



discussion guide

THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA

THE THINGS I CANNOT CHANGE

16mm -- Black & White -- 50 minutes

Produced by the National Film Board of Canada for the Special Planning Secretariat of the Privy Council, 1967.

Synopsis:

The film lives through roughly three weeks in the life of the Bailey family. During that time the father tries to find work; a tenth child is born; and the father is involved in a street fight and difficulties with the police. The film represents a particularly intimate style of film-making, in which the film-maker live as closely with the subject as they possibly can, there are no dramatized or invented parts, and there is no staging or rehearsal. The film is an actuality report. All of the events happened, all are shown in the way they happened as nearly as is possible in film-making. Occasionally the film director's voice can be heard asking questions in order to throw more light on the family and its members, but other than that there is no departure from day to day reality except that brought about by the presence of the film crews.

What kind
of
film?

There is no narrative in the usual sense of the word, no real beginning and no ending. The family's existence has been much as it is portrayed before the film began, and there is no evidence to suggest that it is likely to change very much once the film is over. The purpose of discussion based on the film is fundamentally to explore why this is so, what causes people to live in this way, and what might be done about it, if anything can or should be done. The value of the discussion will not be in further elaboration of the particular plight of this family, but in the development of audience responses to the family's position. The film is about the situation of one family, but it is also about the nature of poverty in Canada, and poverty is a fact both for those who endure it and for those who permit it to exist.

Why do people
live
this way?

A major point for discussion turns eventually around the words, "things I cannot change", quoted by the father. Are these conditions that can not be changed? If change is possible, with whom does the responsibility for change rest -- with the father, the mother, or the society at large, meaning the members of the audience? What change in the life of the family would make a difference now? Is there hope for the mother and father? Is there hope for the children?

Using the film

Who are
the
poor?

This film needs a brief introduction. How many "poor" are there in Canada? The Dominion Bureau of Statistics has defined a "low" family income as less than \$2,500 for two, \$3,000 for three, \$3,500 for four, and \$4,000 for five. From the 1961 census we know that 22% of all non-farm families in Canada (of all sizes) had less than \$3,000 a year, and 15% of all non-farm families of four had less than \$3,000. This does not give us the figures for "poverty". But it tells us something about our "affluent" society.

The
poor
stay
poor

Poverty used to be considered the fault of the individual concerned. It was assumed that everyone got a reasonably fair start in society. What he made of his life was the result of his own effort or lack of it. Is this true of the man we will see in the film? Can it be said that his children are getting a fair start?

Recent research has indicated that the poor are not just people who happen to be "down on their luck", but that some poor families remain poor through many generations. Some factor or factors continue to make them and keep them poor. We can decide whether there are such factors operating in the life of the family in the film. If so, are they personal, or economic and social? Will these factors operate to ensure that the children will be among the poor when they grow up?

Attack
on
poverty

The results of this research have stimulated countries like the United States and Canada to attempt to break the downward spiral that seems to keep the poor poor. In the United States the now famous War on Poverty evolved. In Canada a Special Planning Secretariat on Poverty was formed by the Federal Government and a number of projects have developed. The main attack has been to increase the education of both parents and children; to improve opportunities for housing, and to raise levels of income.

The particular style of the film may make it difficult to get discussion started. The film does not guide the viewer to any specific response nor to any practical course of action, and its emotional impact is strong enough to leave an audience unsettled and perhaps with conflicting impressions. After it is completed, it would be wise to allow a short period for the audience to recover itself, perhaps a break of 5 or 10 minutes, since it is a long film.

Getting
discussion
started

First it would be wise to make clear the character of the film. The audience may wonder if the fight was real, if the police actually called. The validity of the events in the film must be accepted so that discussion may turn on their significance.

The audience will want to establish for itself the representativeness of the film: how much of its situation is due to the particular characteristics of this man and this family, how much is general and therefore of wider significance?

