

“Inherent Worth: Reflections on Social Class”

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One thing I know about this congregation is that there are many dog lovers among us. And, so, I imagine there are also many who are familiar with the unique heartbreak we feel when a beloved dog dies.

I said goodbye to my dear Luna last April when she reached the end of her lengthy and joyful life. Along with feeling a deep and profound sadness, her death presented another challenge. I wasn't ready to adopt again but I also know that life does not feel complete without canine company.

So, I decided to again “hang up my shingle” as a dog sitter, work I did in graduate school to make ends meet. As a dog sitter, I could enjoy the company of a dog without the commitment of offering a “forever home.”

Through a member, I connected with a wonderful family in Winchester and their little grey dog, Marko. After Marko and I got to know each other and we had a few successful short stays together, I had many dog sitting dates on my calendar.

Marko's family lives in “the Flats,” a grid of large, Victorian homes between downtown and Route 3. Marko's house has six bedrooms and three and a half bathrooms, a sunny, gourmet kitchen and an impressive garden that, so far, I have been able to keep alive during the family's absence. Sometimes, when I am dog sitting, I feel like I should be paying *them* for allowing me to stay in such a beautiful place. Recognizing that Marko lives in a different world than I do, I have come to call his house “Downtown Abbey.”

There is a feature of Marko's house that fascinates me. If you walk in the front door, beyond the foyer, you are first greeted by a large and grand staircase. Walk through a doorway on the right and there is another staircase right next to it, more simple and narrow. If you follow this narrow staircase up to the third floor, it brings you to a wing of small bedrooms. These rooms lack the dark wood, rich floral wallpaper and period detail of the bedrooms on the second floor, on the “grand staircase” side of the house.

At first, I couldn't understand why, if there are two staircases, they would be built next to each other. But then I realized that the narrow staircase brings people from the small, simple bedrooms to the kitchen. This house was originally designed to include live-in servants, with the owners using the grand staircase and dwelling in the more opulent rooms and the employees living literal parallel lives in different conditions.

The more I think about this architectural detail, the more I see it as a compelling symbol of social class. We live amid human hierarchies based on how much or how little wealth or education we have. These hierarchies are powerful, so powerful they shape how buildings are built, with whom our children study and play and even how long and how well we live. Class divisions are part of the figurative and literal infrastructure we navigate every day.

And staircases themselves are poetic elements of this symbolism as our stories of class are often of ascending and descending this human hierarchy – above or below our family origins, up and down within the arc of our own lives. Social class is often experienced as transition and, like all transitions, often includes loss, joy, relief, shame, pride and confusion.

What is your class story? I tell you a little of mine in hopes that my story invites you to consider your own.

My father was the first in his family to go to college. His parents, both children of immigrants, could only afford to send one of their two children to university and so, as the boy, he went while his sister did not. My grandfather often recalled that, during the years my father attended Tufts, they ate a lot of chicken. For many reasons, including receiving different degrees of educational support, my father has enjoyed a financial stability throughout his life that eludes his sister.

But that is not to say that my father has always been comfortable. My parents and I spent the first seven years of my life living in a trailer park. We received a discount on the rent as my father also helped maintain the park through odd jobs. He worked nights at a state-run mental health facility and my mother was a substitute teacher when she wasn't taking care of me. For a time, our family received Food Stamps. One of my earliest memories was visiting the public assistance office. I always liked going there as they had a big box of toys.

We eventually moved into my grandparents' wood-paneled basement so my parents could save money for a house. Two years later, after my parents both secured full-time professional jobs, we moved to a small farmhouse the next town over.

I have never gone to bed hungry, have benefitted from a strong, well-funded public school system and, with my parents' support, received an innovative private undergraduate education. One could say that in terms of household income, from age 10 on, I grew up middle class.

And, yet, I have learned habits from my family – cultural habits – that I imagine find their roots a few generations back. I save the plastic containers from take out. I usually shop second hand first. Even though I have the resources to hire a housecleaner and would prefer to not spend my limited spare time with a mop, I never do because that is what rich people do. As I was often reminded growing up, there are rich people and there are ordinary folk, like us.

And, yet, my current income would define me as upper middle class, as would my graduate degree, the stamps in my passport and my access to others with wealth and status. Since I have become active in Unitarian Universalist congregations, I have come to know and enjoy classical music. My cultural habits also include driving a relatively new Prius, being a fanatic recycler and regularly visiting the local Whole Foods, rendering me – in the vernacular of these political times – a member of the “liberal elite.”

At the bottom of the order-of-service is a link to an on-line quiz. With the caveat that the results of this quiz are as meaningful as the results of any quiz on the internet, I find it fascinating. This quiz identifies social class not by the familiar markers of income, education and vocation but by more subjective dimensions - how one makes ethical decisions, trusts others, reads emotions and even whether one is likely to stop for pedestrians in the crosswalk.¹ It defines class as something that shapes culture, values and behavior. From the story I just shared, it may not surprise you that I was defined as someone whose class identity is somewhere between working class and middle class.

¹ <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2013/1017/What-is-your-social-class-Take-our-quiz-to-find-out/How-did-you-score>

I tell the story of my class background in the context of bearing other identities, of being a Unitarian Universalist minister, as a UU minister serving in Winchester, Massachusetts. Both Unitarian Universalism and the community of Winchester have their own class stories to tell.

