

Whatever Works

READING –

From *Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream* (2005) by Barbara Ehrenreich, in which she goes undercover as an unemployed white-collar worker looking for a position in corporate America. Here she attends the Crossroads Jobseekers' meeting at the Mt. Paran Church of God in Atlanta:

The speaker launches into what I now recognize as Job Search 101: the need for an elevator speech, a polished resume, and of course the need to network, network, network. Networking is so central to life, he confides, that we should be taught how to do it in kindergarten and primary school. And who should be our first networking target? The Lord.

I'm sorry, this is too much for me...

What we want from a career narrative is some moral thrust, some meaningful story we can tell our children. The old narrative was "I worked hard and therefore succeeded" or sometimes "I screwed up and therefore failed." But a life of only intermittently rewarded effort—working hard only to be laid off, and then repeating the process until aging forecloses decent job offers—requires more strenuous forms of explanation. Either you look for the institutional forces shaping your life, or you attribute the unpredictable ups and downs of your career to an infinitely powerful, endlessly detail-oriented God...

My taxi driver back to the...airport is an immigrant from India who hopes to become a Pentecostal preacher. When I admit to not being a Christian, he squints back skeptically at me in the rearview mirror, as if he might have missed some telltale facial flaw.

"It's too hard to be a Christian," I explain, "Jesus said that as soon as you get any money, you have to sell all you have and give to the poor."

"Where does it say that?" he asks, genuinely curious.

SERMON

Did anyone see the Labor Section of today's newspaper? No?

No, you didn't read the Labor Section because there *isn't* a Labor Section. Not in our local paper. Not in the San Francisco Chronicle. Not in the Los Angeles Times or the New York Times. Not in the Washington Post or the Christian Science Monitor...There's a *Wall St.* Journal...

There *is* a *Business* Section in most newspapers. That's where we read about the economy. But it's particularly focused on the economy from a business owner's standpoint, from a management perspective, from a corporate—often global—view, with investors in mind, the implication for workers being that if things are good for these folks, then we're *all* good. If we read that the economy is recovering on the Business Page, that means we're all feeling better, right?

Yeah...no, not so much.

The economy, apparently—miraculously—can be said to recover while wages remain in sickly stagnation, or even fall to new depths. In fact, economic recovery is sometimes measured as rising—in eerily gleeful terms—as a result of massive layoffs, job displacement through globalization or technology, anything that contributes to a reduction in labor costs. Corporate profits have reached never-before-seen heights for the 1% and the 99% have received the equivalent of a “get well soon” card.

P.S. Having a great time; bet you wish you were here.

Those of you who are studying Economic Inequality have been learning about this from a variety of perspectives; not only the reality of our present situation, but the thinking that brought us here.

You see, in the fairytale world of the economic thinking that has led us to this place:

- corporate profits will translate into widespread prosperity,
- corporate tax cuts will translate into job creation,
- absent any government regulations or the advocacy of unions, *the free market* (which is free only in theory) will bestow its blessings on all...

Put more crudely, if we just keep stuffing as much money as fast as we can into the pockets of the very wealthiest people, eventually their pockets will fill and some will spill out for the rest of us. But, apparently, their pockets just keep getting bigger. They must be employing full-time tailors (at minimum wage, probably...or much less, if they've outsourced) and these tailors just sew bigger and bigger pockets so the wealthiest—and I am talking wealth almost beyond imagining—the wealthiest have caught every dollar that we've thrown and they apparently have room for more and more.

- The amount of money that was given out in bonuses on Wall Street last year is twice the amount all minimum-wage workers earned in the country combined.
- The wealthiest 85 people on the planet have more money than the poorest 3.5 billion people combined. (I read that this has recently been revised to the wealthiest 66 people).
- Since 1990, CEO compensation has increased by 300%. Corporate profits have doubled. The average worker's salary has increased 4%. Adjusted for inflation, the minimum wage has actually decreased.
- CEOs in 1965 earned about 24 times the amount of the average worker. In 1980 they earned 42 times as much. Today, CEOs earn 325 times the average worker.
- Wages, as a percent of the overall economy, have dropped to an historic low.

