

# **My Origins and How They Affect My View of Public Policy Issues of the Importance of Education, the Welfare State and Poverty, Medical Care as a “Right”, Our “Dependency Culture” and Immigration**

By Rick Olson, Candidate for State Representative, 55<sup>th</sup> Legislative District

May 22, 2010

[olson48176@comcast.net](mailto:olson48176@comcast.net), 734-944-0794

The recent death of my 98 year old mother created a flood of memories of my childhood. With this coinciding with my candidacy for State Representative, it represented a great opportunity to consider how those early impressions affect my thinking on a number of today's state and national issues.

## **The Beginnings**

I was raised in a very rural area in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, 17 miles south of Houghton and Hancock, out in the sticks, not far from Lake Superior. My dad died when I was two and a half months old, leaving Mom with six kids, with my oldest sister age 16.

We were raised on welfare until I was 17, as there were scant opportunities for work for Mom in the area. We owned our own home, a 24' x 24' story and a half structure, located on a 40 acre parcel. Our property was comprised primarily of scrub soft maple and aspen that sprouted after the big forest fires of the early 1900's after the mighty White Pine were logged. We had no phone, no TV, and heated the house with two wood stoves. The door to the upstairs was closed in the winter, as the two stoves barely kept the downstairs warm enough. We slept in long john underwear, stocking caps, and under thick, heavy bedding, as ½" frost built up on the windows in winter. We got an indoor toilet when I was 6, but no indoor shower or bath. We warmed the sauna every Saturday and took a bath whether we needed it or not.

Mom believed strongly in education, having graduated from high school when few others did in 1928. She had to attend 11th and 12th grades in Houghton, 17 miles away, as John A. Doelle Agricultural School did not go beyond 10th grade in Mom's school days (apparently because of a fire). This was quite an achievement, considering she flunked kindergarten – primarily because her mom did not always allow her to attend kindergarten when the snow was deep on the mile and a half walk to school, as Mom was soooo tiny (reaching 4' 11" fully grown).

Mom instilled in us the belief that hard work and education were the way out of poverty. Her mantra was. “Get an education and work hard.” All six of us kids have a college degree and four of us have a Master's degree or more. We have worked hard. We have lived Mom's dream for us, as all are successful in life.

Without a dad, Al, my oldest brother who was ten years older, was my role model. He shouldered the burden of “man of the house”, with an exemplary work ethic. I remember how hard he worked cutting down the soft maple trees and cutting them into “rungas” (10-15' lengths to be ready for the Petersons' buzz saw to cut into wood stove length).

Once, when I was a wee lad, I was sitting on a log in a saw horse while my brother Al was cutting the log into stove lengths with a hand “buck” saw. A family friend commented to me, “You are quite a helper, aren’t you?” And that is something I have said to myself many times as a kid (“positive self-talk”), and what I grew up to be – someone who wishes to be “of service” to others.

### **Lessons learned:**

- **All kids can achieve – being a child in a single parent family on welfare does not necessarily equate to poor academic performance.** What is important, however, is the belief in the home that education is important, and sufficient parental influence that children apply themselves to learn. You don’t go to school to “receive an education” (pictured as teachers pouring knowledge into empty headed students) but to “get an education” (where the students and parents are responsible for actively working to increase the amount they know and can do).
- **Education is critical to getting ahead in life. But hard work is also needed.** My mom did not know the saying that, “a person is compensated in direct proportion to the service he or she provides”, but she knew the keys to providing great service, i.e., maximize the service you can provide by increasing what you know and can do, and then applying those talents diligently.

Many people going through life thinking they are not successful because they are not “lucky”. They don’t realize that “luck” is defined by opportunity meeting preparedness. Mom did not believe in luck, but thought that the harder you worked, the luckier you would be. She understood and engrained in us the concept of deferred gratification, with the faith that if you work hard enough and prepare yourself well enough, that good things would happen.

One gentleman during this campaign argued with me that the kids in Detroit do not have the opportunities that I did. I vehemently disagreed. Our school was no great citadel of learning. I did not have the advanced mathematics necessary to compete at the same beginning level as many other students at MSU. (I had to start at a level below calculus, but managed to graduate from Michigan State in 3 years, while working 20+ hours per week.) My starting position did not matter in the long run. I had a mother who believed in education, and caring teachers who wanted us to succeed, and a principal who encouraged students to continue their learning after high school. I had developed the right attitude because of their influences.

Detroit kids can have the same thing, as I believe the vast majority of the teachers in Detroit Public Schools are as qualified or better than the ones I had, and want success for their students as well. But the parents of the kids need to want their kids to get educated, and the kids need to apply themselves to get the education which is readily available to them. It just will not be handed to them on a platter.

The students may not get out of Detroit Public Schools at the same level as many from Bloomfield Hills, but if they are going in the right direction and stick to it, they can achieve much, and often more than those to whom success came easily. As airplane pilots believe, “Attitude (the relationship of the nose of the plane to the horizon) is more important than the altitude.”

