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What's Class Got to do with It?

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## ACROSS THE GREAT DIVIDE

### CROSSING CLASSES AND CLASHING CULTURES

Barbara Jensen

The blonde curls of Shelly's home permanent stuck to the tears on her face as she dashed from the classroom. "Oh God, I'm so sorry," she cried out. Just twenty minutes earlier she had been in the midst of an animated class discussion in a college course she liked, the psychology of women. Shelly had never thought about being a woman much before; she found it exciting and comforting to do so.

The class was having a discussion about relationships between women and men. The subject was intimacy, and the students were discussing some of the different ways men and women understand and express it. Shelly felt she was starting to understand some of the problems in her marriage. Maybe she could make things better. She was eager and animated in the discussion.

But something went wrong. Shelly was talking about the declining intimacy in her marriage and how college "made things really weird" between her and her husband. It wasn't just his complaining about the time she was gone; he was starting to make fun of her studying, saying she was turning into a "geek" and an "egghead." She told the class, "He even picked up a textbook and threw it against the wall, smashing the spine of a \$65 book!" Then he hollered, "This shit means more to you than me and the kids!" and stomped out of the house. She said that later, when they "talked it out," he said *she* wasn't any fun anymore, *she* wasn't interested in anything. The class laughed out loud, because in class she was interested in everything. Encouraged, she exclaimed, "I couldn't believe it! That's just what I think about him! He's the one . . . I'm interested in things now that I never even *thought* of before, you know what I mean? I asked him, 'What am I not interested in?' and he said, 'Bowling with Georgie and Bill and watching TV!' Like I have time for that now! Like *he* has shown any interest at all in all the things I've been studying."

Shelly's eyes blurred with tears and she fell silent; her pale skin was flushed. A couple of older women in the class started to talk, gently and with warmth, about how they had had to leave their husbands because they needed to "find themselves" and "get a new start." A forty-something woman offered that her spouse really wanted her to go to school, and that Shelly deserved to have that support. A man, who was on the board of a battered women's shelter, emphasized that she had a *right* to expect that support, that men have to learn to give women the things they have always had. He went on to warn her about "offender psychology" and how "they can't stand for their women to be independent, that's how they keep control." The other women from blue-collar backgrounds were uncharacteristically quiet.

"But that's not it!" Shelly insisted in frustration. "You don't understand . . .," she trailed off, struggling for words and understanding. "He, he's a good husband, you know. . . . He was my *only* support at first . . . when my family was lecturing me about my duty to him and the kids. He was great, he—"

A woman who had identified herself as a former battered woman and the man who worked for the shelter exchanged glances with each other. Shelly saw this and scrambled to undo the impression she had given: "That's not it! He really doesn't mind me going to school. I know how it must sound . . . he doesn't normally yell and he's never hit me or even thrown anything like that before, you know? My girlfriends always envy me because he's so sweet and he's great with the kids and he's so handsome, I mean . . . he always knows what to say to people, I mean, not *college* people, but . . . you know, regular people. And it never really got stale, I mean, I was still crazy about him until . . . until . . . I don't know . . ."

Shelly stumbled to a halt and fell silent. Just when someone else was about to speak she blurted out, "I love him! When I think of losing him . . ." Her eyes teared up and she started shaking her head. "It's like the whole world is turned upside down!" Tears steamed down her red-hot face and she ran from the classroom to the lavatory down the hall.

Shelly is a college student at a small, urban university that mostly serves "returning" older and first-generation college students. She is close to her extended Swedish American and German American farm family and is the first one to go to college. Her husband and friends are all working class. She never really thought about going to college before her boss said she might lose her job if she didn't and that the company would pay for it. To her surprise, she loves it. She eagerly reads the class materials; she finds it surprisingly easy to talk in class, and other people often seem to appreciate what she has to say. She suspects she talks way

too much, but she "just get[s] so excited." She wonders how could she not know before that she "loves ideas," as another woman in class put it. She was thirty-two years old and had had two children. "Where was I all those years?" she asked once in class.

