

Falling out of your Social Class! By Merinda Epstein

This is an issue that has entertained my mind for many years. There are many reasons why I have not spoken about it before. Talking about this is a bit 'personal pronoun' and this feels selfish, certainly self centred. It's hard to talk from a position of privilege. However over the last few years I have seen this syndrome in a number of other consumers and I wonder how common it is. I've taken a gamble to explore this in the only way I can – just speaking for myself.

My Twenties

My twenties brought together several forces that were to largely shape my life:

1. It was when I was a youth that mental distress caught me, largely by stealth. It wasn't a major psychotic breakdown or anything as clear cut as that. For most of my twenties I dropped in and out of university courses all over Victoria: from Melbourne to Deakin to Monash. No institution was spared. My fearful, disoriented, choking approaches to study and even more importantly, to people and institutions totally phased me. Failure. My frayed and mixed up self running, running, running away.
2. I had no idea that I was running in front of demon illnesses of the brain. Instead, I just thought I was pathetic, a failure, useless, too dumb to do any good, a laughing stock to all. Shame filled my body and my life.
3. My dealings with universities also handed me opportunity to rethink my ideas and dream about something very different from horses and farmers. We had opportunities within the universities then to think about the big ideas in the world and this is the bit I hooked on to instinctively. A heady radicalism enveloped me eventually fuelled by the fact that I found my academic bearings in the fields of sociology and education.
4. Emotional turmoil followed me shadow-like. My 'troubles', everyone in my social class always called everything 'troubles', started to bring together diagnoses of anorexia, depression, anxiety, dysthymia but nothing much more than this and I desperately wanted more. Instead of something that would help me feel OK these nothing diagnoses led me further into the overwhelming conclusion that I was a disgrace to my family, my social class and my school.
5. A weird triage of my shame reflex came into my life at this time. Always it came back to my privileged education. I had let everyone down. I was born to rule and here I was drowning. I pretended lots of things at that time. I pretended I had kicked privilege out of my life, that I didn't care, that my education was elitist nonsense, that the school created the huge hurdle that I had so far totally failed to jump. In truth, my beliefs and the pretence all got mixed up fuelling my sense of social betrayal.

My School

Elite schools teach you a lot more than academic success. At my old school there was a religious underpinning, an over concentration in science and maths which disadvantages some and privileges others, a sense of civic duty and lots of stuff about fulfilling promise and expectations.

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I'm angry that my old school told us quite clearly, *"Our gals (it was an all girls school) will be the future leaders, will reach heady heights in business and commerce, will be scientists, doctors, lawyers and opera singers."* Those schools never say, *"Our girls will be skilled and confident in staying on the right side of Centrelink and keeping appointments, our girls will have the capacity to live with tiny incomes and survive with their pride intact, our girls will have the sort of drive and self-confidence that will enable them to thrive in a public 'nutcase' role model fighting for the rights of people diagnosed with 'mental illness'.* These schools can't maintain these sorts of messages because they must forever offer a prospectus that will attract parents with promises of their children's social, economic, academic, sporting and artistic success. There was no place in this mantra for successes of such a very different kind. Bleeps and bumps, smears and pimples are all smoothed out of existence.

Two years ago I approached the school offering something very precious. A good speaker, I sold my credentials in mental health which are considerable now after twenty years. I spoke to the Headmistress (no principals here) and vice head but I totally failed to convince them I had much to offer. They said they were interested in relation to me perhaps talking to staff but I was obviously untrustworthy to let loose on the gals. They said they would contact me and were incredulous that I did not want to be paid. It is now a year and a half ago and I have heard nothing. I'm not surprised. They don't want us to exist. I'm a black spot on their radar.

Civic duty

Schools in this class of exclusivity pride themselves on teaching 'their gals' about their civic responsibility. They prepare young women for futures in philanthropy. They pay attention to the civic duty inherited by those of us who are privileged to help 'the poor', 'the sick', 'and the less fortunate'. They speak about humility sometimes but more often they speak about the duty of the upper middle class to 'give back' to the needy in some way.

The assumption is always that 'our gals' will be the benefactors rather than the receivers of this largess. In the world of this social class system and the schools they create and support in this country this lopsided view of social reality is a necessity. "We are educating girls for leadership roles in society" is an everyday assumption but this leadership is conditional. Someone with a 'mental illness' who is a recognised leader in the mental health sector precisely because she speaks from this perspective doesn't quite cut it unless she is famous for something else and does 'recovered mental illness' as a side line.

An absolute division is made where no absolute division exists. The sick and the needy are one thing and of course, they need fixers and helpers who are quite another thing altogether. The professionals, medical practitioners and others have recognisable knowledge and financial benefactors from the old school alumni who are interested in mental health issues as a 'cause' have financial expertise of course. The expert medical 'professional' has the right to have power over us because our knowledge is negated. We must succumb. We are, by definition, the knowledge-less class'. The nonsense of this rarely gets critiqued by those with power because undercutting it all are major issues of social class and privilege, terms which many in this class find hard enough to utter, let alone critique.

The reality is that we come away from class-controlled educational institutions with no emotional, pragmatic or social skills to survive in the tough world of living on a disability pensions, knowing how to receive charity with grace or how to live as public housing tenants, for example. Probabilities would suggest that there are many more 'girls' who have not ended up running the country, returning to leafy suburbs from which they came nor fulfilling their privileged promise. The sadness of this is that these schools actually de-skill adolescents for from what might be the very real world for many. I have a friend who was born into a multigenerational public housing family. I am constantly in awe not only of her skills at living on the breadline but also her pride in the way she lives. No matter how hard I try I rarely find pride in my day to day existence. I envy her and I praise her. She's a genius in areas we didn't cover in our school curriculum.

Meaning in the Landing

It is difficult to know whether the aspects of the way I am in the world are a product of nature or nurture and probably for me this is academic. However, I am sure that crashing out on my upper middle class life has been powerfully influential. I recognise my terrible hunger for praise which I seem unable to give myself, my need to prove myself constantly to me as well as others, the fact that despite a National Human Rights Award and other signifiers of fame I know I am nobody of any import in my old world. The difficulty I have in accepting well meant criticism, my volatile interest in politics, my tendency to want to verbally assert myself (listen to me, listen to me) and the myriad of other behaviours I so wish were not me. I know that some clinical psychologists would have a field day with this but I don't give them permission. The knowledge that has most helped me to understand my world is sociological in origin and not psychological. Crashing out of one's social class is a reality that deserves and needs sociological attention.

Conclusion

This piece does not pretend to speak for all people who were born into upper middle class and/or professional families. Nor does it pretend to speak for all 'gals' and 'lads' who went to elite private schools. I have no doubt that my education has served me well in ways in which I am barely aware and has opened doors shut to other people diagnosed with 'mental illness' who do not have the same social class advantage – so called social capital. My informed guess is that the power I have derived from social capital barely registers on my radar and yet for others without such advantages my built-in authority by virtue of class may be blatantly obvious and to a lesser or greater degree annoying.

I can't rewrite my story although I can always tell it differently. I hope that by me being as honest as I can I might encourage other people to accept, respect and then push past the lesions to heart and soul so often inflicted by pervasive upper middle social class discourse which leaves too many of us with deep scars of failure and shame. If by telling this story I can help even ten people reclaim pride in their lives I will be happy.