- **Poverty is a state of mind, not a function of how much you have or how much you earn.** Although we were poor, we had pretty much everything we needed. We had food, clothing and

shelter, and those basics are really what most people really NEED. Sure, there were many things we WANTED, but few other things we really needed.

An exception is that I don't recall any of us getting any medical care, except the time my sister, Dolly, got a big gash above her eye when she tried to ditch me while sledding down Savela's hill. Dental care consisted of putting a piece of aspirin into a cavity when it reached the tooth's nerve and hurt. In the absence of fluoride treatment in those days, my teeth needed extensive work by the time I had money for and access to a dentist when I was 18.

Application: When people complain about being in poverty, or the need to help people in poverty, I may not be as sympathetic as some. When I compile the benefits someone on welfare gets, I think, "That is quite generous." Welfare payments, food stamps, Medicaid, Section 8 housing assistance, home heating assistance, free or reduced breakfast and lunch in school for the children, etc., add up to a huge total value. This is well beyond the basics of life needed. This is especially irritating when you see the welfare kids show up in school with \$100 running shoes. These are NOT essentials, nor are cable TV with all of the premium channels, Wii systems, air conditioning, \$30,000 vehicles, \$90 per month cell phone plans for texting, expensive vacations, cigarettes, alcohol, lottery tickets, etc. that many think they are "entitled" to. Food, clothing, shelter, medical care AND opportunities for improving your and your children's future are sufficient. Frankly, I think many people have gotten confused about what poverty is, and what it is not. They don't understand the relation between wealth and what it takes to create wealth.

There will always be differences in wealth throughout any society. Such differences, when based on the level of service one provides to others, serve as incentives to provide more service yourself, so you too can enjoy the fruits of success. Providing benefits to those who provide no service (when they are capable of doing so) breeds dependency, destroys incentives and in the end, lessens the productive capacity of our society, resulting in less wealth to share. And, to the extent you extract taxes from the productive people to provide those benefits, you again lessen the incentive for those productive people to invest and earn.

**There is a need for a "safety net", but it should not become a hammock,** so comfortable no one wants to get out of it and so much of a cocoon that it is difficult to get out of. For example, it is very difficult to get a job at minimum wage that would come close to the total value of the welfare benefit package described above. The incentives are backwards. In fact, the push for a "living wage" as the minimum wage law is exactly backwards in the incentives that should exist to create the incentives for poor people to become self-sufficient.

(In fact, economists will tell you that the minimum wage contributes to the inflexibility of wages, to the lengthening of recessions and depressions, and increases the level of unemployment. It is simple supply and demand economics. When an input costs more, less quantity of that input is demanded. With costs of production increased, businesses are less likely to risk the capital in a venture, and thus do not hire people.)

**The safety net needs to be temporary, and not a generation after generation guaranty.** As kids, my siblings and I did not have any continuing safety net to rely on. We knew we needed to be able to provide value to some employer to make it in the world. Where is that incentive today?

Many “dependent” people do not have the long-range thinking to realize that a starting wage is just that, a start, with the need to build a track record of actually showing up for work and meeting or exceeding performance expectations so that raises, promotions and new jobs are possible. In fact, many think the minimum wage jobs available to the unskilled and unproven workers are “beneath their dignity” to perform. That thinking ensures they never grow the skills and work track record to be able to provide any reasonable level of service that anyone would be willing to hire them for, much less at a higher wage level. Their own “stinking thinking” confines them to poverty, not “society” or “the system” or “the man”.

**Is access to medical care a “right”?** I mentioned above the need for access to medical care as an essential, and cited my experience doing without medical care during my youth. I don’t think access to medical care rises to the level of a “right”, however. Somehow we need to keep people accountable for their own health. As undesirable as it was for us to not have access to health care, it made us cognizant about the need to live a healthy life style. When access is a “right”, what incentive is there to avoid a life style inconsistent with health: smoking, drinking alcohol, other drug abuse, obesity, inactivity, promiscuity, gang activity, etc.? We all want to be healthy, but the immediate temptations often overrule the long-run benefits of resisting those temptations. And with people with little training in deferred gratification, the long-run benefits of resisting temptation may not even be considered.

I don’t have the perfect solution, but I do not believe people should have the right to health care access without some measure to keep them accountable. With the new national health care bill, we have just added to the productive society’s burden without any measurable incentive to minimize health care costs.

“A **welfare state** is a concept of government where the state plays a key role in the protection and promotion of the economic and social well-being of its citizens. It is based on the principles of equality of opportunity, equitable distribution of wealth, and public responsibility for those unable to avail themselves of the minimal provisions for a good life. The general term may cover a variety of forms of economic and social organization<sup>[1]</sup>

There are two main interpretations of the idea of a welfare state:

- A model in which the state assumes primary responsibility for the welfare of its **citizens**. This responsibility in theory ought to be comprehensive, because all aspects of welfare are considered and universally applied to citizens as a "right".
- Welfare state can also mean the creation of a "**social safety net**" of minimum standards of varying forms of welfare. “ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welfare\\_state](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welfare_state)

As you can surmise from the foregoing, I reject the first model, where benefits are considered a “right”, but support limited, temporary benefits as a minimum social safety net.

