

INTERVIEW WITH CATHY LOW, MEMBER OF THE VOLUNTEER CORPS OF ATD FOURTH WORLD



Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “Father Wresinski’s core message engraved in the Trocadero in Paris [was that] “Wherever men and women are condemned to live in extreme poverty, human rights are violated. To come together to ensure that these rights be respected is our solemn duty.”
- “We brought Sonia and the children to meet the President of the national council in Switzerland. They prepared intensively for this meeting. They talked about their life, what it meant to be separated from their family, growing up in poverty, and their dreams. Children and their words can change the world!”

You are a member of the volunteer corps of the International Movement ATD Fourth World. What are the Movement and its volunteer corps?

ATD (All Together in Dignity) is a Movement that gathers people from all backgrounds to think, act and live together differently for a world without extreme poverty. Since the foundation of the organization 60 years ago, ATD Fourth World has been inspired by Father Joseph Wresinski’s own experience as a child in a poverty-stricken family and his daily contacts with very poor families. His purpose was to unite all sections of society around those in extreme poverty.

When he joined a homeless camp near Paris where more than 300 families lived in 1957, he asked women and men from diverse social and cultural origins to join him on a long-term goal to overcome extreme poverty. The volunteer corps consists of full time staff working with the organization and rallying around Father Wresinski’s core message engraved in the Trocadero in Paris: “Wherever men and women are condemned to live in extreme poverty, human rights are violated. To come together to ensure that these rights be respected is our solemn duty.” Today, we are around 400 full time volunteers in 30 countries. Although we have different missions, our main purpose is to stay close to very poor families.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, Cathy Low, a member of the volunteer corps of the International Movement ATD Fourth World, explains the aims of the movement and her own experience in working with families in extreme poverty.

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What kind of work do you do in the Movement?

For more than eight years in Geneva, Switzerland, my focus was on reaching poor families with young children, facilitating street libraries, and developing a network of organizations and friends through the October 17th committee (International Day to Overcome Extreme Poverty) and advocacy at the United Nations.

Families in extreme poverty are hard to reach. How do you manage to meet them and work with them?

It is true that these families are hard to reach, especially in a country like Switzerland because poverty is hidden. They are very dependent on institutions and suffer a lot about it. It takes time for people to understand that we are not an institution and not a threat to them. Being in Geneva for more than 30 years, we have established links with families and their children, sometimes even their grandchildren through street libraries and creative workshops and by accompanying them in their daily struggles.

Some of these families have become activists and have been very much involved in ATD for many years, but it is also important that we try to reach out to new families with young children. The families we have known for some time helped me to reach younger families, like Michelle who insisted that it is through their children that I could reach these young families. I ran a street library in a neighborhood with families living on welfare and asylum-seekers. Each week, little by little, as they enjoyed reading books, the children and their parents opened up to me. They trusted me and opened their doors to me. I understood their lives better, the challenges they face, the hope for their children to have a better future.

I also began to share with them our concerns about reaching other families living in poverty. As a result, some families introduce me to other families. Reaching these families requires time and humility but also support and training. Some of them today participate in our projects, including week-ends of respite or research using our merging of knowledge approach whereby the knowledge of all, and especially the poor, is valued.

Could you share an example of a family whom you worked with and how her experience may have affected you?

I got to know a family through the street library. The couple has four children and is on welfare. The parents are illiterate. They had quite a difficult relationship with the Swiss social services. I first met them eight years ago and the father was quite wary of me. But the mother and the children loved the books I was bringing and the time we spent together. I could see that their life was chaotic and uncertain. But we shared very beautiful moments in their

home, usually around a book with the children. The eldest daughter, Sonia, is now 17. She shared a lot about her own life to me, her difficulties between the expectations of her family and the Swiss society, the values she learnt from her family, the exclusion she experienced at school. It was a lot for her to deal with.

