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Class Lives: Stories From Across our Economic Divide

Chuck Collins (Ed.)

Jennifer Ladd (Ed.)

Maynard Seider (Ed.)

Felice Yeskel (Ed.)

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Class Lives: Stories From Across our Economic Divide

Abstract

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Sometimes I think of class as our collective, national family secret. And, as any therapist will tell you, family secrets are problematic. With rare exceptions, we just don’t talk about class in the United States. Most of us believe that the United States is a classless society, one that is basically middle class (except for a few unfortunate poor people and some lucky rich ones). Sometimes talk about class is really about race. We have no shared language about class. We have been taught from childhood myths and misconceptions around class mobility and the American dream.

Many of us are confused about class and don’t tend to think about it as consciously as we might our race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, or sexual orientation. Nonetheless, our class identity has a huge impact on every aspect of our lives: from parenting style to how we speak, from what we dare to dream to the likelihood we will spend time in prison, from how we spend our days to how many days we have.

We are living in a period of extraordinary economic insecurity and inequality. It is an inequality that crushes the poor, drains the working class, eliminates the middle class, simultaneously aggrandizes and dehumanizes the rich, and disembowels democracy.

Keywords

class, economic inequality, democracy

Disciplines

Income Distribution | Inequality and Stratification | Labor Relations | Social and Cultural Anthropology

Comments

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CLASS LIVES

*Stories from across
Our Economic Divide*

Edited by

Chuck Collins, Jennifer Ladd,
Maynard Seider, and Felice Yeskel

A CLASS ACTION BOOK

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Introduction

Caviar, College, Coupons, and Cheese

BY FELICE YESKEL

Class is the last great taboo in the United States. It is, according to Noam Chomsky, “the unmentionable five-letter word.”

Even in this period of growing economic inequality, we hardly ever talk about class. We hear daily, in the mainstream media, about unemployment, bailouts, proposed tax cuts or tax hikes, Congress regulating one industry and deregulating another, budget cuts, recession, recovery, roller-coaster markets, CEO bonuses, and more. Given all the attention to economics, it is interesting that talk about social class has been so skimpy.

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Many of us are confused about class and don't tend to think about it as consciously as we might our race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, or sexual orientation. Nonetheless, our class identity has a huge impact on every aspect of our lives: from parenting style to how we

speak, from what we dare to dream to the likelihood we will spend time in prison, from how we spend our days to how many days we have.

We are living in a period of extraordinary economic insecurity and inequality. It is an inequality that crushes the poor, drains the working class, eliminates the middle class, simultaneously aggrandizes and dehumanizes the rich, and disembowels democracy.

My Story of Class Awakening

Since many of us grew up in neighborhoods with an amazing amount of class segregation, we often didn't notice class differences. I have met plenty of folks who grew up quite poor or quite wealthy who never noticed, since everyone around them was the same. They felt "normal." It's often when we cross class boundaries that we notice the differences.

My own class awakening came fairly early in life. When I was five years old, I was sent from my neighborhood in New York City to Hunter College Elementary School on Sixty-Eighth Street and Park Avenue, a school for "intellectually gifted" kids. I not only crossed the miles on the way to school, but the cultures too. The fact that almost all the kids at Hunter were white like me obscured deep differences among us. I learned to act differently, talk differently, and basically to pass as middle class. I never invited anyone home from school because I was ashamed of where I lived. I did, however, visit Park Avenue penthouses where I worried that my very presence might make something dirty.

For work my dad bought used burlap and cotton sacks, the ones that held one hundred pounds of flour, from bagel and bialy bakeries. He came home from work each day caked in flour and sweat. When I asked him what I should tell people when they asked what he did, he said, "bagman." But even as a young kid, I knew I didn't want to say that. He said I could also say "peddler," since he bought the sacks from the bakeries and then sold them to be recycled. I wasn't sure "peddler" was much better.

My mom sold advertising over the phone, which she called "telephone sales." Neither of my parents had gone to college, nor had most of their friends. My school friends all had dads who were professionals, and their moms (if they worked outside the home) were professionals

too. No one ever discussed this difference; it dared not speak its name. But I did acutely feel the difference, and its name was class.

After elementary school, I won a scholarship to a New York City private school (now called an independent school). I already had my school uniform and was ready to start seventh grade when I told my parents I didn't want to go to the fancy school, I wanted to be a regular kid and go to my local public school. My social needs prevailed, so I attended public schools through high school on Manhattan's Lower East Side. While I gave up some benefits academically, I think I made the right emotional choice, because I finally had friends with whom I felt comfortable.