**Now, be clear that I am not entirely blaming the “captives” in poverty, as they for the most part are simply responding to the incentives in the system.** As W. Edwards Deming (of Total Quality Management fame) used to say, “90% of the problems are system problems, and only about 10% are people problems.” On that basis, he said that it was the responsibility of the managers to fix the system. In this case, the “managers” are our elected

officials, and fix the system we must, or we relegate yet more generations to the status of “poverty”, however defined.

I do believe that as long as we continue to portray the poor as “victims”, we are “enablers”, as defined by co-dependency theory. We enable them to continue to think of themselves as victims, and not as free agents capable of creating their own destiny.

**This article puts this discussion in political philosophy terms:**

“[T]hat the issue on which our politics has become centered -- the Obama Democrats' vast expansion of the size and scope of government -- is really not just about economics. It is really a battle about culture, a battle between the culture of dependence and the culture of independence.

. . .

But public policy also helps determine the kind of society we are. The Obama Democrats see a society in which ordinary people cannot fend for themselves, where they need to have their incomes supplemented, their health care insurance regulated and guaranteed, their relationships with their employers governed by union leaders. Highly educated mandarins can make better decisions for them than they can make themselves. That is the culture of dependence.

The tea partiers see things differently. . . .

But they recognize, correctly, that the Obama Democrats are trying to permanently enlarge government and increase citizens' dependence on it. And, invoking the language of the Founding Fathers, they believe that this will destroy the culture of independence which has enabled Americans over the past two centuries to make this the most productive and prosperous -- and the most charitably generous -- nation in the world.

. . .

The top-and-bottom Obama coalition was in effect a coalition of those dependent on government transfers and benefits and those in what David Brooks calls “the educated class,” who administer or believe that their kind of people administer those transactions. They are the natural constituency for the culture of dependence.

. . . The tea party movement reminds us of what the Founders taught -- that it has a moral dimension, as well. They risked all in the cause of the culture of independence. The polling evidence suggests that most Americans don't want to leave that behind. “

[Discarding the Democrats culture of dependence](#), by Michael Barone, Detroit News, May 16, 2010.

- **Parents are willing to sacrifice greatly in order for their children and grandchildren to have a better life.** I am of Finnish descent, as all of my grandparents emigrated from Finland around 1900. My paternal grandfather, John Carl Drugge (the Swedish version, or Trykke in

Finnish) first came to the US in 1888, and somewhere along the line changed his name to Olson.

The Labor Day weekend prior to 9/11/2001, Linda and I went to New York City, the first time I had the opportunity to visit the city. We toured Ellis Island, which I had mistakenly believed all of my grandparents had come through. After viewing and listening to the exhibits there, I realized that for the more than 25 million of immigrants who entered New York Harbor between 1892 and 1924, more than anything else, America was “the land of hope”. They hoped for a new life, new opportunity for themselves and their children.

I grew up with that sense of hope - that my grandparents had come to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan for greater opportunity. And that it was possible to seize that opportunity to make a better life for us and our children. That hope still resides in me, as I love America and the opportunity it has presented for me and my family. Part of what motivates me to enter politics is to ensure that that opportunity will exist for my children and their children.

My mom told me stories about her youth. Her parents took a train on a spur track used for hauling logs to rural Tapiola from the more populated Houghton – Hancock area they first settled in. The white pine forests were logged off, and forest fires had swept the area more than once, with brush and young scrub timber making a comeback. They constructed a primitive home. To keep their sheep alive during the winter, they cut piles and piles of twigs off the brush during the summer for the sheep to eat. Life was rough. But they had hope for the future – the future for themselves and their children. They survived and their dreams for the future were realized.

The sacrifices that today’s immigrants to the United States make are similarly motivated. Many parents are willing to sacrifice some things so that their children will have a better life than they have. If I were a citizen of Mexico in poverty, I would probably do what many of them are doing – crossing into the United States for a better life, whether illegal or not. I do not blame them.

Nonetheless, I do see a difference between their situation and that of my grandparents. My grandparents entered the U.S. legally, the illegal immigrants do not. You can call them “undocumented workers” or whatever, but the truth is, they are breaking the law. I do not see it as discrimination to have the laws enforced against them. In fact, those who discourage enforcement in the name of compassion actually encourage the violation of federal immigration laws. I agree with State Representative Dave Agema when he says, “Three reasons we must deal with it [illegal immigration]. Jobs, security and fiscal reasons. We spend between \$400-600 million a year on healthcare, education, welfare, jails and human services, they take our jobs and we must know who enters this country and what they carry.”

Thus, while I do not blame the illegal immigrants for coming here, nonetheless, demanding enforcement of the immigration laws is clearly a justifiable political position. The system is to blame, and demanding enforcement is aimed at fixing the system. Even though studies have shown that well educated and productive young people are attracted to vibrant cities with diverse populations, this is no excuse for non-enforcement of our laws.