

Trying To Find Home: Navigating Social Strata


By Christine G. Renne

The presence in the university of faculty from the working class appears to confirm the myth of upward mobility. We must buy into academia in order to get out of the working class, but in doing so we also buy into the denigration of our origins and the preservation of class inequities. In the end, it seems the price of successful escape is to be intellectually and socially “nowhere at home.”

—Christine Overall (1995, p. 219)

It's my senior year of high school. I walk down the long hallway then up to the classroom door where my math analysis (calculus) teacher stands waiting. Because of our truce, I hand him my homework and he hands me a slip of paper with the day's assignment handwritten on it. I disappear without exchanging any conversation with him. His teaching is so ritualistic and unvarying day after day that I refuse to be part of it. Being known as a “good” student, no one questions me for being in the halls after the bell rings or why I'm in the student activities office where I sit and complete the math assignment on my own.

My other teachers, while generally kind and occasionally interesting, provide no particular direction or


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mentoring for me. My parents are unable to help me. Beyond being in the “academic” (college-bound) track, I receive no guidance about selecting colleges or careers. So when a program director at the YMCA tells me not to pursue science because I’d be much better in a people-oriented career, I believe him. I apply for and receive early admission to Occidental College, where my brother attended. However, my sense of purpose and boldness belie my ignorance; I have no idea what college is really like or what options I have in terms of a profession. I am oblivious to the future consequences of my decisions.

Family and Cultural Background

My parents were first generation Americans. Described as “peasants from the old country,” both sets of grandparents arrived from Russia shortly after the turn of the 20th century to escape religious persecution. A small group of Russian Molokans settled in the southern and eastern portions of Los Angeles. Although Molokans are Christians, they follow the same basic dietary laws of Judaism. Ham, bacon, lobster, crab, many types of fish and other animals were foreign to my family.

As a child and throughout my young adult years, I spoke very little about my Russian background. In the era of Sputnik and the Cold War, being Russian meant Communism. It was simpler not to talk about it. Diversity was not celebrated. My family basically assimilated to American culture in that we spoke English at home and dressed accordingly, but both parents remained part of the church all of their lives.

All of my grandparents died before I was three. I knew some of my relatives but an internal family feud severed the connections with much of my dad’s family. I do not speak Russian (although I unsuccessfully attempted to learn the language in college) so could not understand most of what went on when attending the Molokan church on special occasions. The sense of family and cultural heritage basically became restricted to my immediate family.

My father built the house in southeast Los Angeles where I was raised. In fact, he built and repaired many things. In his job at a local cardboard manufacturing plant, his responsibilities included repairing and keeping the machinery operating. His title of “maintenance mechanic” basically meant that he could fix most anything. A favorite memory of my dad was our family outing to the library every two weeks after which my dad would often take us to the local Sav-on for a double scoop ice cream cone.

While we had the “basics” during our upbringing, money was limited. My mother made many of my clothes until junior high when I began making my own. My mother finished her high school diploma while I was in elementary school and my father graduated from high school in 1928. Family lore has it that my sister (the eldest sibling) returned from attending her first day of kindergarten and announced that she wanted to be a kindergarten teacher. While my sister was in high school, my father questioned why she wanted to go to college. She financially supported

herself through school and followed her dream. She recently retired after more than 37 years of teaching, mostly in kindergarten. By the time I was ready for college about 12 years later, there was no question that I would attend.

Theoretical Framework

The initial purpose of this narrative is to explore my own life as a woman from a working class background who is now a professor. After situating my work in the small but growing research field about the intersection of social class and academics, I present my autobiography by providing a documentary through the three categories of social, intellectual, and work experiences. Then, I compare my experiences and understandings with others to reveal similarities and differences. Ultimately, the purpose is to expand what is known about working class academics and to contribute to the expanding research literature focused on how social class influences the lives of those who have careers as academics in higher education settings.