And I realize these are all just numbers; statistics; slippery in how they are presented and balanced against other statistics...but I don't think we can ignore the imbalance that this represents. Not even the Presidential candidates can ignore it anymore. They are speaking now about income and economic inequality...and we will listen carefully for their solutions.

Here's a message to the Presidential candidates: THE CURRENT PLAN IS NOT WORKING!

Message to religious and ethical leaders, religious and ethical communities across the country:
WHERE ARE YOU?

The Jewish tradition has at its heart the story of a people exploited for their labor, reaching toward liberation. Jesus, a member of an oppressed community, challenged people to usher in the Kingdom of Heaven on earth by their radical generosity toward one another. Muhammad, living through the transition of Arab culture from tribal to a more urban society, challenged the increasing selfishness and the growing income gap that came with it and called for social justice and a fair distribution of wealth.

But is that what you hear about these religions?

It is sad, but not a surprise to me that Barbara Ehrenreich's cabdriver, studying for the ministry, was taken by surprise by the revelation that Jesus had told a rich young ruler to sell all he had and give it to the poor. One could listen to a whole lot of sermons and never find that out. It is not mentioned in the Prosperity Gospel.

Why is religion so reluctant to take on economic injustice? Don't we have a particular responsibility to bear witness to the fact that, as Irving Stone wrote in his novel about Eugene Debs, "economics is not a series of ledger books and figure columns; but rather human pain, human suffering, human endurance"? That it is about equity and justice; inherent worth and dignity; priorities and choice about the kind of society we wish to build together?

And I do not say this from a standpoint of self-righteous indignation. I feel like Barbara Ehrenreich that Jesus' invitation to sell everything and give to the poor is just too hard. I know I'm not willing to do it. But I don't think that allows me to throw up my hands and ignore the challenge completely.

How do I work toward it? How do I help to actualize justice, equity and compassion in human relations? How do I honor the inherent worth and dignity of each person?

I need help! That's just it; I need help. (Which is one of the reasons I am so happy that Economic Inequality is a Study/Action Issue: we can help one another grapple with these questions and join with one another to find avenues for effective action.)

I need help. And I need opportunities for helping from the society I live in. I want to pay taxes so that I know others in need will have a safety net. I want to help fund programs that ensure that no one can work a full time job and not be able to afford a home. I want to live in a community that is calling on me to support the common good, rather than one that rejects the whole notion that a common good is possible or even desirable.

Some of what we are talking about here can be summed up by way of a parable, attributed to the famous 20th century social activist Saul Alinsky. Imagine a large river with a high waterfall. At the

bottom of this waterfall hundreds of people are working frantically trying to save those who have fallen into the river and have fallen down the waterfall, many of them drowning. As the people along the shore are trying to rescue as many as possible one individual looks up and sees a seemingly never-ending stream of people falling down the waterfall and she begins to run upstream. One of her fellow rescuers hollers "where are you going? There are so many people that need help here." To which the woman replies, "I'm going upstream to find out why so many people are falling into the river."

You see, *our compassion* can pull people from the water, save them from drowning. But if we are committed *to justice and equity*, we need to find out why so many people are falling into the river, and then we need to address that problem. Compassion can be displayed individually; justice and equity are a societal responsibility.

Both are incredibly important. Vital. We should not neglect to save people from drowning. We should not neglect to provide a bed for people who are homeless. We should not neglect to look people in the eye, and listen, and build relationships one to another as we also strive toward addressing a broken system that has treated some people as expendable; numbers on a page; collateral damage. Any real change will only come about through relationship and understanding between people.

And I highly recommend Barbara Ehrenreich's books for their insight into our economy from the individual stories of the people who struggle to navigate the nearly-impossible course of simple survival.