After being the first in my family to go to college, I decided to earn a doctorate in social justice education. I had been involved in teaching about issues of social identity and the social forces that impact the unjust and inequitable distribution of resources, opportunity, and recognition. I use the term "social justice education" rather than diversity or multiculturalism, because social justice education explicitly addresses the issue of differential access to social power in addition to difference.

When I started my graduate program in social justice education there were others who were teaching and developing curricular materials on racism and sexism; work on anti-Semitism, heterosexism, and ableism followed next. But almost no one included the issue of classism. Social class identity was not discussed, nor was oppression based on social class or perceived social class. The issue of classism was not on the agenda for the academy or for most activists, although there were some great writings, mostly from the feminist community.

My experience of having a foot in two different class realities, or being bicultural with respect to class, led to my ongoing engagement with these issues and my decision in the mid-1980s to write my doctoral dissertation on teaching about issues of class and classism.

I explored various academics' perspectives on class. Some talked about class in terms of occupational status, blue/pink collar or white collar, work with the hands or work with the head. I could look up a job title and find out how much prestige or status is associated with that occupation. Some, on the other hand, talked about class in purely economic terms. This framework meant that income or wealth identifies people's class strata: for instance, does their income or wealth place them in the bottom quintile or the middle quintile?

Economists and sociologists with a classical Marxist perspective talked more about power, ownership, and control—who owns the means of production and who sells their labor. According to this view, the vast majority of us are working class selling our labor power—even highly paid physicians, losing control over the conditions under which they labor, with managed care creating a new type of professional assembly line. Theoretically this made sense to me, but I wondered if to the average person a well-paid doctor had a lot in common class-wise with someone flipping burgers.

I found others who looked at class as attitudes, behavior, lifestyle, values, consumption, or culture. Average people often read class into whether someone drinks beer vs. white wine, lattes at independent coffee shops vs. coffee at Dunkin' Donuts.

I imagined two white men in their early thirties. The first, wearing a jacket and tie, works in an office and spends his day at a desk in front of a computer and talking on the telephone, goes home, pours himself a glass of white wine, and listens to NPR. He earns \$30,000 a year. The second man pulls on a pair of coveralls, picks up his tools, and spends his day making house calls as a plumber; when he goes home he opens a can of beer and watches TV. He earns \$59,000 a year. Although worker number two brings home almost twice the income of the first worker, most folks would think that worker one is middle class and worker two is working class. It would seem that money alone doesn't tell the whole story about class.

In short, there was no agreed-upon definition of class. The complexity and multifaceted nature of class and classism became overwhelmingly clear to me. No wonder class was hard to talk about; we weren't even sure what we were talking about.

Luckily I realized before too long that although dealing with class was my life's work, it might not be right for my dissertation. I switched topics. However, I have spent the two decades since then exploring, educating, and organizing around classism and economic inequality.

Responding to Economic Inequality: Working to Change Policy

In 1994, with the economic divide continuing to widen, Chuck Collins and I founded a national nonprofit, United for a Fair Economy (UFE), which raises awareness about how concentrated wealth and

power undermine our economy, corrupt democracy, deepen the racial divide, and tear communities apart.

During my years with UFE, I led hundreds of workshops about growing economic inequality. One of the most popular activities demonstrated wealth distribution in the United States by lining up ten chairs, with each chair representing one-tenth of the total privately owned wealth. We then asked for ten volunteers, with each person representing one-tenth of the total population.

As of 2010, the latest year for which figures are available from the Federal Reserve Board, the richest 10 percent of U.S. households owned 76.7 percent of the nation's private wealth, and the other 90 percent owned a combined total of 23.3 percent.¹ This vast inequality of wealth ownership became powerfully clear when one person stretched across seven chairs and the other nine people crowded onto three chairs. When I asked the person representing the wealthiest 10 percent if he had any advice for the other nine, suggestions in line with our nation's cherished myths would come forward: "work hard," "get a good education," "believe in yourself"—and occasionally a joking "choose the right family."

When I turned to the nine others crowded onto three chairs and asked their thoughts about their situation, their stereotypical responses tended to fall into one of three categories. First, self-blame, in a litany of "if onlies": "If only I'd stayed in school"; "If only I hadn't gotten pregnant"; "If only I'd majored in computer science and not English lit"; "If only I hadn't gotten divorced."

Next came blaming others, sometimes with some pushing and shoving—or, as I came to think of it, "scapegoat du jour": "It's those new immigrants taking our jobs"; "I worked hard for my chair, get your own chair"; "Welfare moms have all those kids—I don't want to pay higher taxes to support their laziness."

The last category was fantasy, or, as I came to think of it, buying lottery tickets: folks on the bottom identifying with the one person with seven chairs and believing that somehow, someday, they would be there.