Emerging Themes about Academics from Working Class Backgrounds

Much has been written about gender, especially about women as educators. A small but growing body of literature has extended the field for personal examination of lives of scholars or academics, including the perspectives of Latina or African American women (e.g., Delgado-Gaitan, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1997; etc.) or other cultural minorities. In addition to gender, lives of scholars or academics, and cultural minorities, another emerging intersection is social class and class identity.

Early documentation of working class people in the academic labor market captures their stories through autobiography and/or narratives. While many of the writings are from Marxist or feminist perspectives (e.g., selections from Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993 or Mahony & Zmroczek, 1997), the purpose is to identify the differences, marginality, or struggles of working class people in a middle class environment. Working class women who have successfully attained rank in academe have often done so by changing their sense of identity, by experiencing the difficulty of “crossing borders” of multiple social class settings, or a with a growing sense of ambivalence (Dews & Law, 1995). These are not cases of “poor-me” or lengthy tales of hardships; rather, these stories portray a sensitive and thought-provoking way of understanding how social class and working in the academy emerge first, in the lives of working class academics and second, in classrooms and hallways of higher education.

Building on the earlier body of autobiographical work, two researchers moved to a more structured approach to explore the professional and personal lives of working class sociologists (Grimes & Morris, 1997). To frame the study, they designed a set of 59 open-ended questions concerning key issues gleaned from the earlier works and limited their respondents to working class sociologists rather than an array of various academic disciplines. From the Grimes and Morris study and the

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earlier works, several key themes emerge to distinguish academics from a working class background from other social classes. Differing concepts of work ethics, how and why to select a college, the self-concept, and a love of reading consistently appear as important factors in this field of study.

First, the notion of what work includes is a combination of working hard and providing service. Working class academics feel they had to work harder both academically and from a financial standpoint while attending college when compared to their classmates (Grimes & Morris, 1997). Academically, they did not feel as adequately prepared by previous institutions (high school and/or undergraduate preparation), thus creating the situation that to succeed they had to work harder — both to actually *be* adequately prepared and to *feel* prepared. One academic observed, “And while I have bested many of them with ease, I will always feel that I have to work harder simply because my background has not entitled me” (Charlip, 1995, p. 38). Or, as a friend and colleague puts it, “You have to work harder because you don’t know what middle and upper class people take for granted.”

Additionally, the concept of work spills over into what is considered to be service. Teachers and researchers from working class backgrounds tend to value service highly (Mahony & Zmroczek, 1997; Tokarczyk, 1993). For some, religious convictions also support service as a critical component; however, personal or religious values that honor service are not particularly valued in the reward structure of the university and can be exploited as one academic describes:

Unlike the Mennonite emphasis, in which selfless service to the department and the university would have the highest priority, service in the academy is often perceived as negative — as weakness, as something that subordinate classes, including women, do. . . . Consequently, the person who performs “service” is often exploited. Even the term “hard work” itself — whether done for others or for oneself — has negative connotations in academia. The image of a hard worker often suggests a drudge or an unimaginative, passive, conforming person — someone who will serve on routine committees and organize conferences. This person, too, is often exploited. (Weaver, 1993, p. 120)

Selection of a college is a second theme that emerged both in terms of actual location as well as monetary implications. Selecting a college is less a detailed, strategic decision based on multiple and competing choices and more of an expedient or unquestioned act. Some “never thought to apply” elsewhere (e.g., Moses, 1995) and others knew very little about the colleges they selected (e.g., Black, 1995). For those from a working class background, financial status is a major consideration in the pursuit of higher education. Those who seek graduate education often do not know about financial alternatives (e.g., loans, available scholarships, etc.) and are thereby limited (Grimes & Morris, 1997, p. 96). Or, some make conscious choices to attend an institution where they will not incur debts (Overall, 1995) while others work while attending school (Leslie, 1995; Tokarczyk, 1993). Financial considerations are not limited to selections of colleges; “What makes the situation of poor and working class

women so unique is the way in which economic survival strategies are intimately connected to our self-esteem” (Sowinska, 1993, p. 155).

