



Class and Religion

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When the Unitarians and Universalists were debating whether or not to merge into one association a joke was frequently told. The Universalists were afraid of being swallowed up by the Unitarians. The Unitarians were afraid they would have indigestion.

Like all the best jokes, it revealed layers of truth. In any merger, there is always an element of fear that you will lose your identity. In this case, the Universalists were the smaller of the two parties. Being swallowed up was a realistic fear. For the more powerful Unitarians the fear was how would they absorb the Universalists into the denomination.

This was an issue of classism rarely discussed openly, only joked about. For example, Universalists believe God is too good to damn them. Unitarians believed they are too good for God to damn. Unitarians considered themselves to be of the elite due to their social status. They would have looked upon the Universalists with some disdain, as they were lower down the social ladder. If it had not been necessary for survival, I suspect class differences would have never allowed the merger.

Class means lots of different things to lots of different people. Betsy Lenodar-Wright, in a book called *Class Matters*, defines four different class groups: Poverty, Working Class, Middle Class, and Owning Class.

Poverty is the experience of people with significant job insecurity, who are underemployed and do not earn enough to meet even basic needs. The Working Class are people who are doing jobs that often do not require university degrees, usually for an hourly wage. In the past, working class jobs were very often unionised and so they paid enough to meet the needs of a family. However, unionisation has been weakened by neoliberal policies, and so has the buying power of working class wages, meaning that in today's economy, working class people often struggle with basic needs as well. The experience of those in both poverty and the working class is often of having very little power and control over their work environments and other conditions of their lives.

Middle class is a broad category, covering jobs in management, teaching, professions such as doctors and lawyers and ministers. Middle class jobs usually require some university education, if not advanced degrees. Middle class workers are often paid a salary rather than an hourly wage, though not always. Middle class people enjoy some power over their work environment and conditions, often supervising other employees, but are usually not the ones making the fundamental decisions about companies or society.

That role belongs to the owning class, those with enough resources to be in positions of real decision-making power. This includes CEOs, owners of companies, bankers, and in many cases politicians. They are called the owning class because they tend to own — or at least to have significant power in — the institutions they work for.

This roughly describes the circumstances of work and money of each of these four classes, but there are cultural differences as well. For example, Leondar-Wright studied the differences in how working class and middle-class people use language. She found that middle class people tend to talk in big ideas and abstractions, whereas working class people tend to speak in much more concrete terms, using analogies and metaphors to communicate abstract ideas in more tangible ways. In listening to groups of people from different classes, she also found that in groups dominated by working class culture, individual people tended to speak more often, but for a shorter length of time, whereas in groups dominated by professional middle-class culture, individual people tended to speak for longer, but also spoke less often.

In her experience of working with people from different class backgrounds, she also noted a key difference between working and middle-class people on the one hand, and owning and poor people on the other. She said that working and middle-class people expect to spend the majority of their lives working full-time. This leads to a certain cultural work ethic, and certain expectations about the place of work in one's life. People living in poverty, on the other hand, usually can't find full-time work. Going to work full time is at best a temporary phenomenon. Owning class people work if they have something they want to do, but it is often not a necessity. Working with progressive activists from all four class cultures, she noticed that people in poverty and the owning class shared a certain willingness to take risks and an ability to think outside the box that was not shared by those who had a job which required a full-time commitment, and which they felt they needed to preserve.

Of course, this just begins to skim the surface of class culture differences, which also include things like hobbies and activities, preferred methods of transportation, styles of handling conflict, preference for cooperation or individualism, and so on. Each class has distinct things to offer, strengths of their culture which can help organisations and communities. Each has blind spots that prevent them from seeing the others' strengths. These blind spots tend to keep them segregated. This is certainly true on Sunday morning when we tend to stick close to our own tribe. Yet we are Unitarians. We value inclusion. We welcome diversity. So, why are most of us in the middle class, with a smattering of those in the owning class?

Doug Muder, a columnist and editor for *UU World*, wrote about his own family circumstances in a way that sheds light on Unitarianism's class problem. He grew up in a small town in farm country. There was one high school, so whether your dad was a millionaire or ran off when you were three never to be seen again, that's where you went. He explains that his father did something in between: he worked in a factory, the same factory for Doug's entire childhood. You could do that in those days, if you showed up on time every day and did what they told you.

It was a good job. The factory made cattle feed, and cattle always need to eat, so the work was steady. If you were careful with your money, it paid well enough to support a family. It was also a bad job. His dad came home stinking of fish oil. Over time the noise ruined his hearing. And the schedule fluctuated. He worked the day shift one week and the night shift the next—back and forth every other week until he retired. All the workers in that factory did that.

If the night shift was working overtime, Doug didn't see him all week. But otherwise he got off school about an hour before his dad had to leave for work. He'd race home on his bike, and they would play baseball. His dad taught him to hit by throwing tennis balls in the front yard. He had a method for teaching him not to be afraid of the ball. "Let it hit you," he said. Because that's how his working-class dad thought: If the worst has happened already and you survived, what's to be afraid of?