1. Economic Policy Institute, *State of Working America*, 12th ed. (Cornell University Press, 2012), 379.

All these responses to the extreme wealth inequality in our society are some form of classism. The self-blame is internalized class inferiority, and the other-blame reflects a classist sense of superiority. Without systemic explanations for extreme inequality, people individualize, blaming or lauding individuals. While individual effort, intelligence, and risk-taking do play a role, as does luck, they tell only a small portion of the story.

Information about changes in tax policies, spending policies, wage policies, global competition, and the attacks on unions leading to decreased unionization, to name a few, fly beneath most folks' radar screens. Instead we maintain a set of beliefs and myths—an ideology—that explains and justifies a system that has created a widening gap between the haves and the rest of us.

The numbers make clear this country's level of extreme economic inequality. In 2010, the wealthiest 1 percent owned more wealth (35.4 percent) than the bottom 90 percent combined, and the total inflation-adjusted net worth of the Forbes 400 rose from \$502 billion in 1995 to over \$2 trillion in 2013.²

This extreme inequality is problematic in myriad ways. It is bad for our democracy, bad for our culture, and bad for our economy. As Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis observed, "We can have democracy in this country or great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't have both." Extreme wealth generates extreme power—the power to shape political priorities and cultural norms.

Getting into the Felt Experience of Class and Classism

Although many policy changes would benefit the vast majority of the population, many people routinely vote against their economic self-interest. I remember telling the driver of a taxicab that I was flying to a conference to discuss economic inequality. While we talked, I explained changes in the tax code that benefited asset owners at the expense of wage earners. His response was that he didn't have a lot of

2. Wealth data: *ibid.*, 379. Forbes 400: "Inside the *Forbes* 400," *Forbes*, September 16, 2013, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/luisakroll/2013/09/16/inside-the-2013-forbes-400-facts-and-figures-on-americas-richest/>.

money, but if he did, he wouldn't want anyone to tax it away. Although the chances this cabbie would end up in the top 1 percent are practically nil—as remote as winning the lottery—he identified not with his current reality, but up the class spectrum with his aspirations. Talking with him made clear to me again that just talking about changing economic policy was not enough. We had to change consciousness and ideology as well as policy.

Class is relative, and class is relational. Whom we compare ourselves to determines a lot about our subjective, or felt, experience of class. Many of us socialize with people who are relatively similar to us class-wise. Breaking down these barriers and getting to know others from very different places on the class spectrum are important to challenging assumptions, breaking stereotypes, and challenging class myths.

In 1995 Jenny Ladd, who comes from an owning-class background, and I decided to start a cross-class dialogue group. There were eight of us: four came from poor and working-class backgrounds, and four came from owning-class backgrounds, each with a million dollars of assets or more. The scope of monetary resources in the group ranged from \$60,000 in medical debt to \$14 million in assets.

For over six and a half years, we met for five hours monthly in each other's homes. We saw ourselves as a learning laboratory for understanding the dynamics of class. We shared a lot about our experiences, our hopes, fears, dreams, choices, lack of choices, guilt, anger, shame, and cluelessness. We told each other the amount of money we had, earned, gave away, saved, and spent. We examined the judgments we had of others, and the fears about others' judgments of us. After six and a half years, all of us felt transformed by our collective experience. Some of us took risks we had never thought possible: leaving safe jobs, moving across the country, giving away over half our wealth, refusing future inheritance, and saving for retirement.

Jenny and I wondered if we could bring some of what our cross-class experience had given to us into the world, even though most people wouldn't be likely to spend six and a half years in dialogue and reflection. We started a nonprofit organization in 2005 called Class Action, with the mission of inspiring action to end classism. We wanted to bring class issues into the realm of public conversation—assuming that, as consciousness is raised and language

found to describe class experiences, people across the class spectrum would be more likely to want to change a system that is at odds with basic democratic values of equity, justice, and liberty for all.

One of our basic strategies was to educate people about issues of class and classism. We did this in a variety of ways. We developed workshops that we facilitated in educational, civic, religious, social service, and social change organizations.

In one of the activities we developed for our workshops, we asked participants to get into a single line based on their class of origin—from those who grew up in the “lowest class,” to those who grew up in the “highest class.”

Often folks would stare at us: asking how they were going to do that, or what was the definition of “class.” We suggested they think about what they needed to know to decide where to put themselves on the line in relation to each other. After a few minutes of awkward silence, workshop participants would start to engage in lively conversation. After fifteen or twenty minutes we would ask participants to take their place on the line.

Once we had a single line, we would ask people to share their feelings about doing the activity and about where they were in the line. Often those at both ends of the line had the most intense feelings, such as pride, shame, anger, guilt, surprise, isolation, and anxiety. We would then ask everyone what were the factors or indicators that caused them to place themselves where they had. We collectively developed a list of class indicators.

