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Prosperity Gospel: an excerpt

Charter Weeks and Keith Flynn

Abstract

This photo essay documents the effects of the Great Recession (2008-) in the rural counties of North Carolina, as captured by the photography of Charter Weeks and in the stories of Keith Flynn. The larger project, from which this selection has been built, contains interviews with over one hundred people and several thousand images.

Introduction to *Prosperity Gospel*

There are certain events that seem to be markers upon history and whatever their cyclical nature, it is the record of these events that remain foremost in the consciousness of future generations. In the modern sense I would suggest that photography is one of most powerful preservers of both the emotional and actual record of transformational events. I like to say photography keeps yesterday safe for tomorrow.

From Matthew Brady's Civil War photographs at Andersonville, Shiloh and Gettysburg to Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange's images of the Great Depression to the myriad photographers of the Vietnam War and Civil Rights movement, photography has played a central role in shaping legislative policy and public opinion.

As this modern recession began to unfold, with deeper and deeper consequences and unfolding devastation for American families, I felt that some record was demanded if we were not to forget the toll this crisis has taken on our national psyche and the individual lives of millions of Americans.

To backtrack a little, my son and his family were involved in a near fatal automobile accident in August 2011. A person died of a heart attack and drove into them head-on at 50 mph. Our son was medevac'd to the trauma center at Charlotte, North Carolina. My wife and I, in order to travel the next day, were charged almost \$4000 by US Airways to be with our son.

The third night we were there we came back from supper to find Keith Flynn in Sebastian's room. The hospital policy was that only family could visit the trauma center so Keith announced that he was Sebastian's brother. Marie and I were touched that he had driven three hours from his home in Madison County to see our seriously injured boy. A month later, Marie and I went back to our son's home in Asheville, North Carolina to help with making their home wheelchair friendly. And again Keith Flynn showed up. And so began our journey of this book. We sat drinking whiskey and talking about what in god's name was happening to this country and the stupidity and greed that had so transformed our world.

Keith Flynn is a writer and musician and a native of Madison County North Carolina. We decided that together we'd look at this part of Appalachia as emblematic of our national crisis. We agreed the subject of our inquiry was not the poverty that has been so much attributed to this region, but rather the impact of this Great Recession on the people of these communities in a 75 mile radius of Asheville into southern Tennessee.

Keith picked me up at the Charlotte airport on December 26, 2011 and we drove the three hours to his home in White Rock in Madison County. We drove in the waning light of the winter afternoon unsure if our project would accommodate our personal views about the worlds of politics, social organization or art, to mention just a few of the potential stumbling blocks.

We have by now become fast friends with few if any philosophical disagreements. We've probably driven close to 1500 miles. We have interviewed and photographed over 100 people from every imaginable walk of life. I like to think of Keith as the Neal Cassady of this road trip

The nationwide story would require more time and money than we can manage but the devastating effects of this recession are being unequally dispensed in the inner cities of New York, Chicago, LA or Atlanta where unemployment has hovered around 50% for black and Hispanic households. A New York Times article in the summer of 2012 said that there were 27,000 homeless children in the city. This is a staggering number with long-term consequences we do not know how to assess.

On the first day that Keith and I were together, he drove us a couple of hundred miles just to orient me to the area. It is filled with steep hills and narrow valleys with rivers that run along the valley bottoms. It is pretty. It is poor. And much of it is 40 minutes away from things a person might normally need like a pharmacy or a real food store or liquor store.

Initially we had no idea how we were going to proceed but we very quickly developed what a friend calls "the kamikaze interview." We would drive along and see something that interested us. It could be a person working in a field or a commercial establishment, or in some cases, a person we'd made an appointment with. We would simply start asking questions and taking pictures. People were amazingly open once we told them what we were doing. We were only turned down once by a person who wanted to be paid.

It is important to understand that America is not in the same place it was 80 years ago in the Great Depression. There are no breadlines. There are no Hoovervilles. There is no Dustbowl or California migration. Food stamps, public housing and unemployment insurance have dampened the suffering and despair in the sense that very few people are literally starving.

As we began our journey, multiple social forces were coalescing to influence public opinion on the extreme right. The Tea Party movement, with its antigovernment, antitax philosophy, had just swept federal and state elections the previous November. At the same time a ragtag army of young people, anarchists and lefties started the Occupy Movement with Occupy Wall Street. They took over a park in downtown Manhattan near the stock exchange. Their message was focused on the inequality between average working people who

comprised 99% of the population and the 1% of the financial and industrial, military, and financial ruling class.

