I’m required to say, as you may have heard, that I do not speak for the University of North Carolina. Though it should hardly be necessary now, I’d think. Now that the University has worked so hard to shed itself of its little Poverty Center. The University wants it to be clearly understood that it stands neutral in the face of NC’s unforgivable war on poor people. Though I’m not sure that picking the completely privately Poverty Center out of the 240 university centers to shutter is a really strict neutrality.

I won’t talk more about that except to say I’m starting to develop an odd affection for this character Sen. Bob Rucho – apparently of much power and influence in the Senate and over the Board of Governors, as he secures their membership. I saw the other day Rucho said – that of course it was necessary to close the Poverty Center because Nichol says and writes things about poverty that the legislative leadership disagrees with.” So close it up. There is a logic to that, I guess. Or at least a refreshing candor. Rucho may be a totalitarian, but at least he’s not a liar. That separates him from the good company of the Board of Governors. So I’m grateful where I can find small blessings. Tender mercies. And when I say Rucho’s totalitarian – I mean that in the precise sense – ‘we enact the policies and, when we’re done, we decide what can be said about them’. Occupying the field.

We gather at an astonishing time for those concerned with poverty, with hunger, with crushing economic hardship. You know the old Chinese curse – ‘may you live in interesting times’. To be honest, I’m to the point where I could do with a little less ‘interesting’ as far as the times go. But these things aren’t up to us.

Right now, this morning, in the richest major nation on earth, the richest nation ever, we have more poor people than at any other moment in our country’s history. More in the nation, more in North Carolina, more in Raleigh, in Alamance county, in Durham, in Orange County. About 47 millions of us nationwide. 15%. Nearly a quarter of our kids. Almost 30% of all African-Americans, Latinos and Native Americans.

Poverty numbers, especially child poverty numbers, far higher than any other advanced western democracy. The greatest gaps between rich and poor since we began collecting data five decades ago. Now documented to be the highest in the advanced world. We’ve also become the least economically mobile. So if you’re born poor here, you are more apt to stay that way than in other advanced countries. And, of course, if you’re born rich you’re more likely to say that way.

And we gather in the south – the native home of American poverty and economic hardship. Where we have more poor people, and more political leaders that are utterly untroubled by it, than the rest of the land. Ten of the country’s poorest 12 states are southern. Though about 15% of Americans live in poverty generally, in Mississippi its 23%, Louisiana 22, Arkansas 20, Georgia 19.1, SC 19, Texas 19.

We share the indignity with our kids. We visit it upon them disproportionately. Of the 10 states with child poverty rates in excess of 25%, nine are from the south. Of the 11 states with over 10% of kids living in extreme poverty ($11,525 in income for a family of four), ten are southern. The Southern Education Foundation reports that of the 6 million children living in extreme poverty in the U.S., a disproportionate 42% are our southern neighbors. The former confederate states set the gold standard in American economic deprivation.

That’s a mouthful, I know. Bums you out. Hard blows at the outset. I don’t want you to think its all bad news. There’s a different lens. I read in the NYT some months back – in the harder throes of recession - that Gucchi high-end sales, had risen, 24% on the year. Last year, Rolls Royce had the greatest year in its 108-year history – in sales of cars that cost over $250,000 apiece.] Mercedez Benz profits rose by over 30%. BMW more than doubled its quarterly profits. Sales of BMW’s s-class sedan – that apparently cost over $200,000 – jumped 15%. Porsche’s overall six-month marker improved by a mere 59%. Saks 5t Ave. full year net income rose 57%. And, sadly, Neiman Marcus flatly sold out, nation-wide of something called Christian Louboutin Bianca platform pumps at a thousand bucks a pair. [I may have pronounced that wrong….]. But Walmart began selling smaller packages because its shoppers didn’t have enough cash on hand to buy multipacks of toilet paper.

In North Carolina, as you know, it’s worse. 18% of us, some 1.7 million are officially poor. Over 1 in 4 of our children. 41% of our children of color. Think on that. Over 4 in 10 of our babies, our middle-schoolers, our teenagers of color are constrained by the intense challenges of poverty. A simple declarative sentence that shames us as a people. Or ought to.

NC has one of the country’s fastest rising poverty rates. A decade ago, we were 26th – a little better than average. Now we’re 9th, speeding past the competition. 570,000 of our kids are officially poor. School districts, statewide, report that 28,000 of our schoolchildren are homeless.

A national report 9 months ago named Roanoke Rapids and Lumberton two of the three poorest cities in the nation. Robeson County has America’s third-highest food stamp participation rate – that includes a boatload of counties. We have, statewide, over 9,000 homeless veterans, many fresh from our nation’s battlefields. Tonight, I can attest, there are hundreds sleeping under bridges and along woodlines in Fayetteville, in a new use for the interstate highway system.