Class indicators typically included the more “objective” measures such as parents’ highest level of formal education, income, wealth, debt, occupation, home-ownership, and neighborhood. The much longer list of subjective indicators included language (accent, grammar, diction, volume, vocabulary), clothing (new or secondhand, cotton or polyester), posture or carriage, food, recreational activities, expectations, and values. People read class into just about everything

The class indicators also seemed to change depending on where on the class line we focused. For those at the bottom of the spectrum the indicators were about basic survival: was there enough food, or was there a roof over their head at night? As we moved up the class spectrum, indicators included stability of employment and housing, and

what occupation or education parents had. Toward the middle, indicators turned to educational expectations, home-ownership, and vacations. Moving still higher, indicators included travel, multiple home ownership, private schools, and trust funds. At the very top, the most important indicators were who one's people were and one's family and social connections, including relation to royalty.

After doing this activity with hundreds of groups, we found that two of the most memorable indicators at different ends of the spectrum were "Did you use 'summer' as a verb?" at the top, and "Did you eat the cheese?" at the bottom. The cheese referred to is processed cheese that the U.S. government provided to welfare and food stamp recipients during the 1980s and early 1990s. If you ate the cheese, you know who you are. I selected this as one of the indicators in the title of this introduction.

After this activity, we asked participants to create small groups, class-of-origin caucuses, with others who occupied a similar place on the spectrum. Each caucus answered the same set of questions, including, What was good about your experience? What was hard about your experience? What questions do you have for another class group? What questions would you not want to be asked? What is a good name for your group? Groups gave themselves names like "True Grit," "Scrappy Survivors," "Bingo, Ball Games, and Beer," "Coupon Cutters and Caseroles," "Good Grades, College, and Practical Jobs," "Vanilla Wafers and Milk after School," "Volvos and Golden Retrievers," "Private Schools, European Vacations, and Trust Funds," "Nobility and Noblesse Obligers."

After each small group shared its responses with the whole group, we engaged in cross-class dialogue, with groups asking and answering questions. Workshop participants consistently reported that meeting and hearing the firsthand experiences of folks from very different life situations was transformative, and it motivated them to want to do something about classism.

When we do talk about class, we tend to talk only about the strengths of wealth and the limitations of poverty. But in reality it is much more complex. All of us derive strengths as well as limitations from our class position and experience. For example, working-class people learn resourcefulness and the ability to adapt to quickly changing circumstances. Some people raised in the owning class are

paralyzed by an unexpected change or broken system. Because of intense class segregation in this country, few of us have the opportunity to learn about each other's strengths and to grow past our limitations. Cross-class connection is essential to regaining our full humanity.

Why an Anthology?

For many participants, the most powerful part of the workshop is hearing stories from others of similar and different classes. The similarities are validating: they allow people to see that what they thought was unique to their family may in fact be a larger phenomenon. The differences are illuminating, allowing small windows into different worlds.

Over the years, Class Action has reached tens of thousands of people through our website, school curricula, blogs, videos, pamphlets, articles, and workshops. But no matter how many people actually come to our workshops, meet folks from very different class positions, and reflect on how class impacts their lives and what they can do to work against classism, I know there are many thousands more who are hungering for ways to make sense of their class experiences. I hope this book will reach many of them.

Organization of the Book

With our title, *Class Lives*, we see “lives” as a verb as well as a noun. As a verb, it speaks to the power of class, impinging on all of us, whether we are aware of it or not. As a noun, it speaks to the goal of this anthology, to bring out the lives of forty individuals, from across the class spectrum, each unique, yet each very aware of the power of class.

I refer to the class indicators—caviar, college, coupons, and cheese—in this introduction to give a sense of four of the major class groups: caviar for the owning class, college for the middle class, coupons for the working class, and cheese for the poor. The stories included span the class spectrum, providing insight into issues of social class and how all of us are affected.

At the end you'll find a resource section, with information including books and websites to help you to further explore the relationship

of class and society. Also included is the contributors' biographical information: some are previously published writers, many are members of academia, and many are activists. All share the sense of mission and purpose from which this anthology project was born.

There are limitations to this collection of stories. We have many stories from those who grew up poor, but few from folks who grew up poor and still live in poverty. Much, though not all, of our outreach was done through the Internet, and the digital divide certainly accounts for who heard our call and who didn't.

Poverty also suppresses voice. Oppression means we don't get to hear certain realities. People from backgrounds of poverty who have articulated their experience often have some access to privilege, either a parent from a higher class who supported them, more formal education, or more cross-class relationships. Often when someone is dealing with the day-to-day realities of survival, there is little time and energy to write, and little belief in an audience who wants to read about what poverty is really like.

