

READING for Fall 2010 WPE

The Working Class

Oregon Humanities: Summer 2010

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I grew up in a working-class community. We had our own social distinctions—were you a logging company operator’s daughter or a girl whose father pulled on the green chain at the sawmill? A cattle rancher’s son or a stump rancher’s boy? My father even had his own definition of royalty: a man with compassion as well as integrity was “a prince of a guy.” But our families were working people, or wanted to be. Having work was important.

Today, with official unemployment rates in double digits for months on end, nearly fifteen million Americans would like to be part of a “working class” again. One of those fifteen million people is my brother Joe. “When I got my first job at seventeen,” he told me once, “I decided to treat people the way I wanted to be treated myself.” No wonder management in Joe’s last job was excited about his abilities. His coworkers liked him, his customers trusted him. But he worked for a Saturn dealership, and in November 2008 that job, like so many others, disappeared. “I have bad days,” Joe says, “but I get through them. I have to—there’s no alternative.”

What is it like to be unemployed? I got a taste of it twenty years ago when, in the midst of another recession, a late-May tax levy failed and my teaching position was eliminated. “Going down the road talking to yourself” was the expression the men in the lumber camps of my childhood had used for such an experience—accurately enough, I realized as I drove the pickup loaded with books and kitchen chairs away from the home my husband and I thought we had permanently created for our family. By September I was past the initial shock and grief that losing a job can bring, but as I watched the yellow school bus turn the corner and disappear, I wondered how to cope with the feeling of uselessness. I had been a good teacher, yet here I was, sweeping the kitchen floor one more time before I sat down to write another letter begging for a job. If I wasn’t a teacher, who was I? Anyone who has been unemployed has asked some version of that question.

Several months later I got a one-term adjunct teaching job in a community college in northeastern Oregon, and we had to dig our way out of the snow to cross eastern Washington in a whiteout blizzard. Squinting at what I hoped was the road, I kept glancing desperately at the rearview mirror, trying to keep my husband’s battered old pickup in sight. Even then, I knew it was a perfect metaphor for what was happening in our lives.

Which is why, now that I’m retired and don’t have to worry about keeping a job, I can’t stop thinking about those millions of unemployed Americans whose lives are in turmoil. It’s almost impossible to imagine that many wasted human hours: human skills. But it’s all too easy for me to imagine how it’s affecting their health, their marriages, their children. For the past twenty months, my brother has spent his days applying for jobs online and knocking on doors in person. Only one potential employer has written to let him know that the position he applied for had been filled, even after he’s had multiple interviews. You would think it would be easy, not to mention an expected courtesy, to send a group e-mail to the pool of applicants or at least to the people who were called in for interviews, letting them know whether or not the job was filled—

but it doesn't happen. Courtesy toward the working man or woman is not a requirement and hasn't been for a long time. One of the part-time jobs Joe managed to land last year to help extend his unemployment benefits was setting up stock displays for a supplier of big-box stores. His supervisor lived in another state, and he received his work schedule by email—or by phone, if they appeared to be shorthanded that morning. Sometimes he drove to an assignment sixty or seventy miles away only to be sent home, unpaid, after they decided they had enough workers after all. I could go on, but you get the idea.

For the first twenty-five years of his working life, Joe was in the tire business. It was body-breaking work; he spends his evenings on a long therapeutic pad, craving its heat. But this week, pain or no pain, Joe is walking to a minimum-wage part-time job at the Arco station and, as if he were a college student again, checking the want ads to find someone who's willing to rent out a room. He is sixty years old. None of this is happening because Joe did something wrong. He has made, as we say, good choices. He's my brother, and I love him, but people more objective than I will also tell you he's smart and kind and a hard worker. He really does try to live by the Golden Rule.

Our father went to the woods—a phrase that had almost the same emotional power as “went into the service” or even “went to war”—the summer he turned thirteen. I wouldn't want to bring back the world he lived in, except for one thing. I can't imagine him packing in his week's supplies to Johnson's Mill only to be told, “Oh, hello, Bill. Turns out we didn't need you after all. Come back on Tuesday.” The people of his generation wouldn't have put up with it. Can you imagine them, those men and women of the “greatest generation,” agreeing that treating workers this way was justified because, hey, it might make the price of toilet paper a few cents cheaper? For them, work had a purpose beyond creating unlimited profits for a company's stockholders and justifying an off-the-charts bonus for its CEO.

Our current economic hard times have touched everyone, but there's no question that some have been hurt more than others. And it doesn't look as if that's going to change anytime soon. So I wonder: should those of us whose lives are a bit easier be thinking about the attitude behind the idea that workers are fungible? Or that, in a human version of “just-in-time” inventory, it's more efficient to have them appear to perform a specific task and then disappear? Should we be questioning the ongoing waste of human creativity and skill, as well as the increasingly vast disparity of wealth in our country? Have we, gradually and almost without noticing, been lured into accepting the unacceptable? And, if this isn't the kind of culture we want, what might we do about that?

Political candidates get themselves into hot water if they speak about “redistributing the wealth,” but eventually an economy will self-destruct if this doesn't happen, and continue to happen. “The gift must always move,” as Native American cultures have been trying to teach us. We balk at this idea at least partially because we have been carefully taught that those “others”—the people who cut our grass and trim our trees, cut our meat and pick our fruit, those who unpack the boxes and stock the shelves and stand behind the counter to sell us what we need—don't deserve the kind of lives white-collar workers have. It's a belief that threatens the meaningfulness of every life, including our own.

Okay, maybe I'm a socialist: I did vote for Obama. But I wish you could meet my brother. You'd like him; he's a prince of a guy.