After the class had left, Shelly came back in to apologize to me. She assured me that in more than two years of college, she had never behaved so "unprofessional before." She apologized a few more times. Her shoulders sank, deflated. She bowed her head and stared at her shoes. "Maybe he's right, maybe I don't belong here." She was embarrassed, and afraid.

Shelly is experiencing a confusing, exciting, and debilitating situation both in her outer life and within her. She is by turns excited, lost, elated, angry, bewildered, shameful, grateful, and "numb." All of a sudden, her past won't cohere with her present, her future has become uncertain; nothing quite "fits right" anymore. Shelly knows that no one she knew before seems to understand what she is going through, and some even resent it. That night she realized that her new friends don't understand either. She is in the midst of a working class "crossover" experience, something she never expected when she went back to school to "get my piece of paper" so she could keep her job as a legal secretary. She had no idea what she was getting into, she had no idea she would fall in love with a new world. She certainly didn't know that she might actually begin to *become someone else*. Though she is delighted with all the new things she has learned, nothing she has learned in this new world helps explain her situation to her. With no language or concepts to bridge or even explain this experience, she is falling prey to the contradictions within it.

There is suffering in this private passage, unvoiced and unseen, a particularly confused suffering in the midst of outward success. This struggle to figure out "who I am anymore," as Shelly once put it, the crossover's collection of contradictory experiences, emotions, and values are the subject of this chapter. I have come to believe Shelly's struggle constitutes a particular inner and outer (psychological and sociological) constellation that many working class people who enter the middle class experience. The psychological similarities among "upwardly mobile" working class people are striking to me. So is the invisible and "privatized" nature of this potentially painful experience. I am a (counseling and community) psychologist, a teacher of first-generation college students, and a person from the working class who has spent my adult life jostling back and forth between different worlds.

Like me, the people in this chapter have bumped uneasily between professional middle and working class cultures. We engage (or struggle to avoid engaging) with these often opposing world-views. This often

creates a state of *cognitive dissonance*, or an inner clashing of values and experiences that create emotional and mental confusion. Common emotional reactions to this are anger, shame, sorrow (loss), "impostor syndrome," and substance abuse. These are often so muffled as to be invisible to crossovers themselves. Common behavioral reactions I have seen are distancing, resisting, and creating/bridging.

I believe that central to the "crossover experience" is an existential dilemma. By "existential" I mean a problem of existence: of living one's life, of how best to live, and of the human need to make meaning in and of our lives. And central to this dilemma, though not its only feature, is the presence of cultural differences between the professional middle class and working class people. There are stories, sacrifices, and secret shame that have no ear and precious little voice. The hearing and seeing of these cultural differences—the ability to see *outside* the cultural biases of the professional middle class—is crucial to any meaningful understanding of working class life. Without this, all the well-meaning "solidarity" one may feel for the working class is ineffective. "I feel like they're always talking down to me," said one of my working class students, who is active in the political Left, "but maybe I *am* stupid, because, honestly, half the time I don't know what the hell they're talking about."

People in or from the professional/managerial class will likely be the vehicle of change for the "upwardly mobile" working class person in higher education, job promotions, marriage, psychotherapy, and other crossover experiences. They can show Shelly how to write and speak in Standard English, how to put her napkin in her lap instead of on the table, and how to negotiate with difficult clients. But they can't tell her where she's been and how it has made her who she is, or where it is she might be going.

In this chapter, I address the less obvious ways that class hurts working class people in higher education (and other avenues of upward mobility). I point toward unfair, unjust advantage and disadvantage that cuts across lines of gender, ethnicity, and "race." In higher education (as elsewhere), this unacknowledged crossover challenge serves to exclude working class people from certain opportunities and privileges, even from their own inner lives. Their counterparts, from the professional middle class, find in higher education the cultural rules, values, language, and community mores that are familiar to them. Working class people must do psychosocial back flips through a maze of new rules, new values, and new language. My concern is twofold: I am worried about the Shellys, and I am worried about the society we all live in that creates, mystifies, and personalizes unequal opportunity and the cultural (as well as economic) domination of one class of people over another. The painful

distance between the ideal and the real is felt by those who fall between the cracks; working class crossovers bear it as personal "stupidity," lack of "ambition," "failure," and even psychopathology (depression, substance abuse, and more). These constitute significant invisible costs that working class crossovers are forced to pay. Visibility and voice are the first practical antidotes to this invisible identity crisis.

