The mighty wedge of class

On the dissonance between middle-class packaging and a working-class core

On a Saturday evening late one May a few years ago, I stood outside a recently opened restaurant and watched as cars overflowing with hockey fans trotting Pittsburgh's first Stanley Cup championship lurched down the street.

The procession stretched as far as the eye could see along East Carson Street, the main drag running through the city's South Side. Car and truck horns honked out a victory song. Grandmothers came outside in babushkas to watch from the top of the steps. The usually quiet and purposeful regulars abandoned their stools at a dozen or so nearby family-owned bars and joined the celebration.

A decade had passed since the last shift walked out of the gates at the hulking Jones & Laughlin Steel plant that stood watch here for more than a century. For many, the hope that life would somehow return to normal ran out only recently when the mill was finally razed, its two-story corrugated shell cut into pieces and sold for scrap.

In the intervening years, the surrounding neighborhood had taken on a new blush. Young professionals, drawn by high-tech work and the lure of urban homesteading, had put a fresh face on wood and brick row houses. The neatly stenciled windows of a French restaurant stared across the
street at a weathered newsstand; an art gallery cast its postmodern neon glare over an old, boarded-up saloon. As urban chic invaded a working-class community, the two cultures tried to work out a modus vivendi.

On this one night, the familiar dividing lines between the vernacular (shot-and-a-beer) and the fashionable (white wine spritzer) blurred as postgame revelers spilled out onto the sidewalk. Scanning the crowd, I spotted a face I hadn't seen since the eighth grade. Beer in hand, my old friend weaved his way through rejoicing hockey fans to get a closer look.

"Is that who I think it is?" he asked, with just the right hint of disdain. I felt my stomach tighten and my victory smile fade. I'd experienced enough of these reunions to know what to expect. My college-issue wire-frames, $20 haircut, and button-down J. Crew collar confirmed what he had probably suspected all
along: My aspirations had changed me; I was no longer one of his kind.

He took a slow gulp from the beer bottle and looked hard into my eyes. This was his chance to balance the scales, and he made the most of it. "Who the fuck do you think you are?" he sneered. It was a statement, not a question, and he didn't wait for a reply. The street sounds faded as I watched him disappear into the crowd.

I tried to match the face of the man I had just met with that of the kid who came to my house every Wednesday evening to watch *Lost in Space*. I stood there on the curb and mourned another small death, another connection to my past severed.

I revisited the jumble of fierce resolve, nagging guilt, and painful humiliation that had churned inside me for most of the past decade, a time spent zealously reinventing myself. I experienced the familiar dissonance between my estranged parts: my middle-class packaging and my working-class core. Split in two by the mighty wedge of class, I asked myself the same question: Who am I? Where do I belong?

I remember late-summer afternoons 20 years ago, my 10-year-old self fidgeting at the supper table, having once again cleaned my plate too quickly. After a perfunctory minute or two, I would dare to break my father's rule against talking during meals and quietly ask to be excused. Bounding out the front door, I would skip every other step down to the sidewalk and tear past the neat row of squat brick houses, listening for the exhilarating sound of the wooden screen door as it rattled shut.

My friends and I would pass the rest of the evening playing whistle ball or walking upright across the five-foot-high monkey bars. When it grew too dark to see, we would sit with our backs to a stone wall and enjoy the sweet smell of pot drifting down the street. Later, we would make plans to sleep out,

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walking the steep, narrow streets of the neighborhood to collect blankets and shrugs of permission from our parents. On those warm summer evenings that stretched into sleepless nights, we discovered the balm of conversation and laughter, virtues—like the warm beer and cheap cigars we stashed behind the garage—that we knew better than to drag home.

In the morning, we were awakened by the sounds of men climbing into their faded pickup trucks and trying once more to grind cold engines to life before heading off to work—as mill hands, ironworkers, railroad switchmen—long before the morning rush hour. Those men—our fathers—stood tall among the world's industrial workers and rose, with each negotiated pay increase, to a level of economic parity with many of their white-collar counterparts. They endured high school, married young, bought homes, and looked forward to a week's vacation every summer.

As their children, we figured life somehow would provide the same to us: a revolving Sears charge, a nice if not quite new car, possibly even a boat or a truck-camper like the one kept safe behind a tall fence in the back alley. As economically middle-class people in a working-class culture, we enjoyed unprecedented comfort and security.

When I decided to go to college, my mother and father offered the only advice they could: "Well," they said, "we hope you know what you're doing." But implicit in their lukewarm endorsement was the obvious truth: I didn't know—any more than they did. So, without a guidance counselor, or parents versed in the calculus of financial aid and college applications, I proceeded arbitrarily, applying to colleges whose names or looks appealed to me. I eventually settled, for no particular reason, on Penn State.