We also lack stories from the super-wealthy or the ruling class. No one from the corporate or political elite felt comfortable sharing his story, or her story. Some considered publishing under a pseudonym, but even that anonymity proved too scary.

While we have several stories from Latinos and people of African descent, which span some of the class spectrum from poor to upper middle class, finding owning-class people of color willing to share their stories was difficult. We talked with several owning-class people of color, but coming out as a minority within a minority creates a super visibility that was too uncomfortable for them, so they decided not to contribute. We also were unable to recruit any stories from people of Asian or Native American background.

While there have been other collections of class stories, we don't think any have been as diverse as this one. We hope reading these stories will encourage you to share your story and to take action to make this a less classist society.

When Class Action envisions a world without classism, it is a world that

- meets everyone's basic needs;
- treats people from every background, class status, and rank with dignity and respect;

- supports the development of all people to their full potential;
- reduces the vast differences in income, wealth, and access to resources; and
- ensures that all people have a voice in the decisions that affect them.

Wouldn't you like to live in that world?

PART I

Poor and Low Income

TO BE POOR IN THE UNITED STATES OR CANADA is not just to be faced with material need on a daily basis, to be “born into the culture of hunger,” to be homeless, or to live without indoor plumbing or electricity. With it comes negative judgment from others and feelings of shame. As one contributor put it: “I understood everything—that I was less, and they were more.” Those feelings lead to attempts to hide one’s stigmatized condition, while living in fear that one will be found out.

The number of people who are officially poor in the United States, by conservative federal standards, continues to rise and now stands at over 16 percent of the population. For children, the figure is even higher, at over 21 percent.¹

Most of the contributors in this section were born poor, but one, Wendy Williams, became poor through divorce and a stepparent’s unemployment. While all have moved out of poverty, the memories and feelings of their early years remain with them. For one, “Time and love and success have

1. U.S. Census, “Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance in the United States in 2012,” <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/incpovhlth/2012/index.html>.

come my way, but I still feel marked and conspicuous.” For another, “I think about class all of the time.”

The stories have much in common for these seven women, whether they came of age in the 1950s or the 1980s. Often the clothes and shoes they wore became the subject of ridicule from young classmates (and even, in one case, from a teacher) and marked them as being “less than.” Or it could be the different-colored lunch ticket they used at school, or the lack of home address on the form, as there was no category labeled “homeless.”

For those born without white-skin privilege, issues of racism added to the class stigma they faced. The complications increased for one Mexican American woman, Geneva Reynaga-Abiko, who, while growing up poor in California, was accused of being “rich” by her extended family back in Mexico. Later, when she became a highly educated and successful professional, her own family accused her of “being white” for leaving the neighborhood to live in a more upscale setting. As Geneva observes, “I often feel guilty for not returning to Fontana, where much of my family still lives,” yet she is “confident that . . . they are unconsciously happy that I have been able to leave the crime-ridden city where we were all born. . . . I am sure they are proud of me.”

Such ambivalent feelings mark the upward mobility of many of these women. As with Geneva, it may come with visits to family members who have not done as well as their daughters. Even at the height of a career as a widely recognized organizer, leader, and author, Linda Stout admits that “even now, sometimes one person’s classist attitude can throw me back to that place of believing I’m not good enough, not smart enough, or strong enough.”

We are reminded that these seven women are not a random or representative sample of women born into poverty, as we learn about their journeys to higher education, well-regarded careers, and, for most of them, adult material security. They gain their own strength in various ways: from loving parents, from supportive extended families, from peers who understood their pain, and from kindly teachers and cafeteria workers. They have learned resilience and resourcefulness. As Fisher Lavell writes about her rural Canadian family, “Survivorship is a gift of my poverty-class upbringing. Resiliency, the ability to take

the blows and come up swinging. Empathy, generosity, an open heart; things you acquire from being rejected, doing without, and carrying a burden alone.” For Linda Stout, a journey to Nicaragua helped her shift her understanding of poverty and to strengthen herself. There she “met people who acknowledged poverty, but who were proud of who they were. They were revolutionaries who knew that the poverty they suffered was a problem of the system—not their personal fault. I came back from that trip with a determination to ‘come out of the closet’ as a poor person.”

And so we can read the many stories of those who have come out of the closet, who now live their authentic lives and engage in the struggle to fight classism. Paradoxically, while their early experiences, often humiliations, stay with them at the level of feeling and remembrance, these experiences have also contributed to the consciousness they have developed and the progressive careers they have chosen.