### "SURVIVOR GUILT" AND CULTURAL COLLISION

Working class crossovers are likely to be completely invisible to people from the professional middle class, because middle class people have learned to assume their inner and outer lives are "normal." If you have learned to walk and talk middle class well enough to "fake it," middle class people will assume you have always been one of them, at least if you have white skin. Successful crossovers can't necessarily help you either. As likely as not, they have already been "made safe," as Basil Bernstein points out, via the cultural processes and decisions they have gone through to get where they are.<sup>1</sup>

The *invisibility* and the *unconsciousness* of the crossover experience, in my view, can make it painful, debilitating, even devastating. The dilemma manifests in a multitude of so-called (and genuine) personal problems. If crossovers are not conscious of the cross-class experience, the problems it creates can hide behind many personal perspectives. For Shelly, it is a marriage problem. For someone else it is a problem with her "unenlightened" parents. For yet another it is a "chemical imbalance." For many it is a compulsion to ditch class or get "loaded," or to suddenly "blow off" an important exam. Maybe it is simply having "the blues" all the time. For marriage problems, depression, chemical abuse, fear of success, and family-of-origin problems there is, at least, a certain amount of collective wisdom about coping, changing, treating, managing. In my experience, the process of moving from the working class to the professional middle class is a highly personalized and tangled mess of psychological, sociological, and cultural confusion. As philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said, that which one has no language for is often not even perceived.

Geraldine Piorkowski made a rare attempt to describe the psychological barriers for the upwardly mobile student. She illustrates another aspect of the crossover experience and gives us a starting point for looking at cultural collision. She identifies as "survivor guilt" a phenomenon she observed in her work at a student-counseling center at Roosevelt University, in Chicago. "For low income, urban, first-generation college stu-

dents, survivor guilt has emerged as a significant explanatory concept for academic difficulty." She goes on to say:

One minority woman reported that her most stressful experience was being the only one in her south-side neighborhood going to college. Another student described her frustration in trying to persuade family members to take positive steps on their own behalf (e.g., to continue their education or get jobs) with no success. Other first generation college students who work at improving their English grammar find that their manner of speaking becomes the object of ridicule by family members who feel threatened by such differences from family norms. "So you think you're too good for us" is a taunt frequently directed at the family member who is trying to escape the family socio-economic level. Unless one is very comfortable with narcissistic strivings "to be special," survivor status tends to create conflict. Thus it is difficult for many of these students to pursue academic work, which represents an escape from the family level of functioning, without a great deal of internal struggle.<sup>2</sup>

Robert Lifton's work on survivors of natural and human disasters identifies the survivor's haunting and disabling dilemma: "Why did I live when they died?"<sup>3</sup> Piorkowski recast this dilemma for her troubled working class students: "Why did I succeed when they failed?" Piorkowski and her colleagues found the concept of survivor guilt to be a helpful explanation of why these students have difficulty with "higher attrition rates, lower GPA's, significant conflict with less affection toward parents, problems organizing time, lower self-esteem, and more psychosomatic problems than their [dorm-staying, middle class] peers." They also found that using (and explaining) the concept of survivor guilt in counseling sessions and in workshops helped those students and evoked testimony:

Another student, a 26-year-old, married Black woman, heard about survivor guilt in a study skills workshop. She felt that the concept of survivor guilt was the most important thing she had learned in the workshop. . . . She said: "If you come from a family that didn't make it, you feel you shouldn't. My sister lost her job and I feel guilty—like why should I have a job. It's typical of my family—always somebody losing their job or something. We just don't have the same types of problems. When I'm around my family I feel I don't have any right to talk about anything positive. They don't have anything positive to say." The only member of her family attending college, she came in for help with chronic depression and marital problems.<sup>4</sup>

When I found Piorkowski's work, while writing a master's thesis on working class people and psychotherapy, I wept with sorrow and relief.

