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Editor's Note

Padraig O'Malley
University of Massachusetts Boston, padraig.omalley@umb.edu

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Editor's Note

Padraig O'Malley

We stealthily approach the end of the twentieth century, stealth stimulated in part by the metaphysical uneasiness that accompanies the anxious passage into a new era, one that transcends the bounds of our limited imaginations because we cannot grasp the imponderables of the advent not just of a new century, but of a new millennium. The word itself conjures up the fears that lurk in our subconscious as we attempt to placate our anxieties of an uncertain future with the anticipation of the challenges that lie ahead. We are not attuned to concepts of millennia for, like the galaxies suspended in the infinity of space, they suggest enigmas beyond the mysterious, intimations of mortality, and the perils of our own deceitfulness in the face of our inevitable demise.

On the broad horizon of redefinition: the meaning of the word *globalization*, especially a globalization that is accompanied by the phenomenon of increasing fragmentation; the diseconomies of production and consumption that cross national frontiers; the implosion of environmental disorders that threaten the coordinates of nature; the questioning of traditional concepts of sovereignty in a world of saturated interdependence; the alarming disposition on the part of that slice of the world we call developed to make the poor countries the payees for the excesses of the rich; the inexorable proliferation of the arms industry and the increasing threats of nuclear joyriding; the free-floating gymnastics of the so-called free markets spreading the miasma of their "circuit breakers," whose primary function, it would appear, is to protect investors from the very risks to which the market is supposed to expose them.

On the more narrow horizon of definition: the meaning of work; the availability of work; the catastrophic impact of downsizing on ordinary men and women who find that their ability to adjust to the demands of a valueless world order falls short of the imperatives that are invoked to justify that order; the shallow genuflections to the new gods of the international order; the new commandments of the unbridled greed of multinational corporatism promulgated in the name of peace and prosperity; technology and web sites elevated to the theological canons of quasi-secular religions; religion robbed of its vestiges of holiness in the name of dubious moralities; morality shorn of its spirituality; spirituality stripped of its humanity; humanity besmirched of its dignity when it is denied its fundamental essence — to till the fields, wield the plow, wipe the sweat off its brow, and heal the sick.

Hence my rather apoplectic introduction to this special issue of the *New England Journal of Public Policy*, an introduction that wants you, the reader, to begin to connect what might appear to be the almost hypothetical changes on the far-flung abysses of the cosmic frontiers of the future with the incremental changes that define the rhythms of

Padraig O'Malley is a senior fellow at the John W. McCormack Institute of Public Affairs, University of Massachusetts Boston.

our daily lives. For the ineluctable fact is that as we cross the fault lines between the society we live in and the society we are about to inherit, we have become increasingly disposed to marginalize people, to consign them a utility that neither acknowledges their potential nor embraces their shortcomings. Left betwixt and between, they have become pawns in a creed of financial promiscuity in which the rich grow richer, the poor poorer, the hapless more hapless, the desperate more desperate, the detritus of our societies part of a disposable humanity, and the distribution of income both within developed countries and among developed and underdeveloped countries more ominously disproportionate than ever.

In recent years, a profusion of studies, both here in the United States and in the advanced postindustrial economies, reflects increasing disparities with regard to income, asset holdings, occupational structures, and educational levels, to mention just some of a number of variables among the upper and lower cohorts of society, disparities that are even more pronounced when considerations of race and ethnicity are taken into account. Rather than differences becoming less acute, despite the plethora of laws, affirmative action programs, social consciousness programs, advocacy groups, and the best-intentioned endeavors of dedicated nongovernmental organizations, they are becoming more acute. The “lowers” are not just not keeping their heads above water, they are slowly going under, the drowning gurgles of their desperate cries submerged in the voiceless chorus of silent impotence.

Who, for example, remembers central Los Angeles, that once inglorious symbol of what had gone awry with the American Dream? The ingloriousness remains — if as much money had been pumped into its economy and the rebuilding of its dilapidated and antiquated infrastructure as was poured into the voluminous, endlessly philanthropic studies that purported to identify its problems and the causes of its endemic social unrest (lo and behold, they discovered poverty!), central LA would reverberate today with the engines of renewal, not with the brays of betrayal.

My point is this: if, despite the resources at the disposal of this country, which prides itself on being the richest and most prosperous in the world, mere dents in the degree of racial inequality are the result, how are the subsistence countries of Africa, wracked by racial and ethnic problems, many of which are the making of their former colonial masters, ever to get out of the starting gate, especially when the affluent West has pulled the starting gate from under their feet? Or to pose the question in a slightly different form: In a global economy, what are our obligations not only to our own disadvantaged, but to the disadvantaged of the truly disadvantaged countries of the world, made more disadvantaged by global trade policies that work for the most part to our advantage?

Which brings me to this special issue of the journal, “Workforce Development: Health Care and Human Services,” an issue that focuses on a range of problems in the health care and human service fields from a perspective that is, to say the least, frequently neglected in public policy discussion — the perspective of their workforces and the labor organizations that represent them. In many respects, the questions the articles address are a microcosm of the problems that will daunt us in the future, daunt us even more because, in a world of limited choices, denial has a special utility: by allowing us to evoke the unpalatable, it allows us to postpone the inevitable, and in a society that measures the long run in terms of the length of a football season, kicking for safety is invariably preferable to moving the goal posts.

The workers and organizations that form the core of the articles in this issue are at the cutting edge of the cosmic changes and the incremental changes to which I have

alluded. They embody the most far-reaching transformations in technology, the organization of work, the definition of service, the changing nature of the services themselves, the practices of corporate governance, the tensions between social responsibility and more narrowly defined shareholder interests, a redefinition of the roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders, applications of standards of transparency and accountability, the common interests of management and workers in the management of change, issues of race, gender, and equity, and balancing interests of the public good against market-driven concepts of private entitlement.

In their Foreword, guest editors Andrés Torres and James Green encapsulate the essence of the issue. These articles, they write, “center on health care and human service workers in Massachusetts who, like their counterparts in other states, are experiencing various pressures resulting from the privatization and deinstitutionalization of public facilities, the downsizing and merging of private and public health care facilities, the growth of new forms of health care and human service delivery, including that administered by home-based and community-based providers, along with the spread of part-time employment in all fields, the growth of new technologies and the limits of job-training, as well as the impact of managed care and other cost-cutting measures. To many of these workers and their advocates, such pressures have created a crisis in the health care and human service fields.”

Not to belabor the point: what is happening in the health care and human service delivery sectors of the economy is symptomatic only of the changes that are occurring or are going to occur in all sectors of the economy — some the product of “pull,” as new technologies and the supply of new skills redefine the contours of the market, some the product of “push,” as changes in the global economy have a ripple effect and new demands redefine the contours of the market. What is happening in the health care and related service industries is a microcosm of the nature of change itself, more than ever the embodiment of Joseph Schumpeter’s concept of “creative destruction.”

As we tentatively approach the millennium, our trepidation tempered by our innate optimism, our task is to find ways to encourage the creative while minimizing its destructive impact, all the time aware that we will fail as a society, as a nation of societies, if we lose sight of the fact that the maximization of human worth is the sine qua non of existence. That, or an Orwellian millennium.

Lest we forget: in the end, the cosmic is the sum of the incrementals. 🐉