

*Burt Blatt's important role as social critic did not begin with his landmark book *Christmas in Purgatory* and it will not end with his evaluation of recent progress in institutional care. We may not always agree with his perspective, but Dr. Blatt makes it difficult for professionals and parents to hide behind conventional practice as justification for not humanizing our work with the disabled.*

The director of the institution I'm headed for has been transferred, the *Times* reports: Transferred to a new position while maintaining his previous salary of \$42,000 a year. Another story has people going to court to get the residents of the institution transferred to new positions—positions with their families or foster homes, virtually anywhere so long as they are out of the institution. I happen to know something of the economics of that institution. I know that it costs \$30,000 a year to keep each resident in the institution and can't help wondering if they, too, would maintain their "salaries" if transferred back to their homes. But the rules for mentally retarded people are different from the rules of their keepers....

The institution was small (that is, for institutions), clean (as institutions go), more homelike than the traditional large places (although less homelike than my home) and expensive almost beyond belief. The building, which could hold about 140 residents cost over \$11,000,000, which works out to almost \$80,000 for each bed. The yearly cost of running the place with its 120 current residents was \$8,000,000, or about \$65,000 per resident. It was the most expensive program for retarded people I had ever seen—yet there wasn't anything particularly exceptional about it. The quality of life here was certainly above the average for institutions, but not all that different from many other places one can find around the country. Throughout my tour, I couldn't take my mind off the costs. Institutionalized people, sleeping in \$80,000 beds and with "incomes" of \$65,000 a year—they were still institutionalized. They were ostracized, and isolated, killing time, their lives hopelessly and inevitably wasted. They had asked for bread, but were given an expensive stone.

The more I saw, the more clearly I was driven to a harsh conclusion which I am beginning to find inescapable: People are not institutionalized for their good but for their money.

It's a conclusion which is hard to accept because it seems so cynical, if not paranoid. Yet, over and over I

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find economics at the bottom of problems which well-meaning people have tried to treat as educational, or philosophical or therapeutic. Indeed, several weeks after my visit to this institution, the director of its program confirmed the conclusion for me. I had given a talk on the economics of mental retardation, and used his institution as an example. The gist of the talk went something like this: Most states finance institutions the same way people finance their home, by mortgaging the property. To pay off the mortgage, the states count on the money to which mentally retarded people are entitled—most of it through social security payments. But such payment can be applied to construction debts only if those mentally retarded people occupy the buildings. Thus, if the people were moved from a new institution to community accommodations, a serious problem would arise: Who would pay off the bond holders?

The director of that institutional program had been irritated by my use of his institution as an example of the tremendous expenses which can only be met by keeping people locked up. He pointed out that the institution was not full; that when it is eventually filled to capacity, the *per capita* cost will fall from \$65,000 to \$45,000, maybe as low as \$30,000 a year.

If only I could still be amused by such logic. Even in finding fault with my presentation, he was illustrating my point: The institution needs more inmates to defray the cost. If only one person were left in the place, it would cost that person \$8,000,000 a year. In fact if no one were left, it would still cost \$8,000,000 a year. The state is committed to paying the money no matter what. This is why we literally can't afford to evacuate institutions. To challenge the institutional approach to the problems of mental retardation is to threaten solvency of the state in meeting its bond obligations, to endanger its economic structure by raising the specter of an unemployed army of civil servants who now work in institutions and, ultimately, to attack the stability of political powers which rest on the continuation of present financial and employment patterns. ■

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THE FAMILY PAPERS: A Return to Purgatory is available from THE EXCEPTIONAL PARENT bookstore (\$14.50).