But the loss I felt was more complex than guilt. Eventually I combined her research with that of others and found my own conclusions: survivor guilt is one aspect in an array of psychological difficulties that working class students experience. Piorkowski's successful work in this area demonstrates her own thesis, and, in my view, it also illustrates the psychosocial results of a cultural chasm. For working class people who pursue middle class careers, part of the existential dilemma is that there is value in each culture, as well as drawbacks. For Shelly, who was previously happy with her husband and her working class life, there is a blazing new star on her horizon, a life of the mind. It complicates things because she wants both to keep her working class roots and to develop her intellectual abilities. She loves her husband, and she can barely stand the strain of not "doing it together." The ambivalence in her relationship is a mirror of her own gathering ambivalence, her own feeling of being "torn"—*torn not just between success and failure in college but between two different notions of what it means to succeed in life.*

I, and others, have tried to articulate what seem to be some of the valuable and central features of working class cultures and how these contrast with middle class culture. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to describe and support all of this, but here's my snapshot: working class people are raised with a more here-and-now sensibility, in activities and worldview; individuality (but not necessarily self) is downplayed in favor of a powerful sense of community and loyalty, and an internal sense of "belonging." Working class cultures also tend to be more embedded in ethnic (non-Anglo) traditions, and so are more diverse by nature. Conversely, middle class culture is more homogeneous (and Anglo) and tends to put a premium on individual accomplishments, on the achievement of planned (and publicly recognized) goals in general, and on earning self-definition by way of these achievements—what I called "becoming." These are fundamental differences in outlooks and approaches to life.<sup>5</sup>

I offer the following by way of example. In my counseling of mixed class couples, I see a lot of cultural clash. One working class woman, Carla, said to her middle class husband, Steve, "You're so cold to my family, they don't feel welcome." Steve replied, "Why do we have to spend so much time with them? We're grown-ups now!" In another session, Steve said, "Why are you spilling your guts to my boss's wife? I've got to project the right image here if I want to keep my job!" Carla retorted, "Well, why the hell do we have to go out with them anyway? On Saturday night! This is your idea of fun? Sipping white wine with your boss?" And round they went. Carla's life has taught her that social relationships are supposed to be supportive, not challenging. Keeping close family ties,

Working  
class  
  
middle  
class

in her culture, is not a sign of arrested development. She also has developed her social skills with the assumption that social relationships will be peer-based: it does not "feel right" to her, nor does she desire, to socialize across hierarchies, least of all work-based hierarchies. Working class women often talk with each other about intimate problems, even if they do not know each other well—this behavior *includes* the other person, makes her feel "like one of us." In the middle class, being polite and reserved is a way to show respect for others and one's self (on which there is a premium), and sharing confidences with someone you hardly know might be considered rude or at least *déclassé*. In turn, this emotional reserve often seems a coldness to working class people—a way of letting someone know you don't want them around or simply being rude. There are different meanings for the same behaviors.

Stephen Garger, in *This Fine Place So Far from Home*, a collection of essays by academics from the working class, describes how a colleague interrupted his presentation three times to argue against it in the same way:

Where I came from, the immediate and practically the only response to a fellow ignoring or contradicting an explanation three times is to yell and go for the throat—literally and figuratively. Early in my college career silence was the only way to override that response, and this is exactly what happened. . . . All the verbal cues I was receiving indicated the questioner was insulting me and pushing for a fight. However, his physical demeanor most certainly contradicted that impression. The mixed message I was getting was further clouded by the fact that we were violating the unwritten [working class] rule that you don't fight with the people you hang with.<sup>6</sup>

After a friend of his explains that intellectual arguing is something of a recreational sport among academics, Garger muses, "John, the questioner, just may have been opening the door for fun. When I did not respond to the protocol, he tried again and again. Undoubtedly, he was receiving mixed messages, too." He concludes: "*It was as if we were engaged in different and separate rituals in which neither of us understood the rules the other was playing by*" (emphasis mine).<sup>7</sup>

