

But his broader notion of engaging private charity more vigorously in the public social welfare effort has borne fruit. Despite the faith-based initiative's legislative failures inside the Beltway, it has achieved important changes in the way social services are conducted in all sorts of communities across the nation. In short, local government agencies are looking more often and more favorably to the faith sector as a strategic partner. More FBOs that practice effective compassion have decided to compete for public funding, and many have earned it. I conducted two national studies of charitable choice implementation. In the most recent one, which included fifteen states, I found over 750 examples of financial collaborations between government and FBOs that totaled nearly \$124 million. Fully 56 percent of the FBO contractors had never partnered officially with government before.² Interviews with nearly four hundred FBO practitioners who had decided to accept government dollars indicated that such funding had led to new programs, enhanced services, and program expansions to serve more people.³

Critics of the faith-based initiative would respond quickly at this point that "partnership by local government with faith-based organizations is nothing new." They are right—and wrong. For many decades local governments have contracted with traditional faith-based social service providers such as Catholic Charities and Lutheran Family Services and have referred needy families to church-run food pantries. But only in

¹Marvin Olasky, "Faith-Based Programs Beneath Media Radar," *Townhall.com* (October 2, 2003); http://www.townhall.com/columnists/MarvinOlasky/2003/10/02/faith-based_programs_beneath_media_radar.

²Amy L. Sherman, *Collaborations Catalogue: A Report on Charitable Choice Implementation in 15 States* (Hudson Institute, 2002).

³John C. Green and Amy L. Sherman, *Fruitful Collaborations: A Survey of Government-Funded, Faith-Based Programs in 15 States* (Hudson Institute, 2002).

recent years have local government agencies partnered energetically with the kinds of small, community-based, faith-based charities that follow the principles Olasky champions. The contract amounts are often modest (in our survey of FBO contractors, John Green and I found that 68 percent of contracts were for under \$100,000),⁴ but the fact remains that more public dollars to assist the poor are being spent via effective charities today than when Olasky first wrote *Tragedy*.

Significant changes in government social welfare policy have unfolded since *Tragedy* emerged in 1992—just think about the paradigm-shifting federal welfare reform of 1996. Both the book’s critics and its promoters would argue that Olasky’s ideas mattered and gave shape, to some degree, to some of those changes. But for me, this isn’t where the book’s best value is found. What matters most is *Tragedy*’s power to reshape the way the church conducts its social service initiatives.

That is not to say that *Tragedy* tells the church everything she needs to know about fighting poverty today. Some front-line practitioners (including me) wish it would have told more stories of community development and community organizing, in addition to the many wonderful examples of personal transformation. Some readers won’t agree with all of Olasky’s political positions. But *Tragedy* provides an invaluable service to the church by arguing loud and clear for what we must most avoid in efforts to serve the poor: a “compassion” long on words and money and short on time, love, and personal investment. The latter is what many poverty fighters of a century ago lived out (and what, it should be put on record, Marvin Olasky and his family have personally exemplified for years). Today’s poverty fighters must do no less.

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⁴Ibid.

PREFACE

THIS HISTORY BOOK has a weird history.

For the past twenty-four years I've been a professor at the University of Texas, but during the 1989-1990 academic year my family and I lived in Washington on a grant through the Heritage Foundation that allowed me to spend a year at the Library of Congress. During my first month at the library I enjoyed sitting in the lovely reading room, filling out call slips, and having attendants bring old books.

The reading left me with the nagging sense of missing something important, so I obtained a stacks pass that allowed wandering among thousands of bookshelves on which sat dusty records apparently untouched for decades. Regular rules of library quiet did not apply in the closed stacks generally inhabited only by boom-box-carrying, book-retrieving staffers. It was strange but delightful to read sober late-nineteenth-century reports to the accompaniment of rap and rock.

In July 1990 my manuscript seemed ready to send to a major publishing house that had expressed interest in it, but I realized at the last moment that while the content was solid, the narrative was choppy. Up against a deadline, I put in twelve-hour rewriting days over the next month. My workplace was a windowless University of Texas office next to another office where someone was researching reactions to the television show *Cheers* by repeatedly playing its theme song.

After a while, to drown out the *Cheers* music, I played the theme music from *Rocky* movies, including "Eye of the Tiger." I finished the revision just in time and sent it off, then waited for months until the major publisher decided the book was "too religious" and said no. A then-small secular publisher, Regnery, and a Christian publisher, Crossway Books, finally published the book in 1992.

It received some press mention, but nothing much seemed to happen. Yet, largely unknown to me in Texas, *Tragedy* slowly gained a small following in New York and Washington. Journalist John Fund and philanthropist Heather Higgins recommended it to others. Former Secretary of Education Bill Bennett read it and liked it and late in 1994 told new Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich about it.

That was the breakthrough. Republicans had just gained control of Congress; so when Newt in January 1995 repeatedly spoke about the themes of *Tragedy* and recommended it to others, a media frenzy ensued. As journalists wondered what the Speaker and his recommended historian were up to, I took another leave of absence from the University of Texas and had dozens of meetings with senators, representatives, and eventually governors and state legislators. Ironically, had the book come out earlier and received more publicity, on my desired schedule, it would not have hit Newt at his peak and received the attention it eventually did.

People say that *Tragedy* was influential in the welfare reform that the Republican Congress passed and Bill Clinton eventually signed into law. If so, that's because the book turns on its head both the conventional history and the conventional rhetoric concerning welfare. *Tragedy* shows that America's volunteer poverty-fighters were often more compassionate and more effective in their work than our recent professionalized corps. The book suggests that the real problem of twentieth-century welfare was not its cost but its stinginess in what many among the poor needed most: challenging, personal, and spiritual help rather than entitlement, bureaucracy, and an attempt to banish God.

Once welfare reform in 1996 knocked out some of the worst abuses, the issue went away as a central Washington concern. But many states experimented with innovative approaches, and one of them was Texas under Governor George W. Bush. He read *Tragedy* and as governor instructed his state bureaucracy to help rather than hinder religion-based anti-poverty groups.

To avoid spooking anti-religious activists, the term of political art became "faith-based groups," and the whole movement became known as "compassionate conservatism." President Bush began his administration by arguing repeatedly that individual volunteers and neighborhood groups, often religious, can do a lot more to move people out of poverty than one-size-fits-all government programs can. Then he ran into opposition from Congress and from entrenched national groups that rely on governmental grants.

The Bush administration from 2001 through mid-2007 promulgated executive orders that temporarily removed some discrimination against religious groups, but Congressional opposition stopped changes in law. During the years following 9/11, President Bush viewed the war on terror as the defining issue of his presidency and maintained support for war spending by accepting budget-busting increases in domestic spending.

Some conservatives started equating “compassionate conservatism” with big government.

So the legacy at this point is mixed. The policy measures suggested by *Tragedy* have gained a toehold, but the toe is gnarled and its nail ingrown. The small accomplishments of the past few years have fallen far short of the original hope for a warm-hearted but tough-minded approach based on historical successes. But change in Washington takes a long time, and those who read this book will be prepared to take another whack at an anti-poverty establishment that still keeps many people in poverty.

Meanwhile, Christians and others around the country show true compassion in many ways. The interest in anti-poverty work among evangelicals may have reached its low point in the early nineties and appears to be growing. The question now is whether newly-awakened evangelicals will accept the government-centric understanding of how to help the poor or will learn from the Bible and from American history. This book, I hope, will help.

Marvin Olasky
2007