A third major theme involves the sense of one’s self while in the role of an academic. Two particular aspects include ambivalence and a sense of activism. Working class professors often have the feeling of being both an “insider” — generally while teaching — and an “outsider” — often while interacting with colleagues from other social classes (Grimes & Morris, 1997). The sense of alienation from one world and a desire for camaraderie from the other creates a profound tension (Dews & Law, 1995). Being pulled by two different worlds can be an extremely painful experience (Tokarczyk, 1993). However, as faculty members, professors with working class backgrounds tend to see their roles in stronger terms of being an activist or specifically supporting students from similar backgrounds. Professors have empathy, adapt their teaching strategies, or serve as role models for these students in particular (Grimes & Morris, 1997).

A love of reading permeates the backgrounds of many working class academics (e.g., Moses, 1995; Sowinska, 1993). An early love of reading provides vicarious experiences and glimpses into different worlds. Along with opening possibilities of a different life-style, reading also contributes to a sense of separateness from family (Dews & Law, 1995; Leslie, 1995).

Succinctly stated, at least two essential components that permeate the research literature help to explain the ability of those with a working class background move successfully into middle class society. Grimes and Morris (1997) describe those who “made something of themselves” as high achievers who learned the value of hard work early on (p. 75).

Modes of Inquiry and Evidence

The use of autobiography and narrative are sometimes regarded as something less than “rigorous” or “appropriate” means of scholarship. These two methods quite intentionally defy the objectivity supposedly present in more quantifiable research methods. However, autobiography and narrative provide a sensitivity that is capable of capturing the subtlety of social class in an academic setting (Law, 1995). The world of higher education eschews the realm of the personal; yet, this “everydayness” contains the experiences and wisdom of discovery — the very heart of the research enterprise (Bateson, 1997).

The research base about academics of working class backgrounds continues to grow through both autobiography and more traditional research. By drawing on both the autobiographical approach while considering many of the emerging themes from earlier work, I strive to bridge the two approaches.

Social, Intellectual, and Work Experiences

Social Experiences

I swore I'd never be a teacher. I didn't want to put up with the restraints of bell schedules, school rules, or prescribed curriculum. Besides, all three of my siblings (all older) were teachers and I didn't need to follow their footsteps.

As my siblings grew older, followed their careers, married, and moved on, I had other experiences that opened up my world to different places, customs, and social classes. While in junior high and the beginning of high school, I was a member of a city marching band. I played clarinet — which I learned in junior high. Every two years, the band took a major trip by bus that was paid for through numerous fund-raising events. One year (when I was 14) we traveled across the United States stopping to perform at stadiums, special events, parades, and anyplace else that would welcome us. The highlights included playing at the World's Fair in New York and on the Capitol steps in Washington, DC. Two years later the band traveled to British Columbia and Alberta, Canada. We stayed at people's houses, slept on gym floors, and sometimes stayed in motels. One of the most amazing things to me was that we ate at restaurants most of the time. Eating out was a rare event; staying at a motel was a new adventure. Traveling was an exciting experience that I viewed as special. At that time, it never occurred to me that what was so different to me might be commonplace to others. Indeed, I was oblivious.

My high school years marked a time of divergent experiences. During my sophomore year, I worked part-time as a sales clerk at a local pharmacy. I became involved at the local YMCA in various clubs and conferences. As part of being involved in the YMCA, I traveled across the western United States and met numerous teens and adults. I became adept at public speaking and often was a keynote speaker at local service club meetings. Various mentors at the Y encouraged and honed my leadership skills. During the last few years of high school and the first few years of college, I also worked at the Y full-time during vacations as the front desk clerk.

Culturally, the most influential experience was being an American Field Service (AFS) exchange student to Brazil for the summer between my junior and senior years of high school. After returning from Brazil, I viewed the world and my life differently. While in Brazil, the class structure that permeated the society was quite evident. Once again, I was awed by the experience and felt privileged to have been selected. However, the concept of social class in my own life at home was still a vague notion. Others had nice homes, pools, new cars, store-purchased stylish clothes, and traveled, but that was just the way things were. I saw what became the shallowness of high school "life" — the emphasis on clothing, appearances, and the all-important notion of being popular. As the latter part of the '60s, the unrest was in and around me.