Cleaning Up the Trash

Fighting Shame

LINDA STOUT

I grew up very poor in the rural South. My father was a tenant farmer, and by the time I was five my mother had become completely disabled from a car wreck. I didn't really realize I was poor . . . at first. My parents were very loving, and I had a joyful life, working from the age of six, while at the same time being allowed to be a kid. I enjoyed my private time with my father when I got up an hour or two early to work in the fields before going to school. We didn't have a bathroom or running water, but I don't remember being dirty. My greatest joy was when we would have a warm summer rain and my mother would send us outside, naked with a bar of soap.

It was only when I started school that the differences began to show up. Another boy and I got made fun of a lot on the bus, especially by older kids. I never really understood why, but knew that the other boy was always dirty and felt that somehow that was the reason they lumped us together. I thought anyone who lived in a brick house, no matter how small and run-down, was rich. We lived the whole time I was growing up in a small ten-foot-by-forty-foot trailer parked on other people's land, so my dream was always to live in a house.

My other dream was to be a teacher. I started playing at being a teacher at the age of six with all my cousins and younger sisters. I would make a desk out of a cardboard box and then make them sit and listen to me teach. My mother told me I had to do really good at

school if I wanted to become a teacher. And unlike many kids in my situation, my parents were able to make sure we stayed in school during harvest times.

I loved going to school and learning to read, so, at the beginning, I excelled. In first grade they moved me and five or six other students ahead to second grade. We were still considered first graders, but because we were able to read, they would combine us with the next grade up. I did that until I reached the third grade, sitting in a fourth-grade class. The teacher openly ridiculed some of the students, particularly those of us who were poor. She felt I was way too “uppity” for my position in life, and one day she brought me in front of the class to do long division. When I told her she had never showed us how to do long division and I couldn’t do the problem, she mocked me in a singsong voice and told me I would never go to college or be a teacher. The other students joined her laughter. For many years I never told anyone what happened. I was so ashamed, and I began to believe that I could not be a good student. My grades went from A+ to average.

That same year, my best friend, Lou Jean, told me she wasn’t allowed to come to my house, because her father said I was “white trash.” I didn’t understand what it meant, but I knew it was something to be ashamed of. I would spend hours obsessively making sure there was not one bit of trash anywhere around our house. Like for many people who lived in the country and in poverty, there was no such thing as trash pickup. We carried our trash out into a pile in the woods and burned what we could.

It wasn’t until high school that my mother said to me, “If you want to go to college, you will have to make straight A’s and get a scholarship.” Luckily, my freshman year, I had a math teacher who believed in me and encouraged me to move out of the basic classes and into a college track. In order to get the credits I needed, I had to double up on many courses. The guidance counselor tried to tell me it was impossible and that I would not be allowed to do it. But between my math teacher, my mother, and my newfound determination, I persevered, graduating at the top of my class and getting a full scholarship into college.

After going to college for a year, I had to drop out because tuition went up \$500 over what my scholarship covered. My father and I went

to several storefront loan companies to try to get a loan, but because my parents didn't have \$500 in collateral, we were unable to get the loan. I dropped out of college, moved into a trailer with several other women, and went to work in the textile mill.

I carried the shame of poverty with me throughout the next several years. I believed the messages that society gave me that if I was poor, somehow something must be wrong with me. I started hiding the fact I grew up poor and tried to pretend that I was "middle class." I began to live a lie that made me feel even worse about myself, and my self-esteem became even lower. I went on to become a secretary and eventually went to work for a civil rights attorney. It was a fit for me, having grown up Quaker, and I began to learn about civil rights and get involved in the women's and peace movements.

I suffered some of the worst classism in the progressive movement, because I, unlike most of the activists, did not have a broad base of knowledge about the world, did not have a college education, and, most of all, "talked funny" in my Appalachian southern dialect. It was not the usual kind of overt classism that I had experienced in school, and I now know it was not deliberate. But there was always an expectation that everyone in the group had gone to college. A common question was, "Where did you go to college?" or "What was your major?" I was too ashamed to answer that I had not gone to college and would give the name of the college that I briefly attended.

There was also an understanding that I was not privy to what a leader or trainer was. I knew I did not fit that definition because I didn't speak "right" or didn't know enough by the standards held up to us in the various organizing trainings I attended. I was discouraged from thinking I could become an organizer or a leader. When I mentioned wanting to apply for an organizing job in the national peace movement, even friends who were activists discouraged me, saying the movement was looking for specific kinds of skills (implying that I did not have those skills). When I volunteered to speak to a local group of ministers, I was told by a person in the group they felt another man who was a doctor would be more accepted as a speaker. When I went to workshops on organizing, I would leave feeling like even more of a failure, because I didn't fit the "ideal" of what a speaker or organizer was. The trainers used language and ways of being that were totally

unfamiliar to me, and I began to believe that the peace movement was not for people like me.