Both the left and the right found themselves united in complete exasperation with the status quo, and the result was political gridlock in Washington and around the country with union busting, strikes, police actions against demonstrators, homeless people expelled from the camps, and general dysfunction everywhere.

The collapse of the Lehman Brothers brokerage firm in 2008 was the straw that broke the camel's back and cascading events led the United States to the brink of total economic collapse. There has been much written about this, so I will not dwell on the details but it must be said that two wars in the Mideast started by the Bush Administration and paid for entirely by debt were a major contributor to the unwinding of economic stability.

This is a national story of unprecedented proportions. Despite the government's claims that it is over, it quite simply is not. A very large portion of the jobs lost will never return and the people who filled them will, for the most part, never work again. From now on, without at least a high school diploma, they will almost certainly never be more than day laborers and more likely "entrepreneur" as drug dealers, thieves or prostitutes.

It is our hope that these individuals with their photographs and stories will make real the extent and complexity of the recession on real people. They are not in breadlines. Except for the homeless, they are not in tent camps. They are not hunkered down in sod houses in Oklahoma because this after all is the 21st century. But this is their story the story, of our time. And it only touches the surface.

Charter Weeks
Fall 2013



Cindy Wessinger

The first time I saw Cindy Wessinger was on a promotional videotape in the offices of the Community Housing Coalition and she was sitting in a wheelchair in her newly constructed house, thanking the small army of volunteers who had come from all over the state to build it for her. With tears streaming down her face, her gratitude was clear and her story unforgettable. Originally born in Alaska, her family moved to Lexington, SC after an earthquake spooked them and there a pattern began to form. Sexually abused by her father from infancy, Cindy was kicked out of her home upon this discovery by her mother at age 12, and was forced to live on the streets. After a string of failed relationships, and battles with alcohol and drug abuse, she settled with a man she thought would be a savior to her and her two small boys. But a new pattern of abuse began to escalate as her husband became hooked on greater quantities of crystal meth and set up a secret lab to cook it. This scenario exploded into a horrifying incident in which her husband held Cindy and her sons hostage, forced them to play Russian roulette for hours with a loaded gun, eventually throwing one of her sons out of the second story window, breaking his back, and stabbing Cindy repeatedly with a broken light bulb and cutting her throat with it. He then set the house on fire, took his tractor and turned over their car on its top and left, leaving his family for dead. But Cindy, a survivor all her life, managed to call 911 and was saved by paramedics. In the video I had seen of her, she was recovering from her injuries, and weighed 189 pounds. When Charter and I visited her in

her home, six years later, she is walking on her own, polishing her new motorcycle and weighed all of 88 pounds. Now diagnosed with Buerger's Disease and suffering from cancer, she has jump-started her sewing and alteration business and trying to find a measure of peace. Thirty-six years since she last saw her father, she tracked him down and forgave him for his treatment of her as a child. She is nurturing a small koi pond in the backyard and trying to keep the local "critters" from taking them. "I always wanted to write a book about my life," she tells us, "but I'm illiterate." She carefully lays out the fabric for the clothes she is working on as she tearfully recounts her story to us. "I guess I'm lucky," she says, "my boys are healthy and somebody killed my son of a bitch husband in jail. I get lonely here by myself, but things could always be worse, you know?"



Francena & Bubbles

"We must like each other," says Francena Griffith, 57, "we've been friends for 35 years. And I don't think we ever had a cross word between us." She is speaking of Ceretha Griffin, "just call me Bubbles," she informs us, and the two of them have created Just Folks, a community service organization that helps citizens of the projects and inner-city with a wide variety of volunteer programs. They find rides for the elderly to get to their medical appointments, they mobilize car pools so that their constituents make it to the polls to vote, they have women's health education classes and provide child-care services and training classes for unwed, pregnant mothers. They have organized tutoring services, literacy programs, helped to build safe playgrounds and beautification projects for the needy, as well as refurbishing the park where our interview is taking place. They are orchestrating a series of historic murals on the walls that overlook this small park in the center of a sprawling series of intersecting streets and cultures. In the distance are the police station, the courthouse, the arts museum, the firehouse, and the finest theater in the area. But somehow this little backwater called The Block, alongside Market and Eagle Streets has always been a place known for the small coveys of drug dealers, prostitutes, and all types of unsavory characters. "I grew up on Eagle Street," says Ceretha. "I know what goes on down here. I put my own elbow grease into these murals, and helped to choose the historical events that are depicted here. I recruit hard to get help for this organization. It's part of my soul." Francena grew up in nearby Montford, an only child and heir to two generations of bootleggers. "My