A few months ago, a massive Harvard study found that Charlotte had the worst economic mobility of any major city in the united Sates. 50th out of 50. If you’re born poor here, you’re more apt to stay that way than anywhere else. If you’re born poor here, I guess, Harvard’s recommendation is that you move.

Then, a few weeks ago, the Census Bureau announced NC has, in the last decade, experienced a greater rise in concentrated poverty (census tracts where 20 percent or more are poor) than any other state. Business Insider, last week, peeled back the data to reveal that four of the 10 American cities with the sharpest increases in concentrated poverty are ours. Winston-Salem was 9th, Greensboro 6th, Charlotte 4th, Raleigh 3rd. We are the Super Bowl champs of exploding concentrated poverty.

Two million of us are classified by the federal government as hungry – over 20 percent, the nation’s fifth-highest rate. Nearly 625,000 of our kids don’t get enough to eat. Greensboro is the country’s 3d hungriest city; Asheville is 9th. Feeding America reports, for children under 5, we have the country’s 2d highest food insecurity rate, just behind Louisiana.

A 2011 study deemed Winston-Salem America’s worst city for childhood food hardship. Though I pay close attention to these matters, I’ve never heard these facts mentioned by our political leaders. What does it take to become a priority?

But even these statistics are only that – dry, bloodless numbers. Deadly data. They don’t convey the face, the reality of wrenching poverty in a land of great wealth.

It’s not like looking at these challenges through the eyes of Clyde Fitzgerald – the retired RJ Reynolds Tobacco executive who now runs Second Harvest Food Bank of Northwest North Carolina – who explains our state’s greatest challenge is hunger. In Forsyth County, “29,000 kids go to school more to get something to eat, than to study… in Guilford it’s 40,000.” The “most depressing thing I deal with,” Clyde says, “is talking with a parent who describes the decision he had to make that day about which one of his kids could eat.” Or …talking to a school kid who says ‘it’s not my day to eat today.”’ Clyde thinks, for some odd reason, those words shouldn’t be uttered I one of the most economically vibrant state of the richest nation on earth.

Or, as he’d put it – “I think of how my kids and my grandkids acted when there’d be a prediction of snow around here. They’d be thrilled – it’s NC, if there’s been a prediction of snow, we’ll close the schools for a week. The kids can play to their hearts content. Good times. But then I started seeing all these kids who got anxious and scared and maybe cried a little when people talked about it snowing. Because they knew what it meant for them was, for however many days, they wouldn’t get anything to eat.

Fitzgerald’s remarkable organization distributes 26 million pounds of food annually in 18 of our western counties, up from 7 million just five years ago. But he concedes: “we could put all 26 million into Greensboro or into Winston-Salem and still not meet the need even there.”

Or as my hero Earline Middleton explains, “North Carolina’s hungry aren’t who you think ... not the people on the side of the road, they’re your neighbors. They’re usually employed. They’re usually ashamed. They’re people who “used to have good jobs, who probably volunteered at the pantry,” she says. A seventy-year old great grandmother asking for food for her neighbors when she hasn’t had any meat herself in over a year. And she chooses between food and electricity, or food and medicine, or food and rent. Choices… hard to take pride in, in the richest nation on earth.

Or Jill Staton Bullard who I can’t help but adore – though I know that’s sort of sacrilegious – who says ‘we have more & more people who don’t know where their next meal s coming from, or if its coming at all, it’s much worse, much more urgent than 5 years ago.’ ‘Here shoulder with them it feels worse. “I don’t know how anybody raises a family and limits how much food the kids can eat. That might be what you think you’d see in third world countries. Not in ours.

And, more broadly, the statistics I gave you are not like talking, through evening, with scores of the 1100 or so Tar Heels, waiting all night long, outside the Fayetteville civic center, to receive free dental care in a remarkable medical mission three months ago. Folks who had travelled, often from great distances, to have teeth extracted that had long caused intense pain. When asked, repeatedly, when they’d last seen a dentist, the disproportionately black throng, would answer “ten”, or “twenty” or “thirty” years. “Sure it hurts, it hurts a ton, but who can afford to see a dentist?” Still, hundreds had to be turned away. And, although last year eleven such free clinics were held across Carolina, this year organizers could only afford five.

And it’s not like meeting with some of the 200 or so wounded souls, unable to be accommodated by the overburdened local shelter, living in the otherwise bucolic woods of Hickory, in makeshift lean-tos, cardboard shanties and ragged tents. At least until the police push them along, shredding their tents as deterrent -- their only possessions. All only a few hundred yards from sprawling mansions and churchyards in a scene Dickens would have neither the gall nor the imagination to invent. A young woman explained through tears: “I know I have to get used to this, but I’ve never even been camping before.”