His parents weren't Unitarians, being quite happy in a conservative branch of Lutheranism that taught the literal truth of the Bible, and that God is real, personal, and powerful. He recalls that, "The God I met at home was more liberal than the God of my Lutheran grade school, but not by much. My dad was, at the very least, secure enough to be amused rather than threatened by my human attempts to be clever. At home, my heretical theological speculations were always matters for discussion rather than reprimand. But nonetheless, God had spoken, and His word was law. If reason and conscience told me something different from what was written in the Bible, then I'd better think things through again."

Doug explains that he has never tried to convert his parents. Their theology works for them and, even if he succeeded, who would they talk to at the Unitarian church?

When Unitarians focus on class, it is the poverty class. We don't focus much, if at all, on the working class. Unitarians churches have a lot of professionals with advanced degrees—people like me. But most UU congregations don't have a lot of people like Doug's father. I think that's a problem.

When Doug was growing up, he didn't know there was a Unitarian church in town, but there was. He has since preached there twice and whenever he is in town he attends. He observes that, "It's full of wonderful people, but as best as I can determine they are also more like me than like Dad. I've met the newspaper editor, the superintendent of schools, and a professor from the local university there, but nobody from the factory where Dad worked or any other local factory. No truck drivers. No waitresses. Nobody who works checkout or has calloused hands."

His dad came to hear him the first time he preached, but he hasn't been back. Unitarianism has a class problem.

The class problem seems paradoxical to many Unitarians: We try to stand for all people, but when we look around, we're usually standing with people like ourselves. One reason this paradox is hard to talk about, I think, is that a lot of us believe an explanation that we don't want to say out loud: Working-class people are stupid. The powers-that-be have duped them into pining for Heaven instead of changing Earth.

To understand why people might choose not to be *with* us even though we're trying to be *for* them, let's remember that working-class people are doing something hard. Sometimes that means they need to think differently and ask different questions from the ones that seem obvious to those of us who look at their situation from the outside.

Picture it like this: Imagine society as a giant maze, with success as a prize at the end. Some people are born right by the exit. Others start in more difficult places. They can't just wander out. They have to make all the right moves.

Now, if you imagine yourself standing in a high place overlooking the maze, compassion for the people deep inside might raise questions like these: Why does it have to be so hard to find the prize? Couldn't we knock out a few walls? Why can't the minimum wage be higher? Why can't the government hire the unemployed? Why can't tertiary education be free?

From a God's-eye view, those are great questions. But if you're inside the maze, that mind-set won't get you out. Why does this maze have to be so hard? Why does that wall have to be there? Why can't

I have a clear path to the prize? It doesn't help. No matter how good those questions are objectively, if I'm so deep in the maze that I seriously doubt I'll ever get out, I don't need them in my head.

The primary spiritual challenge of the professional class is discernment. There are so many good things we could do with our lives. How do we choose? That's the kind of issue a UU sermon talks about. But I don't think discernment was Doug's father's issue. The factory was not a competing Good. It was a necessary Evil.

When he was pitching Doug tennis balls in the front yard, no part of him actually wanted to go off to that dirty, hot, noisy, dangerous factory. He went because if he didn't something bad would happen. He'd be punished. And in the long run, if he lost his job, his family would be punished, too.

He didn't need help discerning what to do. He just needed to make himself do it.

And that's working-class life in a nutshell. You're not following your bliss. You're not pursuing your calling. You're selling your time for money. The way out of the maze, and the way to get your kids out of the maze, is to get up every day and do something you'd rather not do.

Professionals have trouble understanding the depth of that chasm because we imagine that we also do things we don't want to do. We don't get that extra hour of sleep in the morning. We have meetings with people we don't like. We fill out forms that we know are pointless. But does that give us comradeship with people who are losing their hearing in 100-degree heat?

Here's what sums it up for Doug: "When professionals retire, we keep dabbling. The retired newspaper editor in my hometown still writes. When the professor retires, he'll keep reading journals and going to talks. But in the thirty years since my Dad took early retirement, he has never brought home some fish oil and mixed up a batch of cattle feed in the garage. When you retire from Wal-Mart, you don't set up a bar-code scanner in the basement, just to stay busy. You do that stuff for money, and when they stop paying you, you never, ever do it again."

Unitarian churches also help with the second major spiritual challenge of the professional class: inspiration. The whole point of discernment is to find a consistently inspiring path through life. That's why professionals tell their children, "Find something you love, so that you'll be brilliant and creative and energetic."

In the professional class, inspiration is the road to success. It's the way out of the maze.

In the working class, the road to success is self-control. That's what you want to teach your children: resist temptation. Walk the narrow path. Do the hard thing you don't want to do, so that you and the people who are counting on you won't be punished.

That almost sounds like a theology. But not one you will hear often in a Unitarian church.

So, this is the question Doug comes down to: "Does Unitarianism say something about life or just about life in the professional class? Can we speak in words that make sense everywhere, from the high place to the darkest, trickiest passages of the maze? Can we teach both subtle discernment *and* making yourself do the obvious hard thing? Inspiration and self-control?"

Interesting and challenging questions for this preacher. I think the answer is yes or at least I hope so. If we empathise with the realities of the working class, if we seek out ways to be in relationship with

them and if we learn to appreciate what their life lessons can contribute to our community, then the answer is definitely yes.