As rules start to change for the crossover, family problems abound. Some parents push their children toward "good, clean jobs" as a way to show love and to make their own difficult work lives feel more meaningful. But their reward for this sacrifice is sometimes poignant. If their children succeed, more likely than not, they have adopted the culture, style, and *classism* of the professional/managerial class. Many parents shrink back in shame and confusion while the children they worked so

hard to send to school become cultural strangers to them. They fear what is too often true; their children have become embarrassed by their "low class," "backward" family.<sup>8</sup>

Julie Charlip illustrates the painful class distinctions that start as soon as these children enter the halls of higher education: "I vividly remember visiting Bates College with my mother. It was winter, and it was cold in Maine. She wore her good wool coat, the one to which she had sewn a small pink collar, the one she had had all my life. The dean of students greeted us in his plush office and looked my mother up and down with a sniff of disdain. Clearly he thought we were so far beneath him that he didn't need to mask his scorn. I felt small and inadequate and terribly sorry for Mom. I was, as expected, rejected by Bates."<sup>9</sup>

Too often, these students escape the dissonance of clashing cultures and "survivor guilt," in school and later in their middle class careers, through the coping strategy of distancing themselves from their family. This is a tragedy not only for the parents; psychologically it tears the crossover up inside.

Other parents are frightened or insulted if their children get "too big for their britches." Perhaps this latter group—the people that Piorkowski identifies as sabotaging her students' success—creates the less tragic situation. At least these parents remain *engaged* with their children. The "ridicule" Piorkowski describes may be the family trying to bring this member back into the fold for the good of everyone involved. Working class people resist—I resist—seeing working class family life as merely something to "survive," or seeing working with one's hands as inherently inferior. It is middle class arrogance that takes the institutional injustices working class people face (less pay for new coats) and reduces their lives and culture to nothing *but* that.

"You'd think with all your education you could use an electric can opener!" my mother snapped at me, after I got my undergraduate degree. She seemed to resent me for going to college. Like Shelly, I was the first in a large and close extended family to go to college. My parents seemed genuinely disturbed when I first decided to go to college. "Why don't you do something useful and get a nice civil service job?" my father said with real concern. He thought I was throwing myself away. My mother, when I asked for a bit of financial help, asked me what the purpose of this "college deal" was. I said, "I don't know yet, I just want to learn." She was aghast: "We're not paying for anything if you are just going there to *learn*!" She said "learn" as if I had said I was going there to do heroin. Clearly (and culturally) my parents thought college was a waste of time and money. I think it is fair to say they were also afraid it would take me

further away from them. It was out of their frame of reference and it conflicted with their values. And there I was, with all the enthusiasm of a religious convert, already "correcting" my mother's English at seventeen.

### DOMINATION AND CULTURAL "CAPITAL"

My mother resisted my evangelical efforts to improve her perfectly good and colorful English. She was a fighter, and the struggle I'm describing is a matter not simply of *different* cultures but of one dominating the other. Is it any wonder that working class families do not easily surrender their children to the people who they know help make their own lives difficult? In the world of work the professional/managerial class is employed by the very wealthy to inflict appalling abuse and neglect on "lower class" workers. Working class people do not have equality of economic opportunity. This is, I think, the location at which survivor guilt, as Piorkowski describes it, is most accurate. Irvin Peckham, another contributor to *This Fine Place So Far from Home*, says this of his and his father's lives: "I have only to compare what it is like to spend one's day behind a counter with the boss more or less hanging over one to being an English professor. The comparison hurts my mind."<sup>10</sup>

This domination also happens, in more genteel settings, by way of what Bourdieu calls "cultural capital." Professional middle class social style, language, and knowledge constitute a kind of social currency. People who have learned these things can use it for entrance into, and access to some amount of power in, the academy (as in business and government). Cultural barriers may be as effective in shutting out working class people as are the (significant) economic ones, perhaps more so. I have said elsewhere that most working class people's native tongue is more metaphorical than literal, more personal and particular than abstract and universal. It is more implicit than explicit, more for members of a defined social group, also more pithy, colorful, and narrative.<sup>11</sup> It reflects cultural differences from the middle class. It is the opposite of how students are expected to write and speak to get good grades in school. This makes trying to "make it" in school considerably more difficult. Indeed, successful working class students are not necessarily "making it" in the sense that their parents, partners, and former peers understand that term. Cultural difference and prejudice against working class culture combine to frustrate the "upwardly" mobile student.

