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# Blue-Collar Roots, White-Collar Dreams

The divided soul of a Brooklyn boy  
who straddles the class line

**M**y father and I were college buddies. While I was in class at Columbia University, struggling with the esoterica du jour, he was on a bricklayer's scaffold not far up the street, working on a campus building. My dad has built lots of places in New York City he can't get into: colleges, condos, office towers. It never bothered him, though. Earning the dough that helped pay for his son's entrée into a fancy brick-and-ivy institution was satisfaction enough.

We didn't know it then, but those days were the start of a redefining of what it means to be a working man in our Italian American family. Related by blood, my father and I are separated by class. Being the white-collar child of a blue-collar parent makes you a Straddler, with one foot in the working class, the other in the middle class, completely at home in neither world. It's the part of the American dream you may never have heard about: the costs of social mobility. It's a discomfort many never overcome.

Born blue collar, I still never felt completely comfortable among the tough guys and anti-intellectual crowd who populated much of my neighborhood in deepest Brooklyn. I never did completely fit in among the preppies and suburban royalty of Columbia, either. "Ultimately, it's very difficult to escape culturally from the class into which you are born," George Orwell once said. The grip is that tight. There are parts of me that are proudly, stubbornly working class, despite my love of high tea.

BY ALFRED LUBRANO

From the book **LIMBO**

*Upward mobility is the American dream. It's frequently invoked in patriotic terms as a justification for our winner-take-all economic and social policies. But Alfred Lubrano, a successful journalist who rose from the streets of Brooklyn, notes that "making" it also carries a personal and psychological cost. His new book Limbo: Blue-Collar Soul, White-Collar Dreams (John Wiley & Sons), chronicles the effect of professional success on those who have left working-class life behind.*

—The Editors



raspberry vinaigrette, and National Public Radio. Born with a street brawler's temperament, I possess an Ivy League circuit breaker to keep things in check. Still, I've been accused of having an edge, a chip I've balanced on my shoulder since my days in the old neighborhood.

It was not so smooth jumping from a working-class neighborhood to professional circles in a single generation. Others who were the first in their families to go to college will tell you the same thing: The academy can render you unrecognizable to the very people who launched you into the world. Straddlers like me may eschew polyester blends for sea-isle cotton, prefer Brie to Kraft slices. They marry outside the neighborhood and raise their kids differently.

When they pick careers (not *jobs* like their parents had, but careers), it's often a kind of work their parents never heard of, or can't even understand. But for

the white-collar kids of blue-collar parents, the office is not necessarily a safe sanctuary from toil. In corporate America, where the rules are based on notions foreign to working-class people, a Straddler can get lost.

Social class counts at the office, even though nobody likes to admit it. Corporate norms are based on middle- and upper-class values. From an early age, middle-class people learn how to get along, using diplomacy, nuance, and politics to grab what they need. It is as though they are following a set of rules laid out in a manual that blue-collar families never have the chance to read.

In a middle-class, or especially upper-class, home, there are networks: Someone always has an aunt or golfing buddy with the inside track for an internship, or some entry-level job. Middle-class kids can grow up with what sociologists describe as a sense of entitlement

*Alfred Lubrano with his parents,  
Angela and Vincent*

that will carry them through their lives. This "belongingness" is not just related to having material means; it has to do with learning and possessing confidence in your place in the world. Working-class people—the ones who did not hear Schubert or see a Brueghel until freshman year in college—can learn all this, but never as well. Something is always a little off about us, like an engine with imprecise timing.

Blue-collar kids are taught by their parents and communities to work hard to achieve, and that merit is rewarded. But no blue-collar parent knows whether such things are true in the middle-class world. Many



*The bricklayer and his son, Brooklyn, 1959*

professionals born in the working class report feeling out of place and outmaneuvered at the office. Soon enough, Straddlers learn that straight talk won't always cut it in shirt-and-tie America, where people rarely say what they mean. Resolving conflicts head-on and speaking your mind doesn't always work, no matter how educated you are.

In the working class, people perform jobs in which they are closely supervised and are required to follow orders and instructions. That in turn affects how they socialize their children. Working-class kids are brought up in a home in which conformity and obedience are the norm—the same characteristics that make for a good factory worker. As Massachusetts Straddler Nancy Dean says, "We're raised to do what our mother says, what the teacher says, what the boss says. Just keep your mouth shut. No one cares what you have to say: Don't ask, don't question, do what you're told."

ALTHOUGH MY PARENTS wanted me to climb out of the working class, they would have picked a different middle-class life for me. They foresaw a large bank account, a big house, and a standing date for Sunday macaroni. My father had a tough time accepting my decision to become a mere newspaper reporter, a field that pays a little more than construction does. He long wondered why I hadn't cashed in on that brick-and-ivy education and taken on some lawyer-lucrative job. Here I was breaking blue-collar rule No. 1: Make as much money as you can, to pay for as good a life as you can get.