Having applied too late to attend orientation, I arrived in State College, Pennsylvania, with what I soon learned was more than a clothes problem. My credentials—an impressive grade point average and high test scores—gave my application a veneer of promise. But there was no measure for the things I didn't know, nothing to suggest I might have to learn everything about this new world of college from scratch. The system, like me, was blind to the ways in which my working-class background left me unprepared for this new world. It wasn't just poise or spending money that I lacked. Everything from my colloquial speech to my primitive social skills to my wardrobe drew a discreet line between me and my new peer group.

Adrift in this community of 60,000 not-so-kindred souls, I looked to the only place I knew of to place the blame for my ineptitude—inside, with myself. Overwhelmed by feelings of alienation and worthlessness, I quit. In retrospect, I wonder why nobody—if not my parents, then a teacher or college counselor—could have foreseen my difficult transition to college; not just from one phase of education to another, but from one set of cultural assumptions to another, one entire world to another. I wish, too, that I could have let the full extent of my alienation be known.

Even at the University of Pittsburgh, where I eventually transferred and where the presence of students from working-class backgrounds similar to
mine was plain to see, the issue of class remained eerily unspoken. Though part of me knew better, I could not escape the crippling feeling that I remained alone in my bewilderment. While the university struggled with factoring the issue of race into the equation of college residents and retention of students, nobody thought to take similar precautions with working-class white students.

Quiet and hidden in the back corner of a college classroom, I began to make the connection between my feelings of shame and the working-class misgivings toward education I had long ago internalized. For while lip service is paid at every class level in America to the idea that education is the route to a better life, the reality in most working-class homes is that knowledge counts for less than good behavior. The question my parents asked every day when I came home from school was not “What new thing did you learn today?” but “Did you get into any trouble?”

The working-class experience makes the child particularly vulnerable to low self-expectations. Before I could sing the alphabet, I knew something of what it felt like to be my parents: low-achieving, poorly spoken, lacking confidence, afraid to challenge authority, reluctant to ask for help, willing to accept their situation, content to do without.

It wasn’t just my parents’ lack of understanding and sophistication that blocked me from a fuller view of life’s possibilities, but a deep sense that failure was our fate. The message received by children whose parents have battled with the world and come away feeling defeated is that they are better off not even trying. A pervasive feeling of helplessness hangs over the working-class house like the secondhand smoke that passes silently from parent to child.

Embracing the promise of an education requires working-class children to construct an inner sense of themselves that is radically different from that of their parents, siblings, and friends, to betray their allegiance to the only source of identity and support they have ever known. At each crossroad, and with every success, I became more aware of the dichotomy—the ways in which my education simultaneously would provide me options and distance me from the life I trusted.

A decade later, the anger I have long felt toward my parents has slowly faded. I realize now that the gifts I so desperately wanted from them (an easy self-confidence and a deep well of optimism) were not theirs to give. Instead, they handed their children a promise, visibly broken, in the hope that we might know better than they did how to make it work. In America, the illusion of free and open passage between classes is preached with religious zeal. But parents who wish for something better for their children must struggle against more than an incomplete education and economic deprivation. They must confront the truth behind the myth of making it in America: The land of opportunity is also the land of persistent class structures and struggles. And though many try, most people never rise very far from the socioeconomic level into which they are born.

Without an awareness of their experience of class discrimination, working-class kids will continue to absorb their parents’ shame. They will continue to view the world—through their parents’ eyes—as a malevolent force to be approached with rightful caution.

Without some explanation for the feelings present in the home, children internalize their parents’ sense of powerlessness. Their unexpressed fears quietly sap the strength of the family. My middle-class friends know enough about the destructive force of class to see me as an exception: a triumph of will over environment. But we sidestep any discussion of a class system in America, afraid maybe of the feelings such awareness might stir. It’s easier to assume that we now all occupy one vast, comprehensive middle class.

What I don’t mention, and what others don’t see, is that I often feel more lost than ever, caught between two widely separated social rungs, never sure whether I should forge ahead or fall back, uncertain whether either option really is mine. I have learned to pose in the middle-class culture, but at a price. I live most of the time on borrowed instincts, afraid to trust that part of the working class I still carry inside.

Today, my family is still wondering what on earth I will do one day for a living and uncomfortable with my willingness to expose the personal details of my life on paper where anyone might read them. They don’t share my interest in what has gone before, in the past, even their own. They dismiss writing, or any kind of self-reflection, as an escape from the more pressing demands of the moment. I am engaged with the world in a way they have never known, and still don’t altogether trust. Looking back, the memory of growing apart from the people and habits I know and love stirs a swirl of feelings. I still yearn to believe that my parents know what is best. The adult I’ve become appreciates why such knowledge eluded them. I understand more clearly the gain of my leaving their world. I’m only now willing to consider the loss.