To succeed in higher education (and, often, in a middle class marriage) working class people must learn to adopt and represent middle class cul-



ture as their own. This culture does not grant dual citizenship. You must "leave behind" your "low class" ways, your "bad" English, your values of humility and inclusion (don't show off and be a "big shot," because it says you think you're better than others), and much more—not least the people you love! In early adulthood there are developmental tasks of differentiation at play that I suspect help fuel the leap the young crossover student is trying to make. But it is a cruel and unsuspected consequence to have that process set up a chasm that may never be bridged again. As Donna Burns Phillips, a long-time college teacher, said: "If finding a coherent identity is so difficult for me, one who has had an entire life as well as a career in which to reconcile the influences of hostile value systems, what must it be like for the students who come to our classrooms wholly unsuspecting, wholly unprepared for the changes we intend for them?"<sup>12</sup>

This suffering is invisible not only to others but, most poignantly, to those who bear it. "By Thanksgiving of my first year of college, I wanted to go home and stay there. What was I doing at this place for rich kids? What was I accomplishing? How was I helping my family? I was a mute, a heavy drinker, a class skipper," said Laurel Johnson Black.<sup>13</sup> A middle class counselor might see Black's situation in terms of success and failure, surviving or not surviving her own history. What the middle class perspective misses is the working class culture it can't see, as well as the contempt for that culture—based on razor-thin stereotypes that *are* "seen"—that this potential "survivor" experiences almost daily. Michael Schwalbe illustrates the dissonance of invisibility and classism.

Once when I was talking to a professor in his office, another professor leaned in the doorway and said, "I just heard a new excuse for missing an exam. A student said he couldn't come in today because he had to move a trailer house." The professor to whom I was talking laughed and replied, "That's one I never heard before. I guess it tells you you're really at a blue-collar college." Part of me liked being privy to this exchange. I took it to mean I was being treated as an insider. But I also sympathized with the student. It made sense to me that you might have to miss an exam to move a trailer house. What was funny about that?<sup>14</sup>

As another contributor to the same collection puts it, "Being working class means never knowing with certainty why someone is laughing at you."<sup>15</sup>

As the consequences of choosing a professional path start to impinge on the student, confusion and ambivalence threaten not only her school success but the sense of self and identity she needs to feel anything like "whole."

## DISSONANCE, DISTANCE, AND RESISTANCE

This subtle, slow, and unacknowledged process of crossing class-based cultures threatens "integration." Integration is the psychological process of layering new experiences on top of old ones to create an ongoing evolution of meaning—of one's personal story of life, of who I am and of what I might expect in the future. Take the basic cultural differences between the working and middle classes; stir in the unchallenged assumption, everywhere in the working class student's new culture, that it is far superior; fold in cherished national myths of equality and freedom for all people; and you have a recipe for personal *dis*-integration and profound "cognitive dissonance" (an acute mental and emotional confusion). "Nothing will ever be enough to stitch together the before and after of this life," despaired working class academic Renny Christopher as a graduate student.<sup>16</sup> For many working class students, this dissonance is so great, they are more likely to either *reject* the new culture (one reason for the high dropout rate among such students) or try to *eject* the former culture from their sense of self.

Throughout the literature of working class academics is the common thread of distancing oneself from family and former life, the most common means of resolving the dissonance of "the before and after of this life." For the ones who distance themselves there is loss, unstated and misunderstood. The problems I have described above appear to remain true for many of the people who have already crossed the class divide (especially if they still feel loyalty to their roots). Irvin Peckham, whose mind hurt when he compared his father's and his own work, says it plainly:

A few of us manage to break with our origins, denying our "incorrectness" or the "incorrect" class into which we were born. I do not know how others manage the break but I erased my incorrectness by infrequently going home. In time, I more or less forgot who my parents and siblings were. Although I hesitate to admit it, I have to tell you that the only time my parents and I and my brother and my sister have all been together since I left home was for my parents' silver wedding anniversary. I suspect the next occasion will be a funeral. That's called erasure.<sup>17</sup>