granddad kept a big pot of shine on the kitchen table and folks would come in and dip in their cups and leave their money in a jar by the door. Nobody messed with my family. They knew better. We ran the numbers games on the other side of Mt. Zion Church." Francena's activism grew out of her long employment search. She worked in food service at Disney World, and has done catering, but has been unable to find a job for the last three years. "Ageism is an issue" she says, "People discriminate worse against older people than they do against minorities, it seems to me." Bubbles joins in after she hears that. "African-Americans have a very hard time getting employed around here. We have lots of black politicians, and a black mayor, who's a woman. Hell, we got a black president now. But these folks be skinnin' and grinnin', got one hand in your pocket, while they be patting you on the back with the other one. I really haven't seen any change. I believe in Obama's vision. But he seems like he's trying to get along with everybody rather than to change the status quo. That's his biggest problem, if you ask me. There are only two black-owned businesses still left here on the block, and I don't see anyone doing anything to help minority business owners. Nobody. I just don't trust public officials, never have." Just Folks is the first African-American non-profit organization to adopt a park here, and to establish a food bank. Every Saturday for the past seven years, the group has sponsored festivals where there is live music and food served to the community, and Gospel Goodness every Sunday. "The homeless problem is getting worse and worse, and you know this administration continues to take away the funding for affordable housing," says Bubbles, who takes a breath, points her finger and continues. "We need more love in the community. Tougher and sweeter both, with everyone keeping an eye out for each other's children, policing them, keeping them straight, lifting them up." At this point, Francena intercedes and agrees with Bubbles. "Kids today have no respect for their elders or for authority figures. The schools even want to tell us how to discipline our own children. I took a switch to school to handle a problem myself. The police tried to stop me, then they said they wished there were more parents like me, once we were outside. The police need all the help they can get." Both women have three grown children, and both believe that if there was more focus on history, on the truth of their own history, that children would be more compelled to learn. Bubbles got the last word. "We need to start giving the history back to the children ourselves," she says. "That's the message of the murals in this park. We hope that our efforts will result in a published People's History of this area, with a focus on things that our people can be proud of, what we've accomplished despite the forces arrayed against us. That's the true history, the one passed among us, that uplifts the spirits of our young ones."



Truman Solesbee

Eighty-two year-old Truman Solesbee worked for fifty-seven years out of his shop across the road from his father's old house. Hopewell Upholstery and Trim still has a sign on the building, but Truman says "the rheumatism" has kept him from sewing for the last few years. But when he was in demand, "we went all over the United States and Europe," he circles with his hand, "and we always left 'em satisfied." Truman has lived in his shop since 1985, when "the Feds widened the road and wiped out our old home place," he says angrily. "They

said they would pay to relocate me,” he continues, “but they just disappeared and left me with nothing. Me and my family beat one of them bastards up real good and he had plenty of time in the hospital to think about what he’d done. We was going to shoot his partner, but he turned out to be all right, and eventually tried to help us. But I’m still here and ain’t never got no help from the government. I don’t trust no politician, never will.” He tells me how the interior of a Cadillac is upholstered and says that he hopes to start working again next year. “When I get the feeling back in my hands and my leg, I’ll be able to get some work done,” he says. “Come back and see me anytime, but watch that goddam road when you pull out, lots of people been killed in that blind curve.”



Truman is prophetic as it turns out. Three months after I interviewed him, a 16-year-old kid was doing almost 100 MPH as he turned into the corner above Truman’s shop, and his car began to flip end over end after its nose dropped into the ditch and pitched the bucking vehicle like a saw blade over the top of Truman’s little red pickup and finally planted itself, landing in the left side of the house hood first, as if God had grown tired of the thing and just thrown it from the sky haphazardly. Thankfully, Truman escaped uninjured, “out the back through a secret place,” he told the *Marshall News-Record*, and now must contend with the organized, bureaucratic forces of insurance agents, car salesmen and real estate professionals once again. When we spy a new little white truck sitting in front of the condemned building, where the front door had been wrapped in police tape, we guessed correctly that Truman would be there, sorting through what was left of his life. Sitting on the edge of a makeshift bed, flashlight in his hand, he says that “hooligans stole more than \$10,000 worth of tools out of here while I’ve been gone,” and sadly shakes his head. “People used to help a neighbor. Nobody would even think of stealing from each other. All

you had to do was ask and folks would help. Didn't even have to ask most times." He proudly shows us an ancient sewing machine, that he says is more than eighty years old. It looks like it hasn't been used in decades, but Truman strokes the wood on top like you would pat the head of a good dog. "I tell you, that car coming through the house like to scared me to death," he says, barely above a whisper. "It sounded like a hurricane. I was in the hospital for nearly six weeks recuperating. All of them doctors was watching my heart to see what it was going to do. But I'm still here." He's now getting settled in a public housing apartment on the north side of Marshall. "Come see me," he tells us, "I ain't going to be doing much." I promise I will, sincerely meaning it, and shake his hand, which is soft as velvet.



