

Say goodbye to work, worker stereotypes

Sep 29 , 2013 by Daniel J. Bauer

The words to come are about stereotyping, and the dignity of all work.

Several years ago, my university put me up at a posh hotel in Taichung so that I could participate in a widely publicized two-day exhibition for high school students who wanted to meet professor types from all over Taiwan and get information about university life. The friendly folks at the registration counter of the hotel gave me coupons for a gigantic breakfast brunch to help me begin the day. They also gave me coupons for a drink in the bar to help me end the day.

I went down to the bar at the end of my first day, and a fellow sipping beer there asked me what I was doing in town. He was an American (I guessed by his accent), and appeared to be in a chatty mood.

I told him I was a Catholic priest (“shen-fu”) and university instructor. I told him the name of my school. I told him why I was in town, described my duties at the exhibition, and so on.

“You’re a Catholic priest, huh?” he said sharply. “Wow, you guys got one (x9#+) of a public relations problem these days, don’t you? All that (8&3@) child abuse got you priests tied up in a big knot, wouldn’t you say?”

I managed not to lose my temper, but you can be sure the anger churning inside did a number, so to speak, on my stomach. I was not sure of this person’s intentions, but I felt he was lumping me together with a tiny percentage of miscreants in my profession, and I didn’t like it.

I’ve never met anyone who liked being stereotyped. Have you?

To be put in a box and judged (usually negatively) is almost always a hurting experience. It hurts both ways. It hurts the one who does the stereotyping, and hurts the one who is stereotyped.

Stereotyping surfaced in a news report this week. That report spoke of what we often refer to as “manual labor.”

A movement seems to be in flux these days on our local scene in which well- educated white collar workers are opting to move into a variety of so

called blue collar jobs. The report focused on a couple cases.

One of them introduced a man 28 years old with a Master’s degree in engineering, who gave up an office position to work beside his father in a motorcycle repair shop. Given his salary, the number of hours his office work had demanded, and the prospects of promotion in the near future, he felt working with his hands and helping his family were more worth his time and talent.

Another case was that of a man 50 years old, also a formerly dissatisfied office worker, who is now working happily - - and with pride - - as an electrician. “Most people think this type of work is dirty and is done by people who didn’t study,” he said. But he didn’t agree. His salary wasn’t so bad, he said, and he was happy. He also felt he was “learning a lot” (TT 9-26-13 p. 2).

Drastic changes in the world economy, values guiding decisions in the highest echelons of companies (and schools) large and small, and sea changes in the troubling arena of education in Taiwan today all mix here to paint a complex picture.

We need however to stay fixed on the questions of stereotypes and the dignity of all workers.

To some degree, we are all products of our background. My Dad dropped out of college after his freshman year to fight for his country. World War II was one of the factors that made our family a working class family. Dad’s hands were calloused, his back sore, his legs very tired at the end of six long days a week running his hardware store. We kids were proud of Dad, and proud of his work, too. That man knew more about plumbing, electricity, construction, paint, wallpaper, pipe fittings, wood, and seeds and plants than I’ll ever know about language and literature. Our educations, you might say, were different, but neither was more valuable than the other.

As we struggle in our classrooms to prepare our young friends to succeed in an incredibly challenging new world, we’ve got to help them see that all work, white collar, blue collar, no collar, (or Roman collar) is worth doing. Stereotyping that categorizes one form of work as undignified or less precious is short-sighted and hurtful. (Father Daniel J. Bauer is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points :

1. Even people with college degrees sometimes or often earn their living with their hands, doing "manual labor" instead of "white collar" labor. Does the thought of not getting a "white collar" job after graduation worry you?
2. You do not have to talk of your parents and their work in life, but do you know people in blue collar life who do well and lead happy lives? Can you share examples of "blue collar" people who inspire you?
3. Among "blue collar" people around us at Fu da are our many "workers," our so called "GUNG YO." Do students stop sometimes in the hallway to say hello to our "gung yo"? Do you think very often about how they work with their hands and sweat to make Fu da a pleasant place for us all?

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