Or, as a 47 year old woman, living alone in the woods explained, unemotionally, without tears, without expectation: “When you’ve lost your job and lost your savings and lost your home, and then I even lost my cat – who was very dear to me – it may sound funny, but losing my cat hurt me deeply -- when you lose everything, you lose your sense of being a person. You lose your own independent identity. Your own space to fill in the world. It’s hard to remember you’re still a human being. That you have a chance at a decent life, or that you even deserve one. That you are worthy of existence.”

Or speaking candidly with health care workers in Rocky Mount who explained that they bend the rules to place oxygen in the homes of their impoverished and incapacitated patients -- in order to make it tougher, under state law, to shut off the water and power they can’t afford.

Or with a seventy-year-old black woman from Winton who drives the school bus, morning and afternoon, every day, twice a day, in order to get needed resources to pay for medicine and therapy her physically disabled husband requires. You know her. She’s one of the lazy poor.

Or the young brilliant black mother, from Halifax County, who graduated from UNC, moved back home, lost her job, eventually lost her housing, and sense of hope. But, she explained, she feared losing the far more important battle, with her young son, against peer pressure, about the importance of going to school. Because, as he said to her, “how can you prove that by what’s happened to you, mom?”

Or the daughter in Wilson who frets for her 62 year old father, with heart disease, who can’t get to see a doctor unless he can come up with the $400 he owes – and has no prospects for. So she fears, every day, the call. And I couldn’t decide who carried the greater burden, the daughter or the father.

Or the thirty year old woman from Colerain who lost her husband, her aunt and her house – in the flash of the tornadoes over two years ago – and since she couldn’t afford insurance, who now lives in financial, as well as personal, ruin.

Or the hundreds of Latino women and men, working long, brutal hours, in agriculture, across eastern North Carolina, not far from here, for $45 a day. Except on the days that they received nothing, because their employers decided to steal their wages as part of the business plan.

Or, in East Spencer, a small, ancient, mostly black town, where over 40% of the community lives in poverty. East Spencer has no library, no school, no grocery store – in what the scholars call a food desert. Even though the national corporate head quarters of the massive Food Lion grocery chain is located a few hundred yards over the bridge in Salisbury. And a huge food distribution center is located smack in the middle of East Spencer – sending loaded trucks across the region. Everywhere except the town in which it resides.

Or, in Hendersonville, where, in a police chase for an unarmed black man, alleged to have to have stolen a computer game, over fifty bullets were fired by law enforcement officers into a half dozen houses, even the church where we met a few days later. A grandmother explained, weeping, that if she and her four-year-old granddaughter hadn’t hit the floor quickly enough, shots coming through the window would have killed them both. Something, of course, that would never occur in a white neighborhood. Never. So that a young mother would say: “when they shot into all those houses, they wounded the whole community because they said our lives didn’t matter.” And how else could it be understood?

And, for me, finally, in what would be a perfect allegory, if only it weren’t true, the disabled, impoverished, homeless man who wanted to silently protest, on the corner he claims, when Pres. Obama came to town. But the Secret Service moved him blocks away – so Obama wouldn’t have to see him. Edited out of the president’s picture, deleted from his field of vision. The disappeared. Not to be counted, obviously. Not to be aided. Not to be given a meaningful chance. But, as crucial, not to be seen at all. In Washington, in Raleigh, not to be seen at all.

And, of course, all this occurs in a state and a country where huge numbers of us, and most of our leaders, claim that we have so much poverty because we’re too generous with welfare benefits. But the United States treats its poor more harshly than other advanced countries. If being tough on poor people reduces poverty we ought to have the fewest poor people. Instead, we have the most. We’re the richest, the poorest & the most unequal major nation in the world. Despite all our protestations and allegiances and commitments, the most unequal nation in the world.

The frank truth is if the exclusions and indignities of American race and poverty are right, the Constitution’s wrong.

If the debilitations of those locked at the bottom are acceptable, our scriptures are wrong.

If these denials of equal citizenship and humanity are permissible, we pledge allegiance to a cynical illusion, not a foundational creed.

And I think we know it. It’s like LBJ once said, “we may not know everything, but we know the difference between chicken shit and chicken salad.”

Johnson wasn’t always crude. Just almost always. I spent a lot of my youth protesting Lyndon Johnson. He horrified in war. He was this big, complicated, inconsistent, hypocritical, larger than life, Texan. [I grew up on the edge of Mesquite Texas.] Johnson would holler at you, wave his arms, sweat on you, spit on – I don’t know why I’m drawn to him.

But he also taught that American poverty touches both our personal conscience and our national mission. Under circumstances not unlike our own, he said this:

**“Rarely in any time does an issue lay bare the secret heart of America itself. Rarely are we met with a challenge, not to our growth or abundance or our security, but rather to the values and the purposes and the meaning of our beloved nation.  And should we defeat every enemy, and should we double our wealth and conquer the stars, and still be unequal to this task, then we will have failed as a people and as a nation. For, with a country as with a person, what is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world, and** **lose his soul?’ For what does a man profit?”**