Tonya

Tonya is 50, with OCD and other mental disorders, and she spins a mad story of her past life and what landed her in her present straits, homeless in a river camp with Roger Pratt. Pratt is 42, from Palm Beach, FL and homeless, off and on, he tells us, since he was thirteen years old, and an orphan since he was teenager. He last held a job over ten years ago, driving a truck, until a DUI conviction took his license. He seems the calm center of this particular encampment, which is the landing strip for turbulent visitors that blow through on their way to

somewhere else. Though some stick on the periphery, like the sleeping couple forty yards away, piled under dirty blankets beneath the train trestle, Tonya and Roger have made a camp here for over two years, and fiercely resist any attempts to push them out. Roger offers us hot dogs and beans, while Tonya spins the threads of her story for us. Her first husband physically abused her and her two daughters in Charlotte, NC, where they lived in a \$600,000 home, took their girls to beauty pageants and dance lessons and ran a retail store together. When the beatings from her husband reached a crescendo, Tonya says "I shot him with a .357 Magnum through the hip, and I told him if you ever put your hands on me or the girls again, the undertaker will be wiping your ass." She tells us that she had received a bachelor's degree in psychology and a graduate degree in child development, but "was too sensitive to keep counseling youngsters, and couldn't listen to their stories without having nightmares." She divorced her first husband and seemed to find happiness with a second, until he died in a freak boating accident when he was caught by a net and drug under the boat, drowning before Tonya and the others could save him. Her life began to spiral completely out of control after this, she tells us, losing her home and her daughters. She took a union job as a roadie backstage in Charlotte, but lost it when she began to have severe health problems. Alone in a snowstorm in Asheville, Tonya piled her truck into a deep ditch, and was taken to Mission Hospital, where she was diagnosed with clots on her brain stem, had a stroke and was given several stents to stop the bleeding. She says she only remembers parts of her life now, and has only begun to speak again in the last two months, with Roger's help. She says that she knows "she is half-Cherokee," and if she could just get her papers to prove it, then she could "get a check from the casino and get us out of this mess." Arrested several times for vagrancy, she knows "the police have her picture," and she moves around town with a baseball hat pulled low over her face when she heads out of the camp for supplies. She is happier today than usual, Roger adds, she has reconnected with one of her daughters, who is expected to deliver her first grandchild any time. This news sets Tonya crying again, and we stare at the slow muddy river ten steps away, gliding past us like a giant brown cloud, filled with the detritus of all these lives, an escape and a barrier at the same time, hypnotic and terrifying in its quiet power, absolving this land of nothing.



Manuel Taylor

Born in Ft. Bragg and stationed at Ft. Polk, Louisiana, driving petroleum tankers for the Army, 38-year-old Manuel Taylor has been on the streets for a year, “couch-surfing and whatnot,” and pushes his grocery cart from downtown Asheville four or five miles to the metal scrap yard in Biltmore every day. Some places have learned to look for him and if they have any scrap, they wait to put it out until he rolls by. He has made this into a living, averaging about \$25 a day, some days more, depending on the size and quality of the metal detritus he accumulates. He says that “two felonies, for forgery and possession,” kept him from being able to get a real job, and that he was “too busy hustling” to apply for public housing or “any of that government stuff.” “I’ve turned my life around,” he tells us, “I might have jacked a WalMart, back in the day, if stuff was laying around the parking lot, but I’m a better man now.” He flashes a million dollar smile and leans on his cart, “this stuff here is just like freemoney.com, know what I mean?” Before we can drive away, he is already singing under his breath, and pushing his overloaded cart, which resembles some ramshackle church organ, toward the scrap yard.



Troy

Troy did tree work until the larger companies crushed out all the independents in the area by underbidding them. His wife, Christine, has fibromyalgia and used to do factory work at the local CD packing plant until her pain became too intense for her to stay on the assembly line. Now they've settled in North View Park. "They call this Little Mexico," says Troy, and he tells me that 90% of the families in this trailer park are Hispanic. "If you had to guess the unemployment rate in this park, what would you guess?" I ask him. "80% easy," he replies, "there ain't no work for nobody, don't matter what color you are." His son, Luke, practicing his yo-yo tricks, is back in kindergarten, and the boy's sister, Crystal, is learning Spanish from her best friend across the street. I ask if they like poetry, and when they answer in the affirmative, I give them a copy of *The Asheville Poetry Review*. "Wouldn't matter to me," Troy laughs, "I can't read shit. It all looks just like little sticks on a napkin."