In the end, I did become an organizer. Other southern organizers who worked with poor people recognized my passion and my skills, and believed in me. I still carried the shame of poverty and hid the fact I did not have a college education, and often would not admit to not knowing things that everyone else took for granted. For example, I remember once admitting in a local peace group that I did not know that the Japanese were held in internment camps in the United States in World War II. People were incredulous and laughed at me. They did not understand that I grew up where I was not taught these things—that my public high school substituted fundamentalist Bible class for U.S. history. So I learned to silence myself and not ask questions, pretending I knew things that I didn't.

I became a different person—a powerful person—when I was working with poor people. I realized that my voice had a place. I was successful in organizing in my home community—a community where many outside organizers had failed to make any headway. We began to win real victories and make real political change in our communities. I found that poor people really did care about peace and justice when it was talked about in a way they understood. I found my voice and my power, and yet I still felt the shame and powerlessness of poverty in settings outside my own community.

It was only when I went to Nicaragua that I saw people who lived in severe poverty with many similarities to the way I grew up, but who felt very differently about it. Talking with organizers in Nicaragua helped me understand poverty better, and my beliefs began to change. In Nicaragua, I met people who acknowledged poverty, but who were proud of who they were. They were revolutionaries who knew that the poverty they suffered was a problem of the system—not their personal fault. I came back from that trip with a determination to “come out of the closet” as a poor person.

As I began to talk about the experiences of growing up poor and trying to overcome my shame that somehow it was my fault, many other people would come up to me admitting they carried the same shame and secrecy. Together we worked to shift our consciousness and helped each other rid ourselves of the classism we had internalized.

The hardest part was that my mother could never handle me talking about growing up in poverty. She carried so much shame and guilt that when I would talk about it in front of her, she would say, “We tried to be good parents.” I could never help her understand that it was not her fault. Nor was it the fault of my father, who worked all his life sixty or more hours a week. My mother died carrying her shame with her.

It took many years for me to overcome all the messages that society tells us about poor people—messages that become part of our own beliefs about ourselves. And, even now, sometimes one person’s classist attitude can throw me back to that place of believing I’m not good enough, not smart enough, or not strong enough to be an organizer, an author, or a leader. And yet, I am all of those things, and some days I actually believe it about myself.

North American Peasant

FISHER LAVELL

“Mom?”
“Mm hm?”

“Why don’t people like us?”

That was me, about twelve years old, sitting at the kitchen table coloring a picture of a bird-dog pup. And my mom over at the sink, doing some kind of work, maybe peeling potatoes or doing dishes or washing plastic bread bags to be hung on the clothesline and reused many times over. That was the 1960s, so we didn’t have indoor plumbing, and she would have had to carry the water in pails from our neighbor’s place a city block away. Of course, we weren’t in the city but in a small prairie town in northern Manitoba, Canada.

“What do you mean, people don’t like us? People don’t *not* like us.”

“Sure they do.”

“Like who?”

“I don’t know. Just people. People uptown. People at church.”

“Well, people at church don’t not like us. They like us. They love us, just like Jesus taught. Love everybody. You know that.”

“Well, I don’t feel that they love us. I don’t feel that they like us. I feel that they don’t like us.”

“Well, I don’t know why you’d say that. They like everybody at the church. They treat us the same as everybody else.”

“Not really.”

“Of course they do. We can go there, we can sit wherever we want, the pastor shakes your hand every Sunday! The ladies say good morning to you and me and everybody else.”

“Yeah, I guess. But it’s not the same. I don’t know, it’s just that they don’t look at us the same. They sort of . . . hold back or something. Like they treat us nice because they’re supposed to treat us nice. But it doesn’t feel like they like us.”

Little birds chirp and sing in the trees outside, and I point out lots of examples, which she explains away. I make lots of arguments, but she stands firm. About how nobody treats us different or dislikes us, not the people at church or the business people or the health providers or the kids at school.

“Yeah, I don’t know. I don’t know why. I just know that they don’t like us, that’s all, and they treat us different.”

“Well, I don’t know why you would say that. Sometimes, for a smart girl, you sure talk crazy. Why shouldn’t people like us? We’re just as good as anybody else.”

I put a dark brown trim around the puppy’s edges and am very pleased with the effect of the lighter brown on his body and floppy ears. “I know we are as good as anybody else, Mom. Everybody is as good as anybody else. I just feel that other people don’t know we are. And they don’t like us.”

