

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

IN OUR PERSONAL LIVES, change can often come suddenly. A glance, *Some Enchanted Evening*-style, across a crowded room. The birth of a child. A job offer out of left field. A tragic accident. In the flash of a moment, our lives can careen off into entirely different directions.

But sometimes our lives can change more slowly, so slowly we may not even recognize that change is taking place. We go about our daily routines, year after year. Then one day we look up and see a new world all around us — and realize that the lives we lead have been fundamentally transformed.

Over the last quarter century or so, I believe, we Americans have experienced just such a transformation. These pages have attempted to explain the impact of this change — the resurgence of inequality — upon us.

I don't remember exactly when I started thinking about writing this book, or about inequality. I do know that inequality has always struck me as deeply unnatural.

Maybe that's because of where — and when — I was raised. I grew up a half-century ago on Long Island, next door to Levittown, the first super suburb of the postwar United States, the American dream come true. In the 1950s, I lived in what came across to me as an incredibly equal world. I could ride my bike for blocks and blocks, or ride in the backseat of my father's Ford, and never see anything but the same suburban spectacle. Neighborhood after neighborhood of single-family homes. No hovels, no mansions.

Not much pretense either. Some people worked with their hands, some were professionals who never got their hands dirty. That didn't seem to make much of a difference, as far as my eleven-year-old eyes could see. My uncles who drove nails rode in fancier cars than my father who practiced law or my mother who taught school. Nothing strange in that. Some households chose nicer cars. Some spent weekends now and then at some bungalow colony in the Catskills. Some put up vinyl pools in their backyards. People made choices how to spend their money — and everyone seemed to have money to spend.

But not too much. No rich people ever entered into my eleven-year-old line of sight. I knew, of course, that rich people existed, just as I knew that, somewhere, elephants actually existed outside of zoos. But no rich people — or elephants — lived in my neighborhood, or any neighborhood I had ever seen.

My classmates and I did take a school field trip, once, to a rich person's house. The rich person was long dead and gone, the house many times bigger than any house we had ever seen. Nobody lived there anymore. The only visitors seemed to be schoolkids like us. We walked the grounds, climbed the marble steps, tried to tell time by the sundial. The teacher told us somebody named Vanderbilt had lived here a long time ago. Years ago, she told us, a few people did indeed live like this all the time. Wasn't that, she asked, amazing? Certainly was, we nodded.

Our young minds had no trouble processing what our teacher was trying to say. Back then, we understood, people lived backward lives. Nobody had TV or telephones. And some people lived in huge houses. And then we had progress. Now we all have TVs and telephones and nobody lives in huge houses. We were better than people back then. We were smarter. We were more equal.

That sense of the world became — and remains — a part of me. I feel deeply grateful having grown up in that time and place. Without that experience, that foundation, this book could not have been written.

In the years since then, a great many people have helped me build on that foundation. My political mentors in upstate New York. My fellow staffers and activists in the labor movement. My colleagues in good works that range from Progressive Maryland to the Boston-based United for a Fair Economy. My long-time support group of graying local friends, not a Yankee fan among them, still going strong after nearly thirty years.

My deep thanks to all these folks.

And my special thanks to the folks most directly linked to this effort.

Thanks to Ward Morehouse, David Dembo, and Judi Rizzi, the trio at the Council on International and Public Affairs who have given me the time and space, over the past dozen-plus years, to grow my ideas about growing inequality.

Thanks to Jeff Vogel, trade union and environmental advocate extraordinaire and maybe the deepest bass in the New York City Labor Chorus. He dares to envision a truly different and better society — and tirelessly nudges me, and everyone else, in the right direction.

Thanks to Chuck Collins, the co-founder of United for a Fair Economy. His energy and insights never cease to give me inspiration.

Thanks to Nancy Leibold, a most public-spirited South Jersey soul. Her words of encouragement came at just the right time.

And thanks, most of all, to the person who's been bringing home the bacon. Some know her as Tia Toots, some as Dr. Pizzigati. I know her as a life-long partner. Without her, I could never have completed these pages.

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