SOCIALISM:
WHOSE POT
OF SOUP IS IT?

SINCE MY MOTHER had only a third-grade education and was functionally illiterate, there weren’t many lucrative job opportunities available to her. To compensate, she worked two and sometimes even three jobs, cleaning the houses of wealthy families and caring for their children. She frequently left the house at five in the morning and did not return until midnight, which meant that Curtis and I would sometimes not see her for several days at a time. When she was at home, you could see the fatigue in her eyes, but the little time and energy she did have, she always spent on Curtis and me. It was clear that whether she was working or spending time with us, she wanted us to have a better life than the one we had.

When other families went on outings, for example, we couldn’t. There simply wasn’t enough money. Every once in a while, however, Mother would save up enough for us to go to the fair, but only enough for us to get in the gate—we had to enjoy the rides by watching others. We couldn’t try our hand at any of the games, no matter how much we practiced pitching coins or playing basketball at home. Most adults can recall wonderful childhood tastes from nibbling on cotton candy, hot dogs, french fries, ice cream, and rainbow-colored snow cones, but Curtis and I had to be content to only smell—never taste.

Being unable to give us many of the little joys of childhood weighed heavily on Mother. When we’d arrive at the checkout counter in a grocery store and have to run the inevitable gauntlet of assorted candies, we’d ask
her if we could have something "this time," but the answer was always no. The look in her eyes was so devastating that after a while we wouldn't even ask. There was no money for a babysitter either, so Curtis and I were pretty much left on our own.

But Mother was always creative in coming up with ways for us to make ends meet. In the summertime, for example, when farmers' crops were ready for harvest, she would drive us out to the country on the weekend, stop at a farmhouse, and offer to pick four bushels of a crop if we could keep one. Farmers usually complied, and we'd bring home fresh vegetables or fruit, such as strawberries, peaches, tomatoes, and green beans. Although we may have complained about the work, it was fun picking produce together as a family. And once we returned home, she would can many of the items to sustain us during the winter months.

Most of Mother's friends and relatives also struggling with economic hardship were quite happy to lean on public assistance. As a child, I overheard many conversations in which they detailed schemes—some of which were quite elaborate—for obtaining more government aid. Take a course in a community college, I heard them say, to make it appear that you are trying to escape welfare. That will get you extra money for child care. Your social worker, who will be so happy and proud of you, can be easily manipulated. By the time they grow weary of their work and move on, another one will have been assigned to your case. I often wonder what they could have accomplished if they had spent that intellectual energy developing a new business. My mother steadfastly resisted her friends' lifestyle because, even though she only had a third-grade education, she had noticed that almost no one who became a welfare mom ever came off of welfare, and she was repulsed by the thought of perpetually depending on others.

The attitude of my mother's friends and relatives was very similar to that of the students in a course I took in school, in which only two grades were given: satisfactory and unsatisfactory. Many of the students in that particular class—who usually strove to excel—relaxed and set aside any notion of spending long hours studying to get an A on an exam, let alone working for extra credit. After all, they knew they would receive at best a grade of satisfactory no matter how hard they worked. On the one hand, it comforted many students to know that they would pass the course without ever having to extend themselves much—but on the other hand, it discouraged many students from working hard to achieve excellence.

Some might question the wisdom of my mother's drive toward self-sufficiency and her no-nonsense parenting of us boys, but I believe the
proof is in the pudding: one son became an aviation engineer and the other became a neurosurgeon, two of the most prestigious professions. Many children of the wealthy clients for whom she worked managed to only just get by in life or worse—some ended up dead, in the penal system, or on welfare.