


Cultural Daily


Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Of Hard Work and Privileged People

Dr. Rosa Maria Pegueros · Thursday, January 26th, 2012

 My daddy had one necktie: It was permanently knotted, so on the rare occasions when he needed to wear it, he would just pull it over his head and tighten it. I could probably count on both hands how often I saw him wear it over the course of my life. He was a little guy, barely 5'3", heavysset, with powerful hands. When I made brownies, he would take two walnuts in one hand, squeeze them, and they would crack; just like that. For variety, he would smash them with his fist. It wasn't a trick; it was just the way he cracked nuts.

I can't imagine the fathers in *Leave It to Beaver* or *Father Knows Best*, pulling on a pre-knotted tie, or helping out in the kitchen by cracking nuts with their bare hands. The work these two suburban men did was mysterious. They left in the morning; they were home in time for dinner. They wore ties to work. They had time and energy to help their kids with their homework. Personally, I liked Jackie Gleason's truculent truck driver; his breezy, worldly-wise wife, Alice, and his friend Art Carney, the sanitation worker in *The Honeymooners*. While both the suburban and the working-class families were somewhat idealized, their lives were familiar to me.

 At least, at that time, working-class people appeared on TV and in the movies. Today, they don't. In today's entertainment product, rich and easy-living people predominate, and poverty is always pathological: The kids are in gangs; the working mom is stressed and angry, or defeated.

This makes me think that maybe GOP Presidential aspirant Newt Gingrich, and this week's apparent front-runner, has been watching too much TV. By suggesting that poor kids be given janitorial work in their schools, to help them learn the meaning of work and of earning a paycheck, because they don't see people working hard around them, he has bought into an image of working-class and poor people as problematic, as if their mere existence is a strain on society.

Then as an example, he offered up one of his own daughters who had a brief stint with working as a janitor when she was thirteen. His daughter raved about the experience. It must have been cool for her to see how the other 99% lives, especially if she only had to do it for a short time. I think the children of the rich should do some work for a paycheck since that may be their only brush with reality. Actually working and paying 20% of their wages in taxes, just like everybody else, instead of living off their investments and paying only 15% of the income in taxes.

I had a bit of janitorial experience. Occasionally, I would help clean the convent of the school I attended, just to be helpful. The nuns would feed us well; it was a win-win. But my real brush with janitorial work was when, as a college student and child of a working-class family, I used to borrow my father's car and pick him up from his third job in the evenings. After working from 6am to 3pm as a warehouseman, he'd work from 3pm to 5pm in a gas station, and then he would go to the gas company's corporate offices to clean up. I would meet him there a couple of days a week and empty ashtrays and wastebaskets while he cleaned floors and did other such tasks. A

lifelong Teamster, he was also the shop steward in his warehouse, so he spent some evenings at union meetings. If we were lucky, we wouldn't be too late for dinner. My father's workday was twelve hours long. That's what this poor child saw: My father, at day's end, so exhausted that he would have dinner and fall asleep immediately thereafter in front of the television.

Back-breaking work is over-rated. You learn lots of things from watching your parents work twelve hours a day, especially that you don't want to ever have to do it yourself. I had a way out. I was in college, paying my own way without scholarships by working at my own three part-time jobs, while I lived at home. If I had been cleaning up with no end in sight, no dreams to look forward to, it would have been a life-sentence rather than an opportunity for a paycheck.

Some years ago, an acquaintance of mine was going through a very bad depression. A child of privilege, she had grown up with the expectation that she would always be taken care of. She married a prosperous professional man but then the disaster hit: His company downsized, and he lost his job. He was at that awkward age: Too old to be seen as a young go-getter, but too young to retire. They struggled, and he got a job as a salesman—unfortunately, he wasn't very good at it. She bristled with resentment. Her comfortable middle-class existence was undone as they struggled to hang on to their home. She obstinately refused to get a job; she would train for one thing or another and then leave it after being hired because she didn't like the work.

She was complaining to me about her situation, and I was mystified. It seemed pretty clear to me: if they were going to survive and stay in their beautiful suburban house, she had to find work that would help bring enough money in. I remember her glaring at me: "You wouldn't understand," she said. "You've always had to work!"

That's true. I didn't understand: I don't know what it's like to be the daughter or wife of wealthy men, or to have money making money for me, sight unseen, while all I'd have to do is spend it. Even now, as a professional building a 401K, I worry about what it will be like when I am no longer able to work. Theoretically, my pension and Social Security checks should keep me pretty comfortable, but deep down, I don't trust they will.

So much for the supposed sanctity of hard work. As long as America's entertainment only depicts the well-off, politicians have little reason to understand the working-class. They think they're talking to an audience whose minds have been enfeebled by the *Real Housewives of Whatever Hills*. They're probably right.

The reverse is also true – until our leaders start talking in real terms about real, working-class people, entertainment companies won't sense that TV shows and movies should have working-class people as string, central characters.

The entertainment industry and politics as usual – those are two nuts my dad would have loved to crack.

Images: Top, the author's father. Lower, The Honeymooners.

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