Unitarian Universalists have a reputation of being predominately middle- to upper-middle class. A recent Pew Research study placed UUs as the twelfth wealthiest faith affiliation out of twenty-six, with Jews and Hindus earning the most and Jehovah's Witnesses earning the least. UUs as a group are ranked higher than the average US adult.²

Local minister and historian, the Rev. Mark Harris, has researched the origins of this phenomenon. His book, *Elite: Uncovering Classism in Unitarian Universalist History*, identifies theological and sociological influences that have contributed to this class identity. His work is worthy of a sermon unto itself but can be summarized by affirming the perception that the Unitarians and the Universalists, when different faith traditions, were divided along class lines. For a time here in Massachusetts, Unitarians dominated the ruling and owning classes, professing liberal values, practicing conservative politics and regarding their religious cousins, the Universalists, as "poor relations." It is not true, however, that Universalists were predominately working class and uneducated. More so, the Universalists included a greater diversity of classes and a sizeable number of ambitious middle-class citizens, striving for upward mobility.

The connection between Unitarian Universalism and economic privilege may be rooted in theology. Traditionally, Unitarians have emphasized individual – not communal - development, a spiritual orientation assuming an autonomy found among the comfortable. In addition, focusing on "this life" and "this world" over the promise of joy in the afterlife is an easier sell to those who are not in profound financial struggle. Emerson's call to "self-reliance" reveals an assumption of independence and agency that the poor do not realistically possess.

Unitarian acceptance of science as part of faith has also fostered prejudice towards the poor. Harris affirms that endorsement of reproductive rights and the

² <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/10/11/how-income-varies-among-u-s-religious-groups/>

“right to die” movement by contemporary Unitarian Universalists finds its beginnings in the many Unitarians who promoted eugenics and advocated for the sterilization and euthanasia of those polite society found “unfit.”

I recently had an interesting conversation with one of our members. In the church she was raised, they always dressed up because as her mother would say, “you never know when Jesus will show up.” This led to discussion of an observation I once heard – that people often attend their faith community wearing clothes different than what they wear during the week. An executive or professor might dress down on the weekend while someone who wears a uniform – a mechanic, a bus driver – might appreciate the opportunity to put on a suit. Most Unitarian Universalist congregations I know have a culture of casual dress, a paradoxical symbol of high economic status.

Winchester has its own story of class. Since I have become acquainted with this congregation and the community it serves over the past couple years, I have come to recognize the complexity of this story.

Winchester is known for its affluence; a recent search on a real estate website revealed few homes for sale for less than a million dollars. And a leader at the Unitarian Universalist Association once told me, in a workshop with local youth, she asked the young people to name hallmarks of privilege in their community. For the Winchester participants, it wasn’t private school that was a sign of high status but being part of the public school system. I continue to be surprised when I hear members say that, even though many in this congregation don’t live in Winchester, they feel “looked down upon” for having an address in another town.

But the story is not quite that simple. A leader affiliated with the Winchester Got Lunch program, providing mid-day meals to those in financial need, once confided to me that they sometimes deliver food to residents one would never know were struggling. And class difference is relative. Even among those with significant income, they sometimes strain under the pressure to belong to the right clubs, to give their children the newest gadgets, to participate in all the community activities that sometimes come with a large price tag.

So here we are, a Unitarian community serving Winchester and beyond, all of us with our complex stories of class, perhaps a rich diversity of stories rendered

invisible by silence. Knowing Unitarian Universalist history, knowing the community in which we gather, I have long wanted to start a conversation here about class.

And I have wanted to start a conversation for one, primary reason: shame. I believe, no matter where we dwell on the economic food chain, the primary by-product of class hierarchy is shame.

This morning, I chose Big Creek People in Action as our Share the Plate recipient. This organization was our gracious host for last year's youth service trip to War, West Virginia, a city in McDowell County, the fifth poorest region in the country.

I thank Director of Youth Ministries Sam Wilson for how he educated trip participants about the causes and impact of McDowell's economic struggle, creating the motto, "we are going to war...on poverty!" Indeed, the communities we saw there, while incredibly welcoming and surrounded by natural beauty, were dramatically different than what we are familiar with in the Boston suburbs.

I remember one of the adult chaperones sharing a story over dinner. The youth were scraping many layers of faded paint off the side of a house, talking about anything and everything to pass the time in the hot sun. They settled on comparing different pizza restaurants in Paris. The chaperone felt uncomfortable. Could the homeowners hear this conversation? How would it feel to have what some might call "rich teenagers" repair your house? Somehow a sign of wealth became a source of embarrassment.

I had a similar experience. I came into the house next to the one we were working in to get cleaning supplies. The homeowner and I engaged in small talk as she assembled the items. She asked us when we were going home and how long the drive was. I told her we were leaving the next day and – without even thinking – that we weren't driving but flying back. By the look on her face, I might as well have said that we were taking a spaceship home. Has she ever been on an airplane? How often have I traveled by air? I, too, felt uncomfortable.

And sometimes I am on the other side of this awkwardness. No matter how respectful and friendly Marko's family is, no matter the car I drive and the degrees I have, when I am dog sitting I know I am there as "the help," inhabiting a

different place in the class-based human hierarchy, not so different from the live-in servants that may have first served that beautiful house long ago.

The First Principle of Unitarian Universalism is affirmation of “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Thus, we are called to affirm there is something sacred in every one of us that transcends the artificial but powerful lines of social class. And I believe that the only way to claim back our power is to give voice to a different understanding of humanity, beginning with telling our stories about social class. Let the conversation begin.