Laurel Johnson Black, who "was a mute, a heavy drinker" in her first year in college, is now an academic who says, "When I speak to my siblings my world slips around until I am dizzy." Her essay in *This Fine Place so Far from Home* is called "Stupid Rich Bastards." She offers a palpable sense of the cognitive dissonance she feels: "Sometimes I sit in meetings and classrooms and wonder who else might like to cut the shit and say

what they feel. I feel suspended, dangling. If I put my toe down at any point I might root there. I cannot move among the rich, the condescending, the ones who can turn me into an object of study with a glance or a word, cannot speak like them, live in a house like them, learn their ways without being disloyal to someone."<sup>18</sup>

Resistance is harder to track because it often manifests in *not* going to college, *not* writing papers, and so on. If working class culture is different from middle class culture, and if both have their strengths, then it is reasonable to *choose* to remain in the working class *despite* the severe economic and physical penalties imposed for doing so. I believe many people do just this. Unfortunately, most are punished with lower wages and less control. Others, like my big brother Eddie, manage to change not cultures, just work or income.

Eddie and I have both held professional jobs for most of our adult lives. But I went to college (and graduate school), and he was a mail carrier who gradually worked his way up to postmaster of several large post offices in Minneapolis. I became a left-wing type who did community organizing, and I now focus much of my counseling work on poor and working class kids and adults. I also developed a love of theater, Beethoven, and "fine dining." As a young adult, I became, ironically, both politically committed to working class people and increasingly ashamed to bring my new activist friends home to my "redneck" family. My brother became a right-wing type who nonetheless has worked hard to bring an "employee involvement" management style into the post offices he managed before his retirement. He still plays rockabilly guitar and sings karaoke, wears cowboy hats, and can't imagine paying as much money for an entire meal as I do for a tip (though he makes more money than I do). He never stopped enjoying the company of and connection with the many members of our extended family. Who is the more advantaged and who the disadvantaged one between us? If the answer is easy, it shouldn't be.

Perhaps my relatively cheery view on working class culture comes in part from the fact that I, like Garger, come from a relatively successful, "settled living," working class family and neighborhood. My father did skilled labor (meat cutting) in Minnesota. We had plenty of problems, as I have described elsewhere, mostly to do with the conditions of the work. But I grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, arguably the best time in American history for working class people. Jack Metzgar, who independently came up with ideas almost identical to mine about cultural differences, and who argues for the validity and equality of working class culture, is likewise from a family of skilled labor and even union activity.<sup>19</sup>

But these sentiments can be found among the very poor as well. Jay MacLeod, in his book *Ain't No Makin' It*, recounts his study of boys from

a housing project in "a northeastern city." Many had parents who were chronically unemployed or who worked intermittently in so-called unskilled labor that never brings in enough to pay all the bills. MacLeod studied two groups of teenage boys, the ones who pursued education as a "way out" and the ones who did not. Among the ones who neither attained nor desired academic success (the "hallway hangers"), there was a boy named Slick who was extraordinarily bright and sometimes thought of becoming a lawyer. He explained his existential choice:

**Slick:** What it is it's a brotherhood down here. We're all fucking brothers. There's a lot of backstabbing down here, down in the streets. But we're always there for each other. No shit. There's not a guy in here who wouldn't put out for the rest of us. If he needs something and I got it, I'll give it to him. Period. That's the way it works. It's a brotherhood. We're not like them up there—the rich little boys from the suburbs or whatever. There's a line there. On this side of the line we don't fuck with each other; we're tight.

**Frankie:** We'd chump them off [rob] on the other side, though.

**Slick:** Fucking right. If he's got four hundred bucks in his pocket, there's more where that came from. Fuck him. But they also chump each other off; only they do it legally. How do you think they got rich—by fucking people over. We don't do that to each other. We're too fucking tight. We're a group. We don't think like them. We think for all of us.

