Coming Out About Class

Swimming Upstream Toward Economic Stability

By Corinna Yazbek '01

Midway through her show at Mount Holyoke, Erica Lopez the Welfare Queen asked, "Who here has ever stood in line at a welfare office?" I raised my hand and looked around the packed New York Room; I was the only one with my hand up. I thought, am I *really* the only one, or is everyone else hiding?

Lopez was framing a conversation about the experiences of poverty, one also going on inside my own head and heart. Growing up poor, then graduating from an elite institution, means that I am straddling two worlds with no map for navigating this treacherous path of upward class mobility.

The year I started at Mount Holyoke, it was ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* as having the nation's most beautiful campus. That same year, my mom went to housing court once again and lost our home, the trailer in which I'd grown up in southwest Florida. I desperately clung to the idea that a good education was my ticket out of poverty. However, I didn't realize the cost of leaving my class culture behind and trying to immerse myself in this new one—elite academia.

I loved my time at Mount Holyoke—the friendships, intellectual pursuits, and personal growth spurred by dialogues about everything from racism to homophobia. However, there were no campus-wide dialogues about class and classism. This left a huge part of my identity hidden. My class background was something I barely shared with a few trusted friends. I was moving forward and not looking back.

My plan for upward mobility was flawed in that it didn't go beyond graduation. I stayed on at the organization for poor people's rights in Springfield where I had done an internship. I was paid $200 a week with no benefits. I was living paycheck to paycheck and my college loan repayment date was fast approaching. Over the next three years, I became the group's development coordinator, and my hours and pay increased. This helped me pay my bills, but moved me further from the reality of most volunteers and members of the organization.

All of a sudden, I was the *privileged* one—the white girl living in Northampton (the other side of the "tofu curtain") with a degree from that expensive private women's college. My previous history—trailer park, food stamps, my family's bouts with addiction and homelessness, my father's incarceration—was erased as I moved up the class ladder. I fought to change the organization's culture of internalized classism, but ultimately I left the job because there wasn't room for all of who I was.

Four months later, my savings were depleted, and I found myself asking, "Do you want paper or plastic?" My Mount Holyoke degree was tucked inside my underwear drawer, and I was bagging groceries and cashiering at Whole Foods. Every time I worked, this tape would play in my head: "I didn't go to Mount Holyoke to do this." But I also asked myself, why is it okay for my coworkers to do manual labor but it's not okay for me?

I wanted to value all work and all people, but I really struggled, feeling my work was meaningless. I was afraid of sliding back into the class from which I had come, but hated myself for this fear and the judgment it implied for anyone not securely in the professional middle class.

Around the same time, I started working at Class Action, a national organization that addresses issues of class and classism. I didn't mind being a glorified administrative assistant because I worked with brilliant social-change pioneers. They were all middle or upper class, so I became the voice of the impoverished experience. I realized that I felt much more comfortable being the poorest one in a group than the one with the most privilege. And the job was thrilling: I was interviewed on radio programs around the country on the heels of the *New York Times* series "Class in the U.S." People wanted to know what I thought about class and actually listened as I described how, much like racism, classism hurts us all.

This past spring, I spoke on a "Making Class Visible" panel at Mount Holyoke. I told the audience that a Mount Holyoke degree is no guarantee that we will never be homeless or hungry or scared or have to do whatever it takes to earn enough money to survive. We might end up on food stamps, need fuel assistance, apply for Medicaid, or work indefinitely at an unfulfilling job.

And this is all okay; it doesn't mean we've failed. Some students have been on welfare and other survival programs before and during MHC, and some of us are likely to be there after graduation. I once loaned money to a sister alumna and sent her a package of baked goods because she couldn't afford to buy food. When I was a student, no one told me this might happen.

Americans are indoctrinated with the myth of a meritocracy. We believe that if we do everything just right—e.g., we go to a good college—then a stable future is in store for us. People should be talking about the realities of class, because those who aren't middle class are invisible, hiding, or caricatured.

> "I didn't realize the cost of leaving my class culture behind."

I am again looking for meaningful work that pays a living wage. This is a lot to ask for, apparently, although everyone deserves it. I still wrestle internally with being unfulfilled by bagging groceries or waiting tables, but now I'm practiced at thinking and talking with others about class issues.

There is such a feeling of liberation in coming out about class—stating that it exists and discovering how it affects us. Good luck to all the other alumnae who are brave enough to talk about class and classism—before, during, and after our time at Mount Holyoke.

Learn more: More resources about class—including the Making Class Visible initiative's Web site and Yazbek's essay "From the Trailer Park to the Ivy League," from which this *Quarterly* piece grew—are at *alumnae.mtholyoke.edu/go/classissues*.

Ben Barnhart