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Got the Working Man Blues: Different Jobs, Same Jobs, All Over Campus

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As I walk around campus and visit various offices and venues, I think about the different jobs people do here. Those of us in the faculty may seem separated somewhat from the staff, given our jobs. Professors in their ivory towers and all that. But then I think about the jobs I have had, jobs other than the one I have now. Will you indulge me as I run through my job history?

My first real paying job was at Burger King, when I was 16. A few years later, I worked at Chick-fil-A at Southpark, when it was the only fast food restaurant at the mall, and before they had free-standing stores. The work was not glamorous, although I once sold a Chick-fil-A sandwich to Jim and Tammy Bakker. (This was before the Tammy t-shirts with makeup smeared all over them, saying “Guess who I ran into at the mall?”) Since I was working mostly with people my own age, it was fun much of the time, although I quickly learned that dealing with people and food tends to bring out the best and worst in our fellow humans.

When I go to Thomson Cafeteria or to Popeye’s in Digs and get my food from the worker, I almost always remember that I once stood on the other side of the counter. I know. I have been there.

The summer before I went to college, and then for about a year after I dropped out of college my freshman year, I worked at a place in Charlotte called Southeastern Magnesia and Asbestos. Happily, I did not deal with asbestos very much in that small shop, but I did learn what life was like on a small assembly line. Every day, all day, I ran a machine my boss had rigged that took pink fiberglass rolls and backed them with grey plastic or aluminum scrim, running whatever covering I loaded through the white glue that I mixed, to make heating and cooling insulation rolls. I can still hear the sound of “Fred,” as I named him, I can still hear all the songs that played on the radio that summer, I still remember the sharp sting of fiberglass slivers in my arms and hands.

When I see somebody on campus getting his or her hands dirty, performing endlessly what seems like a mindless task, I know. I have been there. I also know how such work can free your mind. Not so mindless, it turns out.

At two different times in my youth, I was a custodian in an office building. Every night and on weekends, going through the empty offices, emptying garbage, dusting desks, vacuuming, cleaning bathrooms and toilets. An invisible force, unseen and unheard, perhaps forgotten or ignored. But I do not ignore these great workers when I come into my clean office in the morning. I know. I have been there.

One summer, I drove a bus that picked up people with disabilities and drove them to work or to school.
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in Charlotte. I drove all over town, picking up Jinks and Don and taking them to the Nevins Center, where they were happy to have a menial job; getting out of the bus to help Henry, blind from birth; lowering the ramp and letting Martha on board in her wheelchair.

Another summer between college classes (I eventually dropped back in!), I painted houses, scaling 40-foot ladders to scrape peeling paint and apply new coats, or standing with my angled brush and painting trim, which to my surprise I was very good at. I know the smell of paint intimately, the feel of paint on my hands and arms, the joy of scrubbing off at the end of a long day. When I see someone painting on campus, I usually pause and watch awhile. Few jobs give as much satisfaction as putting a fresh coat of paint on and old surface. I know. I have been there.

Another summer, I cut the grass at a huge chemical plant outside Greensboro. I rode my big tractor all over the massive grounds, yellow hard hat on my head, steel-toed boots on my feet. The plant was so big that as soon as I finished cutting the grass, it was time to start over again. I was walking to my office yesterday and paused to let the woman cutting the grass between Bancroft and Kinard pass. She could not know how clearly I knew what she was doing, what she was feeling: the vibrations of the machine under you, the patterns you get to make, the bumps and jolts of uneven ground. I know. I have been there.

I was a telemarketer once—for three days. I made my calls and read my spiel. I have forgotten, or repressed, what I was trying to sell. Most people just hung up, many cursed me, a few bought what I was selling. I most remember the older woman who started crying and said it was just so good to talk to someone, and thanked me for calling her. I broke the rules and talked to her for about 15 minutes. Then I quit.

While I was in graduate school, I worked in the library, checking books in and out, working the card catalog (a real wooden one, with drawers and paper cards!), re-shelving books. I sure learned the intricacies of the Library of Congress system. When I see student workers on campus, I know what they are doing and how they feel. I have been there.

I taught high school for two years before I went back to graduate school, and I taught seventh grade one year while I was writing my dissertation. In many ways, those three years of teaching at the secondary level were the most rewarding teaching I have ever done. I am glad I made the decision to move to college teaching, but I would not trade those three years for anything, and I know I am a better teacher because of them.

In fact, I am sure I am a better teacher because of all the jobs I have worked, no matter how far they seem from being a professor.

I write about my experience because it is what I know, what I have lived, but I know I am not alone among the faculty. We do know what many of the other jobs on campus entail. We know. We have been there.

So to the staff, when you see one of us strange creatures, those nutty professors, walking across campus, books in hand, head stuck in some cloud, don’t assume that we are just thinking about theorems and spreadsheets and experiments and philosophy. We may just be thinking about your job, which is our job, seemingly different, but all doing the same thing.
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Thought For the Week

“Work consists of whatever a body is obliged to do. Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do.”

--Mark Twain