Years later, I would read in a university women’s studies course about Betty Friedan’s so-called “problem that has no name,” the malaise of affluent, educated white women in the unsettling new world of baby-booming suburbia. But from the time I was very young, I struggled to identify and express what it was about me and my family that made us somehow different from other people—and treated differently.

This was a lonely task. Although I was wowing my family and teachers with my abilities and promise, among my large extended family I was a class of one. The smart one; the girl who was going somewhere. All around me, I could see the woman’s life I never, ever wanted. Big-bellied at fourteen, quitting school to marry a drinking man who would beat them, fool around, sometimes even abuse the kids. And for all that I was on my way up and out, I loved my people.

I admired and adored my rugged old uncles, who always lost their legs to war or disease. My hard-drinking errant aunties, who loved to

laugh and dance and party, often dying young. But that's not who I was going to be. I always balanced precariously on a stubborn ledge of refusal to distance myself from them, yet determination not to be how they were. Never under the wing of others; yet always different from my own.

Measured by money, education, and privilege, I lived in poverty. My parents both came from large, poor rural families and had never passed grade five. My father was, as my mother said, a jack-of-all-trades, and yet, unlike the saying, he was a master of all. He was a fine carpenter, could operate any kind of machine or vehicle, worked for the farmers as a laborer, slaughterer and meat cutter, and could track, hunt, and trap with the best of them. He was self-taught on guitar and a wonderful singer.

I grew up in a one-room house. There was a curtain that separated the bedroom from the living area. We had a woodstove, no electricity, no plumbing, no phone. My dad was sometimes employed, often traveling away to work the hydro or oil jobs. We rarely had cash money, and when Dad returned from somewhere with a big check, most of it paid down the debt at the grocery store.

My mom kept a big garden, also chickens, pigeons, and rabbits. And what we didn't eat fresh, she canned to last us till the next summer. When the meat ran out, my dad would walk down the tracks with his .22 and come back with partridge or prairie chicken. Or jump into a truck with a bunch of my uncles and return with venison. We never felt poor.

I was a very content child; the long grasses and bush paths were my playground, and my cousins and neighbors, my fun. It seemed wondrous to me when my mother told people that we lived in a little stand of poplars, just on the outskirts of town. As if our lives were a merry whirl and twirl of some great giant tree-lady's festive gown.

My mother and father walked very different paths. My mother was religious, her church the original loud, overzealous "Holy Rollers." My father's tithes and offerings went faithfully to the bar at the Valley Hotel. My mother stood alone in her religion, teasingly criticized for years, but she never wavered. She shared in the weddings, the ball games, card games, and house parties with her family and in-laws. But when it came to certain things, she neither judged nor participated. She lived the old saying I once found silly, "Hate the sin, love the sinner."

She never left my father. Not that he didn't deserve it, but because she had made a promise before God.

When I was a young child, my father's trips "uptown" seemed unproblematic and heralded his return in high spirits with trinkets and exotic cartons of Flamingo Café fish 'n' chips. But very soon the fun was rare, the troubles many. He did some terrible things. "Forgive and forget," I hear people say, but I'm more drawn to the Irish saying "Remember and forgive." How can we learn if we don't remember?

Although the years of my growing up wore the taint of my father's fall to drink, some of my fondest memories are of sitting up in the wee hours, with my dad on guitar singing the old songs. I believe in large part I developed the insights and abilities I use in my work today from the hours of sitting in the kitchen, singing Old Hank, Don Williams, and Roy Acuff; listening with my heart to my father's deep wounding.

Never expressed in his own words, but there in the songs, thick as blood. "Your Cheatin' Heart." "I Can't Stop Loving You." "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain."

I graduated with honors and moved to the city—because I had to—for my education, for work. And as the Dixie Chicks put it, "to make my big mistakes."

In university psychology courses, I met up with theories that I should have applied. I read about people with low socioeconomic status and low self-esteem, addicted, sexually victimized, suffering from learned helplessness. I knew those people, but I was not one of them.

I owed this to my father, a proud and self-reliant man who wouldn't take welfare no matter how much we did without. I owed this to my mother, who refused to collude in my father's addiction. My course notes told me that the alcoholic had a dysfunctional wife, the codependent, whose behaviors complemented and enabled his addiction. But although my father had been the former, my mother was never the latter. She refused to placate, coddle, or absolve. Our home had often been a place of loud arguments, but my tenacious mother's children were safe, nourished, and never neglected.

My own journey to understanding the meaning of social class has meandered through varied terrain. I was introduced to the concept in a course on the history of social control, led by a self-proclaimed socialist professor. I was keenly involved with the course and got A's on my papers, but was shocked at my "zero points for participation." This was based on the three classes that I had missed because of sick-child