My interests had always been different from those of other kids in the neighborhood. For the longest time, I tried to fit in. I mean, I chased girls and played ball and lifted weights—the approved pastimes that keep you from getting beaten up in working-class neighborhoods. But I still didn't fit in: I got good grades, didn't care about muscle cars. I felt just as home in the library as on the concrete basketball court, not something to boast about.

I will always love aspects of blue-collar culture that live on in me—the whatever-it-takes work ethic, the lack of pretense, people's forthright manner—but working-class Brooklyn could be crowded and mean. There was a surfeit of anger and fear and alcohol.

Most fathers collapsed in front of the tube at the end of the day, incapable of anything else. Kids were shushed and ordered to sneak silently past these weary men, whose self-esteem was often undermined by jobs

devoid of creativity, freedom, or flexibility. Sometimes after dinner, a few of the men would tinker with their cars, habits left over from younger, better days. It allowed them a sense of mastery not permitted at work, a project to complete without a boss carping about its progress or quality. Of course, wives weren't happy about this withdrawal from the family. And so arguments would start, and hard days would sometimes end badly.

I idealized my dad. Up at five every morning, my father made a religion of responsibility. My dad wasn't crazy about the bricklayer life. He wanted to be a singer and an actor when he was young, but that was frivolous doodling to his immigrant father, who expected money to be coming in. After combat duty in Korea, my dad returned home, learned his father-in-law's trade, and acquiesced to a life of backbreaking routine. He says he can't find the black-and-white publicity glossies he once had made to promote his singing career. Many Straddlers witnessed the shelving of their

blue-collar parents' dreams. As kids, my brother and I joked about our father's would-be singing career, wondering where we all would have been had he become rich and famous. One of our close (literally) neighbors once told him they liked it when Dad took a shower because of the inevitable concert he'd provide. When one of my father's sisters died and he stopped singing for a while, the neighbor noticed, and asked my father what was wrong.

Much about working-class life is admirable and fine. The trick is to avoid glorifying it without painting life in it too darkly. Sure, we lived with a few *gavones*, what some thought of as the low-class losers (there were classes among the working class, too, a pecking order based on taste, dignity, and intelligence). But the very best of blue-collar culture is something I still celebrate

STRUGGLE. WORKING-CLASS people will tell you, is central to blue-collar life—and the chief architect of character. This heritage of struggle, as writer and working-class academic Janet Zandy puts it, develops a built-in collectivity in the working class, a sense of people helping each other—you're not going it alone, and you have buddies to watch your back. It's different in the middle class, Zandy and others argue, where the emphasis is on individual achievement and personal ambition. The middle class, many Straddlers would say, rarely had to pay working-class-type dues, and were most likely unaware of the class advantages they had to assure their positions in life and business.

While middle-class kids are allowed some say and voice in their upbringing ("David, would you prefer going to grandma's or to the park?"), working-class kids develop within a strict, authoritarian world

**There are parts of me that are proudly working class, despite my love of high tea, raspberry vinaigrette, and NPR.**

in myself and look for in others I meet. The values are an essential defining factor:

- A well-developed work ethic, the kind that gets you up early and keeps you locked in until the job is done, regardless of how odious or personally distasteful the task.

- A respect for your parents that is nothing short of religious, something I was amazed to find was not shared among the kids with whom I went to college and graduate school.

- The need for close contact with extended family— aunts, uncles, grandparents—who each had the authority to whack you in the back of the head should your behavior call for it.

- An open and honest manner devoid of hidden agenda and messy subtext. You say something, you mean it.

- Other things, too: loyalty, a sense of solidarity with people you live and work with; an understanding and appreciation of what it takes to get somewhere in a hard world where no one gives you a break; a sense of daring; a physicality that's honest, basic, and attractive. (When I worked for *New York Newsday*, a disgruntled reader had been stalking me and persistently threatening my life. A colleague suggested I get a "goon" to protect me. An editor answered, "Alfred doesn't need a goon. Alfred *is* a goon.")

We could, between money troubles and family crises, recognize the good in life. Nobody laughs like blue-collar people, who are unashamed to pound the table in gasping recognition of a pure truth, or glaring absurdity, or sharp irony. I have seen relatives grab onto each other for support in tear-blurred spasms of guffawing that nearly chokes them. It's fun to watch.

("David, if you don't come with me to grandma's right now I'll slap your teeth out!"). Experts say that children raised in authoritarian homes do less well in school than kids from less regimented middle-class environments. Without intending to, says Hamilton College sociologist Dennis Gilbert, parents who stress obedience over curiosity are championing the values of the working class, and helping to keep their kids in it.

Temple University sociologist Annette Lareau did some interesting work in this area, she tells me. Studying 88 African-American and white children from the Northeast and the Midwest who were between the ages of 8 and 10, Lareau was able to see distinct differences in the way working-class and middle-class kids are raised. In fact, she concludes, the importance of class influence in their upbringing was greater even than that of race.