Intellectual Experiences

In junior high and the beginning of high school, I yearned to be a nuclear physicist or astronaut. As part of a special math pilot program at my junior high, the administration and a math teacher selected an elite group of 24 students (12 boys and 12 girls) to participate in an advanced class. We took algebra and geometry earlier than generally offered which resulted in finishing math analysis (calculus) early in high school. Most of the group also took biology, chemistry, and physics together as well. However, no “pipeline” or means of identifying young women who could pursue higher education and possible careers in the sciences existed then — at least not at my mostly working class high school.

When told by a YMCA Director that I’d never be happy in a scientific field because I would be much better in a people-oriented career, my dreams of being a scientist evaporated. Looking back, I’m still surprised at how much he influenced me. His mentorship served me well in developing my public speaking and leadership abilities; however, his career counseling ability was questionable.

Selecting a college was simple. One of my brothers went to Occidental College, a small private liberal arts college in Los Angeles. I liked it when I visited so attending there sounded like a good idea. I didn’t really consider any other universities although I received several invitations to apply other places because of my scores on the SAT. While at Oxy, I worked part-time, had a state scholarship, and my parents paid the balance. I was rather naively surprised when I realized that college wasn’t much different than high school; however, it was the first time I was truly challenged intellectually. I grew too despondent and frustrated to appreciate it and too unsavvy to understand the differences between my background and the middle and upper class students at the school. I lost the state scholarship because I earned too much money while attending school. I didn’t want to go into debt by staying at Oxy so, on a dare from a YMCA friend, I transferred to University of California, Riverside. The first week there I applied to University of California, Berkeley because some of my AFS and YMCA friends were there and I wanted to participate in the Viet Nam war protests. After being accepted, I drove to Berkeley expecting to talk with someone there to figure out my options as a transfer student. I drove around the entire campus, couldn’t find a parking place, and drove back to Southern California.

Acknowledging my rapidly waning interest in college and that I would lose units in transferring, I needed to complete my degree quickly or drop out. VISTA or the Peace Corps were possibilities to deal with my growing disillusionment and my commitment to provide more equitable opportunities for all and to promote peace. If I stayed at University of California, Riverside, I could complete my BA in three years. I finished the course requirements for my degree (Social Sciences) but still needed units to graduate. I looked at some education courses and found they were interesting. I became involved in the School of Education and finished the

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credential work to be an elementary school teacher in two quarters after graduating. Five years of college were condensed into three years and two quarters.

Sixteen years later, I returned to the university for my M.A. and Ph.D. Although encouraged by faculty members to attend a more prestigious university for my doctoral studies, I could not see how I could — financially or geographically. I taught elementary school full-time while taking two or three courses a quarter in graduate school, saved all that I could to pay for a year's leave of absence to complete my doctoral exams and dissertation research, then returned to teaching full-time while writing my dissertation. The following year I took another leave of absence to teach at the university part-time and finish my dissertation.

Work Experiences

My last quarter as an undergraduate came to an abrupt end as my mother died in March resulting in “incompletes” for all my classes. I finished them one by one while I taught outdoor education for the spring quarter. Come fall, I didn't know what to do. I got dressed up and was headed to the administration building for the Los Angeles Unified School District (where my siblings worked) but realized that it was Admissions Day and the office was closed. The next day I called to sign up as a substitute teacher while I decided what to do. They wouldn't take my application because they only wanted to hire full-time classroom teachers.

I called several YMCAs and came up with two part-time jobs. One position turned into a full-time job and was where I met my husband-to-be. The job ended and I became a substitute then full-time elementary school teacher in a local school district. Due to severe cutbacks as a result of Proposition 13, I was laid off (not tenured) and returned to the YMCA as a Program Director. A few months later, I was divorced and became one of only a handful of female YMCA Executive Directors across the nation. It was fun, challenging, and work that I knew, loved, and thought that I understood. However, I didn't initially understand the transition to being an executive or working with a rather powerful board of directors comprised of several major business leaders in northern Orange County. My previous experiences didn't prepare me for that cultural or social class change.