In a book entitled, Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America (2001),--in which she set out to survive for a year on minimum wage jobs--she shows how *the poor pay more* by necessity because they are not offered the conveniences of "normal" life, whether because of their lack of an address, or a bank account, or a credit rating, or transportation, or any of the numerous things that many of us take for granted.

She discovers that no job, no matter how lowly, is truly "unskilled." "Every one of the six jobs I entered into in the course of this project," she writes, "required concentration, and most demanded that I master new terms, new tools, and new skills—from placing orders on restaurant computers to wielding the backpack vacuum cleaner. None of these things came as easily to me as I would have liked...Whatever my accomplishments in the rest of my life, in the low-wage work world I was a person of average ability—capable of learning the job and also capable of screwing up."

Reading Ehrenreich, I thought of my own time working as a Nursing Assistant at a nursing home in Tucson. I was continually struck by the dedication and compassion of many of my co-workers toward the people in their care, though they were given, along with the dismal wages, only perfunctory acknowledgment at best by management. They would complain, as did I, about our paychecks, but even more often (and Ehrenreich points this out, too) they would complain about management getting in the way of them doing their jobs. They would complain about decisions that rendered them less able to give the care to the residents that they wanted to give. They took pride in their work, even though they knew that it was not valued in any substantive way by their employer.

Low wage work is often very important work, vital work to the ongoing activity of society, but it is not rewarded; is even considered somehow shameful in the wider world.

Ehrenreich points out that we all want a meaningful story we can tell about our lives: we worked hard and we succeeded. Work hard and you will succeed. We are told that this is true, even though there is ample evidence to the contrary. If we are successful, we want to believe it because it validates our efforts. If we are not successful, we want to believe it because we want the hope that it will happen tomorrow. It separates us from one another, because if we are successful and believe it, then we have to believe that the poor person is doing something wrong. It separates us from one another, because if we are poor and believe it we have to believe that we have failed in some way that the successful person has not.

People who are struggling to survive are batted back and forth between religion and the economy but neither one dares to suggest that the system is broken. Politicians encourage us to spend as a patriotic duty and then chastise us for spending as a moral failure and then ask us to be grateful for any crumbs that fall from the pockets of the corporate lords. Religious leaders and motivational gurus offer God as a comfort in our plight or as the ultimate networking tool through prayer who will help us find the position we were meant for, but not as a voice that cries out through our own mouths for economic justice. Redistribution of wealth is seen as a grave sin, by economists and politicians and preachers, but redistribution of corporate debt seems to be a given, God's will, the invisible hand of the market suddenly being redirected to a greater good that we should somehow all accept, though the goodness is hard to fathom.

So why is there no Labor Section, no voice for workers in the media at large? Why is it that employers require loyalty from their employees, but guarantee none in return? Why is it we can bail out banks but not mortgages or student loans? Why is it that the people doing some of the most important and valuable work of taking care of the most vulnerable among us are paid some of the lowest wages of anyone in our society?

Are these not ethical questions? Are these not religious questions? Are we not called to raise up the stories *behind the story* of the American Dream? What is it we should feel about a society that accepts such a ruthless economic structure as inevitable?

[T]he appropriate emotion is shame, writes Barbara Ehrenreich in Nickel and Dimed, shame at our own dependency, in this case, on the underpaid labor of others...The "working poor," as they are approvingly termed, are in fact the major philanthropists of our society. They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for; they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high. To be a member of the working poor is to be an anonymous donor, a nameless benefactor, to everyone else...

Reflecting on her experiences, and thinking of what she hopes for the people she met and grew to respect deeply, she writes:

Someday, of course....they are bound to tire of getting so little in return and to demand to be paid what they're worth. There'll be a lot of anger when that day comes, and strikes and disruption. But the sky will not fall, and we will all be better off for it in the end.

May that day come soon.