Ultimately, working-class and middle-class cultures are based on different foundations, says Minnesota psychologist Barbara Jensen, herself a Straddler. The core value of the working class is being part of a like-minded group—a family, a union, a community—which instills a strong sense of loyalty. The core value of the middle class is achievement by the individual.

The middle class, Jensen says, sees little else but its own culture. That's made easier by the fact that the middle class literally writes our culture. Movies, books, the news media, and television are creations of the middle class. Working-class people see little of themselves in popular culture. (There are exceptions, of course: *Working Girl*, *Norma Rae*, *Roseanne*. But by and large, Jensen's observation holds true.) Thus, the middle class gets to see complex depictions of itself, while

the working class views mostly stereotypes of itself.

Obviously, people are more than just class. We all embody interlocking cultures—ethnicities, races, genders. We possess different skills and inclinations. Still, imprecise as many of the flash cards are, they do reflect people's perceptions. The perceptions we all have of the other side can have a greater impact than reality.

WHEN WE WERE YOUNG, my mother took my brother Chris and me into Manhattan on special days. I think she wanted to show us there was grace in this world:

over for inspection in favor of preppies from the Midwest, South, and West, who have traditionally flocked to the city to begin careers.

No matter how lowly a job they toiled at, preppies always seemed to have money to spend at night. They were the ones who staggered to their feet in bars at 2 a.m. when the jukebox played Sinatra's "New York, New York." It was the outsiders' anthem, the song they sang to themselves to remind one another that they had left Missouri or wherever behind and were now making it in the Apple. These nouveau New Yorkers took our

## A Temple University study shows that class, even more than race, affects how children are raised.

museums, Radio City Music Hall, the top of the Empire State Building. Many Straddlers told me they lived for such moments in their own lives: a trip out of the drab hometown to some Oz of light and rich circumstance. These forays provided knowledge and hope of something better.

The car of the elevated F Train with its orange seats smelled like sweat, perfume, and urine—a Brooklyn potpourri. At the Smith and 9th St. station, the F train arched high into the air and suddenly you could see the harbor and the Statue of Liberty. Vistas shifted as the train lurched forward. We got a glimpse of the Manhattan skyline, shining, across the water. The world suddenly opened up. That moment when you slowly rise out of the subway onto a Manhattan street is something that still excites me even now, thousands of rides later. Manhattan had wealth. Women wore furs, limos choked the streets. As a working-class person, you could partake of this high life in bits, enjoy its plenitude at the edges; eat soup at Lord & Taylor without necessarily buying clothes, then light a candle at St. Patrick's Cathedral, gawking at the opulence in both places. My mother taught us to find a hotel if we needed a bathroom, and I'd feign bladder emergencies just to see Manhattan's grand lobbies. Sometimes we'd simply look at the buildings on which my father and grandfather worked.

When I got older, I would schlep to Manhattan with my friends whenever I could, drawn by its implicit promise of something better. We wondered whether Manhattan girls kissed differently, talked differently, smelled nicer. We'd be outside clubs, the dreaded bridge-and-tunnel boys from Jersey and the boroughs, wearing the wrong clothes. Doormen knew to exclude us, and they did so without a second thought. We were the help—the stockboys, the busboys, the guys from nowhere, left out in the cold. Guys like us were passed

places on the dance floor, our seat at the table. That's what we told ourselves, anyway, as we worked ourselves into a low-boiling class rage. For many Straddlers who wandered out of the neighborhood to see what the world could offer, it's not unusual to grow resentful of people perceived to be enjoying all of life's goodies. We wanted what they possessed—their polish, their worldliness, the apparent control they had over their lives.

THIS IS PART OF the basis for my beef with Caroline Kennedy. When I decided in high school that I wanted to be a reporter, I applied to be a copyboy at the New York *Daily News*, the spirited, blue-collar tabloid that talked tough and spoke to my people. My father would read the *Daily News* out loud to us over breakfast on Saturday mornings. He and my mother would laugh at the latest outrages of politicians and assorted city scoundrels. Here, I figured, they'd give the working man a break. When I was 18, I wrote a nice letter to the editors about my father and the breakfast table and his loyalty to his union. They told me sorry, they weren't hiring copyboys. Then I read a few days later that the editors had given a copyboy's job to Caroline Kennedy. I'm sure she's a lovely person, but still. So it's like that. I said to myself, Years later, when I was interviewing for a reporting job at the *Daily News*, I made a point of mentioning the Kennedy story to the editor. I told him, "You guys owe me." The editor, whose father had been a cop, must have appreciated my attitude, because he hired me.

► Alfred Lubrano is a reporter and feature writer at the Philadelphia Inquirer and a frequent commentator on National Public Radio's Weekend Edition. This story was excerpted from his new book *Limbo: Blue-Collar Roots, White-Collar Dreams* (John Wiley & Sons).