After I successfully consolidated the YMCA position and eliminated my own job, I returned to teaching elementary school, again as temporary situation until a pending YMCA position was finalized. The job never materialized so I continued teaching. One summer while doing volunteer outreach work for the YMCA, I visited Georgia. I came to realize during that trip that I could move away from Southern California and potentially be happy.

About six years later, I decided to pursue a master's degree in education because of my interest in curriculum development and my love of teaching. I became hooked on the academic life and completed an administrative credential and a Ph.D. After completing the Ph.D., I worked at the university as the Coordinator for the Multiple

Subject (elementary teaching credential) program then accepted a tenure-track position at a branch campus of a major research institution in the Pacific Northwest. I became the first and only member of my immediate family to move away from Southern California. However, a few years later I returned to my earlier geographical home, sunshine, and my current position.

Navigating Multiple Worlds

Initially, I didn't want to be a teacher because of my perceptions of the restrictions placed on classrooms and schools. At times, I still chafe at the bureaucracy and ineptness of institutions. However, the ineptness is sometimes my own as I struggle to straddle the various worlds I inhabit. I don't always understand "the rules of the game" or even what the game is. My logical mind sometimes misses key points.

In writing my story, I am somewhat chagrined about how little I know about the reasons why my family did what they did. I don't know why my father took us to the library other than I recall him checking out books on how to tie flies (he was an avid fisherman). I don't know why it was assumed that I would go to college. Along with many other things, social class was never discussed in my family. Family stories were few. Things were the way they were and that was that. Perhaps it was a result of my parents living through the Depression or other difficult times. I simply don't know.

Over the years, I was rather independent and oblivious which led me to not always recognize or understand the prevalent social class bias and gender bias. The YMCA was frustrating but invigorating. I was disgusted when I received letters saying that I was not qualified for a job because I couldn't be a member of the Rotary Club (which was limited to men at the time). I was keenly aware of a sense of difference as I pulled up to million dollar homes in San Marino in my Volkswagen Squareback and was amazed that I needed to teach high school girls how to wash a car or use a manual can opener. Yet, the Y provided opportunities to talk and wonder about what was important with others my age and older.

When asked what I do, I now say I'm a professor. It took several years for me to be comfortable claiming the title of "professor" so I used to say, "I teach." In thinking about it now, my reticence is reflective of identifying the separateness and dualness that I experience when talking with people I don't know very well. The usual follow-up question queries what I teach. When I reply education, there is an immediate response — usually almost a sense of deflation — that somehow, being a professor of education doesn't "count" the same as biology or mathematics or some other field that's less familiar or common. I do "women's work" (teaching) in a field that is not particularly valued (education). While being a professor is considered to be at least a middle class occupation, education is still taken "lightly" as an academic area and offers little privilege or cultural capital, thus extending and reinforcing the dualness of my working class background and my middle class life.

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I share much from my earlier years because they illustrate how social class influenced my life yet how I remained oblivious and ambivalent. What I recently came to understand was that much of my disillusionment and my search for the “right job” are deeply based in the clash of who I perceive myself to be and the expectations associated with the various social classes in which I move.

I definitely benefit from white privilege and have many outward symbols of a middle class life. Financially, I have a fine home, drive a seven-year old basic model of a van, and worry about how to afford retirement. I have health insurance that is paid for by my employer. Socially, I can “hold my own” at fancy gatherings although I don’t enjoy dressing up or formal situations.

The clash is especially evident because I *enjoy* working with my hands, i.e., manual labor. I do my own yard work (including major excavation) and most of my own minor home repairs (fixing a leaking roof or toilet, etc.). I like the stained glass window and the oak tables with inlaid tile that I designed and crafted. And the entire neighborhood enjoys the corner flowerbeds with cheery bulbs, a new retaining wall, and the bright, blooming roses. I gain a rich sense of satisfaction and joy from quality craftsmanship and custom designs. However, I am also often treated as “strange” or “different” because of my comfort and abilities with power tools, my willingness to get my hands dirty (quite literally), and my knowledge of things not usually associated with middle to upper class white middle-aged females.