Seeing
many sides

The discussion will lead most probably in the direction of cause, blame and remedy, but it would be wise to raise as many specific matters as possible so that memories can be refreshed, and as general an understanding of the film as possible developed. Most film viewers select particular events or themes to the exclusion of others, particularly when there are strong emotional factors, and the audience is involved. To stimulate all, or as many of the specialized views as possible, is to help more people to see more in the film.

Some issues are:

- .. What are the clues to the actual standard of living? How well or badly off are they? How much money the family lives on is a matter of fact. What they do with it is a quite other matter.
- .. What sort of work is the father looking for? Why doesn't he seem to get any?
- .. How much of the trouble has been caused by the move from the rural Maritimes to the big city of Montreal?
- .. What kind of family relationships are there? What are the relationships between husband and wife? Between father and children? Between mother and children?
- .. What are the father's attitudes to the society around him -- to his inability to get work -- to his standard of living? What hopes does he have, and how real are they?
- .. What indications are there of other people's attitudes to him: the police or his fellow workers?
- .. What can be learned from his history? What generalizations can we make about it?
- .. What use is he making of the prayer he quotes: "the things I cannot change"?

Some
Questions

Resource Material on Poverty in Canada.

Meeting Poverty. A series to encourage a better understanding of poverty in Canada and of measures to meet it. Includes reports, bibliographies, statistics, a newsletter.

Obtainable from: Meeting Poverty, Privy Council Office, Ottawa. Free.

Poverty in the midst of plenty; poverty in Ontario 1964, by the Ontario Federation of Labour. Toronto, 1965. 58 p. Published by the Ontario Federation of Labour, 33 Cecil Street, Toronto 2 B.

Poverty in our society. A pamphlet in THE SIXTIES series, November 1965. 20 p. Published by the Canadian Association for Adult Education, 21 Sultan Street, Toronto 5, 25¢ (mimeo)

Poverty: People with problems - An agenda for action. by Dr. Reuben C. Baetz. 22p. An address given at the 39th Annual Meeting and Dinner of the Big Brother Association of Hamilton, Feb. 21, 1966. Obtainable from the Canadian Welfare Council, 55 Parkdale, Ottawa, Canada. 25¢.

Rural need in Canada, 1965. Published 1966 by the Canadian Welfare Council, 55 Parkdale, Ottawa.

Rural poverty: What can ARDA do? A pamphlet in THE SIXTIES series. November 1964. Published by the Canadian Association for Adult Education, 21 Sultan Street, Toronto 5, 25¢. (mimeo)

Social aspects of poverty. by Dr. Daniel Thursz, Associate Director of VISTA. A paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Maritime Conference on Social Welfare, Halifax, N.S. May 1966. 20 p. Obtainable from: Meeting Poverty, Privy Council Office, Ottawa MP-30.

Urban need in Canada 1965. A case report on the problems of families in four Canadian cities. 1965 5 volumes. Published by The Canadian Welfare Council, 55 Parkdale, Ottawa.

Resource Material on Poverty in the United States.

Growing up poor; an overview and analysis of child rearing and family life patterns associated with poverty, by Catherine S. Chilman. Washington, Dept. of Health Education and Welfare, Welfare Administration, Division of Research, 1966. 117 p. 45¢.

Low income life styles, by Lola M. Ireland. Washington, Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Welfare Administration, Division of Research, 1966. 89 p. 35¢.

The other America; poverty in the United States, by Michael Harrington. New York, Macmillan, 1964. 191 p. \$5.95.

The poor pay more, by David Caplovitz. New York, Free Press, 1963. Carried in Canada by Collier - Macmillan Ltd. Paperback. \$3.30.

Poverty in America. edited by Louis A. Ferman (and others). Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1965. 532 p. \$12.50.

- . What could or should be done for this man and for his family?
- . Is it a matter of retraining?
- . Is it a matter of family counselling?
- . How easy or difficult would these be to accomplish?
- . Who should take the initiative?