Eventually, the social services decided to put the children into foster care. They recognized the love for each other that the family members had, but they thought that the parents could not provide a good education and upbringing to their children. I accompanied them to court to try to defend them. After the verdict, Alex, the father, told me that although they lost the case, my support for them had given him his dignity back during the hearing, and that was important for him. Although I could understand the concerns of the institutions, the voices of the parents were not really respected during the whole process and the parents were not considered as partners in the upbringing of their children. It was even said that they were not « a normal Swiss family ».

I also think of a young Swiss couple, Jean and Sophie. Their life has been very chaotic, as they had to live in one hotel after another. Sophie was discriminated against at work because she is Swiss in a context of low-paid jobs where many of the other workers were foreigners. Jean has learning difficulties and he was excluded at school because of his inability to learn how to read and write. He had endured the violence of this exclusion on a daily basis. I see his rejection of institutions as a resistance, in order not to be told by others what to do. It made me think of the research done by ATD Fourth World and Oxford University on the hidden dimensions of poverty in 2019¹. One of the main sources of suffering expressed by people living in poverty is to be denied to right to act by themselves, to be disempowered.

What are the main challenges that families in extreme poverty face today because of the pandemic?

In the beginning of the pandemic, one of the main difficulties we faced was to keep in contact with the families. We could see that social distancing had put mental stress on people, especially as their children were not able to continue to learn in schools. And for parents who had children in foster care, it was nearly impossible for them to be in contact with their children. Not being able to participate in various activities had an impact on the families' mental health. Some people we know, even young persons, died of COVID-19 because their health was already poor before the pandemic.

Paul Uzell, an activist in Ireland summarized quite well what many families we know would say. *"In this period of*

¹ <https://www.atd-fourthworld.org/international-advocacy/dimensions-of-poverty/>

lockdown we have all in many ways been made aware of what it means to lose your freedom... to live in isolation... to have reduced choices... to have a finger pointed at you. This is giving people an insight into what we are living – me and many people struggling in our own community live this reality day-to-day.” Another activist in France says “Maybe we could also teach people to live with little, it is something that we know how to do.” They could also help society to face the pandemic if we listen to them.

How can we respond to these challenges? What is needed?

We first need to recognize that people living in extreme poverty are the first to fight it. Instead of blaming them for their poverty, we need to find a path together. Extreme poverty is a challenge for the whole society, but it is not a fatality. Answers are diverse and everyone can play a role where he/she is, given his/her own responsibilities. Father Wresinski’s vision was to unite all, from citizens to

politicians and organizations around people in poverty as the first partners to end it. We can find solutions to promote a society respectful of all people and of the earth as a pre-condition for peace.

Could you share your personal journey? How did you end up joining the Movement's volunteer corps?

I grew up in a farm in a rural area. My father was close to travelling families even though his neighbors were always telling him not to be. He and my mother were also very much involved in the community through sports, their parish, and a cooperative. Growing up in the village, I could see the gap between people from different social backgrounds and the exclusion some experienced. This questioned me. Meeting ATD Fourth World changed my life. It provided me with a space where this issue could be discussed. We can be close to those living in exclusion and try to understand them and also find some support when needed. Still, today, it is a school of life for me.



Photo: Cathy Low animating in a street library in Geneva.

Could you finally share a personal anecdote with our readers? What else are you passionate about, or particularly interested in?

I am passionate about working with children. The street libraries have always been an opportunity where I found myself so at ease, even if they are challenging. In 2019 in Geneva, we worked with the children on the rights of the child. I could see that over the years, the children gained in confidence. They started to speak for themselves in the street libraries. I decided to use the story of Nobel Laureate Malala, the young girl who fights for education in her country Pakistan. Children were really interested by

her story and her commitment. I could see how important it is to give them opportunities to discover people who are models of inspiration. That year, we brought Sonia and the children to meet the President of the National Council in Switzerland. They had prepared intensively and seriously for this meeting. They talked about their life in their community, what it meant to be separated from their family, growing up in poverty, and their dreams. They experienced speaking in front of a public and being listened to. It was a memorable moment for all of us and they gained so much confidence and pride. I really love being part of that. I know that children and their words can change the world.



Photo: Children share their options with the National Council in Switzerland.