Sheila Treadway

The store where Sheila Treadway and her husband, James, have established their gun shop has been a consignment store, a medical massage office, and a half-dozen other enterprises over the last ten years or so. It's a cabin with a small front porch, and right on the highway, a location mirage that incites prospective small business owners to buy some inventory and move in and then casts them out, one by one, as they sit invisible to the multitude of cars rolling right past their door on Hwy 25-70. When the stimulus funds were being allocated to the states in the aftermath of the economic downturn in 2008, Sheila and James were running Treadway Excavating and Trucking, with several folks working with them and state contracts as far as the eye could see. Then the money started drying up. "We lost seven contracts in one day." Sheila remembers, "and I told James we better start figuring out something else." With seven children to feed, including the youngest, just three years old, they decided to try this shop, with James doing the gunsmithing and repairs for the hunting and gun enthusiasts who purchase the various models of rifles, handguns, and hunting bows on offer here. Sheila calls the office where James works "his Pout House, 'cause when he's had all he can take he heads in there and don't come out for hours. Besides the automatic weapons, we do the most business with the bow hunters," Treadway says, "bows are like shoes to a woman, every year they need the new models." I start to ask her if they sell

automatic assault weapons and this starts a conversation about the recent shooting at a movie theater in Aurora, CO, where James Holmes systematically shot over 70 people while wearing body armor and throwing smoke grenades to confuse his victims. "There's a lot of people that don't think he's the real shooter," Treadway answers, "there are witnesses that don't remember seeing a red-headed man with dyed hair pulling the trigger. And outside, after all the carnage was over, they catch this mumbling nut, who can't even load his gun. There are folks in the know who think this is the government's way of starting the registration lists, to start taking guns away from the populace. And it won't work." It takes me a second to digest what she had just said, and when I confess suspicion, she goes in the back room and brings out an AR-15 semi-automatic weapon, with an additional clip of ammunition, the same kind of weapon James Holmes had just used in Aurora. "Now there is just no way he got off that many shots with this clip," Treadway says, "he would have needed a clip like this." She pulls another clip out of a box and shows us the difference, this one capable of 100 shots in under two minutes. The image of her standing there with her baby on one hip and that sophisticated machine gun on her other hip is seared on my eyeballs. "The government wants to act like a buyback of automatic weapons is an equal trade. But that's bullshit. This weapon costs over \$1200, and they want to give us \$300 and say that's equal value. If we participate in any buyback program, we're out of business, and every small shop like ours will be out of business. The people who want to take our guns know that." She says that she sells about 6-8 assault weapons a month, but she knows dealers that move as many as a 100. "They are flying off the shelves because people are afraid of this president and they know that he can't be trusted. Once you take the gun owner out of the equation, then the government can do anything they want." Originally from Michigan, Treadway's father was a preacher and a funeral director who taught her to be skeptical "and anything that sounds too good to be true, usually is." I hold the baby for a minute while Sheila puts away some of the handguns on the counter that she had laid out for us to see them. We talk about many of the county residents that we know, and figure out that we might actually be cousins by marriage, since my grandmother was a Treadway before marriage. The world is always smaller than we think it is. "And more dangerous," says Sheila, "unless you're ready." As I leave, I hug her neck and give the baby a kiss. Some things you can never be ready for.

About the authors

Charter Weeks has been a documentary and commercial photographer for 50 years. His work has appeared in numerous journals and publications including *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *South Loop*, *Hanging Loose*, and *Corvette Fever*. His work has been exhibited in galleries and museums in New Hampshire, Maine, Massachusetts, New York, Colorado and California. You may see more of his work at www.charterweeks.com or write him at: <mailto:mcw@charterweeks.com>

Keith Flynn (www.keithflynn.net) is the award-winning author of seven books, including five collections of poetry and two works of non-fiction. His most recent titles include *The Lost Sea* (2000), *The Golden Ratio* (2007), *Colony Collapse Disorder* (Wings Press, 2013), and a collection of essays, entitled *The Rhythm Method, Razzmatazz and Memory: How To Make Your Poetry Swing* (Writer's Digest Books, 2007). Flynn is founder and managing editor of *The Asheville Poetry Review*, which was established in 1994. For more info, please visit: www.ashevillepoetryreview.com.