

The Stories We Tell



Jaden Christopher Syre Smith, left, and Will Smith in a scene from the movie "The Pursuit of Happyness."

Films like 'Pursuit of Happyness' assuage the guilt of the privileged.

BY JEREMY V. CRUZ

I SAT IN REFLECTIVE SILENCE as my sister drove us from the movie theater to our parents' house. We had just watched "The Pursuit of Happyness," Will Smith's film based upon the true story of Chris Gardner, who lifts himself and his son out of poverty and homelessness and becomes a successful stockbroker. My sister had enjoyed the movie, but I found myself internally restless and silent. Smith's character is loving, hardworking and intelligent and gives the audience every reason to celebrate his eventual climb. Initially the story moved me to tears, yet with time I grew angry and began to feel I had been manipulated and sold a lie. When I could no longer contain my frustration, I broke my silence: "I think I hate that movie."

Not every movie about poverty is good for poor people. The beautiful father-son relationship portrayed in the film by Will Smith and his real-life son, Jaden, exists within a larger story whose basic messages to poor people—"pull yourself up

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by your bootstraps" and "you create your own destiny"—imply that those who remain poor do so because they are selfish, lazy or weak. My experiences with Interfaith Worker Justice have shown me that most persons living in poverty do not need to be told to work hard, sacrifice more or be strong. In fact, the poor are among the hardest-working, strongest, most selfless people I know, often holding two or three jobs to keep their families together for one more day.

Reinforcing Social Myths

"Pursuit" and films like it also assuage the guilt of the privileged, including me, and send the message that we who have "made it" into the middle and upper classes are there simply because of our superior virtue and intelligence. It is far more flattering to attribute our wealth to superior character and abilities, "which God rewards," than to factor in inequitable tax codes, unequal access to health care, discriminatory education, slave-wages, international trade agreements and inheritance laws that protect privileged races and classes.

This is not to suggest that virtue and productivity are unimportant. But "Pursuit" illustrates our society's discom-

fort with addressing important social questions concerning poverty. At one point in the movie, Smith's character ponders who is standing in the way of his pursuit of happiness. It is a weighty question, one the movie never explores. We are told that the events upon which the film is based occurred in 1981, but the movie does not discuss the socio-political or economic policies that led so many people into poverty then. No reference is made to the fact that Gardner is the only black man in his stockbroker-training program or that he must rely upon the benevolence of old white men for his job. Rather, viewers find themselves "rooting" for Gardner, even as he is forced to fight with and steal from other poor and middle-class persons in his pursuit of happiness. It does not hurt his cause that he has a cute kid; nobody wants a cute child to live in a homeless shelter.

Gardner is a model of the "deserving poor," the poor person others can pull for because he is hardworking and intelligent, which is the way privileged persons perceive themselves. But what about the multitude of homeless men and women Gardner and his son encounter and with whom they suffer? Are they less deserving? Less beautiful, virtuous and intelligent? If so, do they not deserve the necessities for human life and flourishing?

Insofar as he succeeds within and does not question the system that produces and preserves his poverty, Gardner serves as the privileged person's ideal poor man. He becomes the rare exception through which privileged persons can maintain the myth that anyone can make it in this system. If a poor, inadequately educated black man can succeed, the systemic issues surrounding class, race and education must not be very significant. If he can make it, anyone can.

But the fact that some who suffer eventually find success does not mean that the system is not broken. Gardner's trainer exclaims on the first day of stockbroker training, "There is only one guy in here who is going to be somebody," as if to suggest "the pursuit of happiness" is nothing more than a cut-throat game of Monopoly. At root, the moral question is not: Does anyone have a chance to achieve a fully human life in this system? Instead, it is: Does everyone have the opportunity to attain the fullness of life here?

Challenging Our Faith

Movies like "Pursuit" present all Christian churches with a significant challenge to their proclamation and embodiment of God's salvation by way of a "preferential option for the poor." We trust in God who "has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble" (Luke 1:52). Yet too often we are comfortable paying for and passing on stories that justify the people and power structures that keep the humble down. As disciples of God's great storyteller, we must examine the messages embodied in the stories we share from the perspective of persons living in poverty. Are they liberat-

ing for those without means as well as for the privileged? We may cry at a movie because we identify with its dilemmas or because it stirs our feelings about our own lives, even when the underlying message does not end up liberating or healing us. But a story is not "good" simply because it pulls our heartstrings. We would not call a pro-slavery novel "good," simply because it contained a few emotionally moving father-son moments. Likewise, we ought not to deem "good" today's stories that justify and fail to question the rich. If we allow the Gospel to shed its light upon our "good" stories, we may come to recognize sexist, classist and racist assumptions in those stories and in ourselves that we previously did not notice.

Christians, whether their ministry is in the home, the art gallery, city hall or the church, ought to examine not only what they say, but what they remain silent about. Recall the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s admonition: "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." In the United States, where by conservative estimates 37 million people live in poverty, our silence preserves and perpetuates the status quo. Edward Nathan Wolff, a professor of economics at New York University, estimates that the wealthiest 20 percent of U.S. citizens control 84 percent of the country's wealth, while the other 80 percent of the population survive on the remaining 16 percent.

It is not morally acceptable, in my opinion, for Christian actors to play "the good guy" in socially harmful films. Nor is it sufficient for preachers to pull heartstrings from the pulpit by sharing a person's rags-to-riches story while ignoring the structures that enabled them to succeed in their struggle and the social conditions that gave rise to their poverty in the first place. Indeed, to address questions of poverty only in terms of individual character and competence ignores the social nature of persons and the social causes of poverty. So long as a chief executive officer of one of the top 367 U.S. corporations makes, on average, more than 400 times the salary of the average worker, we must question the hoarding of resources and socio-economic opportunities by the privileged before we question the work ethic, intelligence and selflessness of persons in poverty.

While the idea of the "pursuit of happiness" is enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, we must think about and act upon this pursuit according to our religious understanding. The true pursuit of happiness follows a road marked by solidarity and social justice, not just personal responsibility; it will be achieved only once we declare (and live out) our dependence upon God's liberating love and our interdependence with one another. Our stories have the power to transform persons and cultures for better or worse. We must tell stories that will inspire persons to participate collectively in the work of God's liberating and healing love. **A**