Making Connections

But I have to ask — what is idiosyncratic and what is a reflection of social class? What can be accounted for by gender or the growing wisdom of age? Financially, what is being cheap and what is the reality of being single? What is essential?

I believe that to serve is essential. My background as a YMCA professional and a teacher revolve around the concept that through quality engagement, people can enhance themselves and the lives of others. I believe that education is about making connections — with ideas and people across time and boundaries. Becoming more educated allows for informed and broader choices. I care about people, about the future, and about what part I can play to make the present and the future a better place for all. I hold a deep sense of commitment and believe service gives life meaning yet I struggle to gain a sense of balance. Nurturing my soul is essential but often is in conflict with “doing for others” which leaves so little time for myself.

No matter what I do, I tend to do it whole-heartedly. I love to read, have many diverse interests and talents, generally excelled in school, and find that learning is an enticing challenge whether it be how to warp the floor loom I recently purchased or studying the history of the development of towns in the Sierra Nevada. It doesn’t take much to intrigue me. However, “If you’re not going to do it right, then don’t do it” rings in my mind from years gone by. Whether it was learning to play the

clarinet, landscaping my yard, planning my classes, grading papers, or designing programs, I generally spend an extraordinary amount of time thinking, planning, implementing — whatever is required — to do it well.

Similar to others from a working class background (e.g., Grimes & Morris, 1997), I often have more empathy for those students who are from a similar background. Conversely, and not generally identified in the research literature, at times I have less patience for those students who don't find studying convenient or who don't have a strong work ethic.

My journey reflects and incorporates many of the emerging themes from previous autobiographies and research. Working hard and providing service permeate my entire life and continue as part of my role as an academic. My choice of undergraduate and graduate institutions was not based on prestige; it was based on expediency, familiarity, and financial considerations. For much of my life, I did not recognize nor could I name the ambivalence I experienced coming from a working class background while participating in middle class activities and contexts. My activism permeates my experiences through the YMCA, teaching elementary school, and within other contexts. And I continue to be a voracious reader.

However, one theme emerged that is central in my life and is not developed in the earlier research literature. For a lack of a better term, I call it obliviousness. I saw that others had possessions I did not; I knew others experienced things I did not. At other times, I “didn't know what I didn't know.” But that was simply the way it was — a “taken-for-grantedness” or an undiscerning knowing that was not critically examined yet was central in my thinking. I also wanted to believe that we live in a meritocracy where those who work hard are justly rewarded. Unfortunately, I now know from my own and others' experiences this ideal isn't true. However, not knowing and not examining the inequities provided me with opportunities and an outward appearance of confidence and boldness. A result of being more aware of social class especially while in a university setting provides a mixed blessing: oblivion is sometimes much less painful.

Closing Observations

Self-disclosure can be painful because others may learn things about you that in some fashion can be used against you. This is especially true of those who are untenured or who have not attained full-professor rank. However, to advance the knowledge of how social class intertwines with the everydayness of the work of professors, autobiography and narratives are necessary for two reasons: first, to uncover the often subtle nuances of difference, and second, to create a broader base from which to draw and confirm the emerging themes.

Writing this narrative was both simple and trying. The words flowed easily and quickly while telling my story. Conversely, working to keep it succinct yet insightful was difficult. While writing, I reverted back to simpler, conversational

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sentences and not the usual academic writing. I was very conscience of it and caught by the duality of styles.

When talking with colleagues about this piece, I soon discovered that it would not “count” in my academic file as a publication as originally written. I had followed the earlier examples of self-disclosure and searched for some commonalities rather than the more academically accepted format of situating the piece in research literature. Because I have to choose how to invest my time so that I might succeed in the institution, I very consciously changed the original manuscript to follow the more traditionally accepted format.

It is common to think of autobiographies as a journey or a border crossing. I feel that some of my on-going story must wait for awhile. However, by waiting, I am condoning the very experiences that have served to silence me. As for now, I’m just trying to find home.

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