**Frankie:** That's the fucking truth. If you don't have fucking buddies, where are you? You're fuckin' no one. Nuttin'.

**Slick:** If I had the choice, and this isn't just me but probably everyone in here, if I had the choice between being a good person and makin' it, I'd be a good person. That's just the way I am. If I had my bar exam tomorrow and these guys needed me, I'd go with them. That's just the way it is down here.

**Shorty:** Yeah, you wanna be here with your family, with your friends, they're good people. You're comfortable with them. You don't feel right with these other people. (Emphasis mine.)<sup>20</sup>

A "good person" in the professional middle class is too often a "brilliant" individual who achieves something mighty for "the good of [an abstracted] humanity"; that person often gets awards for his or her actions. A "good person" in the working class has time to hang out, wants to keep the circle of connection intact, and offers many small generosity to personal and particular others. In a society in which virtually everything, and particularly education, is "classed," might not some decide to opt for a culture that emphasizes cooperation over competition? Might not some

discuss

choose "hanging out" over pushing themselves to achieve? Might not some prefer Christmas cards that simply say "love, Aunt Mary" to Christmas letters that compile the year's achievements, evidence of one's worth (or brilliance, or ambition, or travel budget)? For me, this is not hard to imagine at all. Resisters to professional class culture may choose to live in their cooperative cultures, despite economic penalties. They choose to remain with the people and places that feel like home. But, in a society dominated by the very wealthy, and largely run by the professional middle class, the privileges and rewards of staying in the working class or moving into the middle class are far from equal.

### CONCLUDING WITH CREATION

Somewhere at the center of all these arguments and abstractions sits Shelly, hiding and crying in a bathroom stall at a midwestern state university. It would be wrong-headed to try to tell her what her own decision and solutions might be. What we *can* do is clarify what those decision points are by seeing her dilemma more clearly. We can start by illuminating and validating both her past and her present. If she can see her and her husband's dilemma as a clash of cultures rather than a battle of good and bad, better and worse, normal and abnormal, she may even be able to avoid choosing decisively *between* the cultures. If she has someone to talk with about how she might reconcile them in her own life, she and her family might move forward in a way right for her and them.

Working class cultures have many humane, healthy, and life-giving qualities for which people from the middle class pine and search, at no small consequence to their bank accounts. Like most counseling psychologists, I have spent a part of my career helping both "failures" and "successes" from the professional middle class improve their mental health. We help them, often, to embrace a kind of humanity that values warmth over brilliance, "connectedness" over competition, and that helps them to find a self that exists in spite of personal achievements or failures. I do not intend to romanticize what can be, in many ways, a difficult working class life with limited options, but it is also easy for me to remember, and enjoy to this day, many positive aspects of working class life.

Donna Burns Phillips believes that "academics have to be just as clear and deliberate about the attitudes toward the students they teach as they are about the theories they teach."<sup>21</sup> In my view, it is exactly the job of college teachers, and other (perhaps unwitting) gatekeepers to the professional/managerial middle class, to help people remember, even see more

clearly, where they came from and what value it has. Phillips suggests that "education sets up a dialogue between past, present and possible selves."<sup>22</sup> I want it to do just that for Shelly.

What college *should* give Shelly (and what it gives her middle class peers) is additions to herself, as Phillips points out—not subtractions from herself, or a "transformation." What she needs is an *integration* of new abilities and awarenesses, not a compartmentalized half-self plagued with doubt and addicted to success. This work is "creating" or "bridging," a third response to the clashing of cultures and the resulting confusion. If this is difficult, if it seems contradictory to people (like me) who long for a classless society, we still need to apply ourselves to the task.

We need to experiment and figure out how to help Shelly "stitch together the before and after" of her life. There is probably much she can teach us, if we listen. In this area, our role must be as much about facilitating as professing. Helping Shelly see and define *her* own cross-class experience is important. Shelly is not only seeing her husband with newly judgmental eyes, she is also distancing herself from her "old" self. Without a conscious appreciation of the complex journey she is making, without an appreciation for the working class woman she was and is, she could lose all of what was good about her working class life, as well as losing her husband and family. Shelley's success will be dubious, at best, if she must relinquish that much to achieve it.