

**Well-to-do, Down-to-earth, or Struggling-to-make-ends-meet:
The Unmentionable Cultures of Social Class and Religious Education**

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“Shadowy Lines that Still Divide¹”

I recently had a friend ask me for a recommendation of a good pediatrician in our part of town. I suggested the practice that my family uses, and my friend went to visit the office prior to the birth of her baby. She came back the next week and thanked me for the recommendation, saying that she had chosen our pediatrician to be her own: “I visited the practice in Cherry Creek that my co-worker had suggested, but I liked your practice so much better. They just seemed much more down-to-earth.” I was struck by her choice of language to express what I would easily name as a class distinction between the two pediatric groups. Cherry Creek is home to a destination mall with high-end designer stores such as Tiffany and Gucci. The pediatric practice caters to the class of people who make Cherry Creek their home and shopping grounds. The practice my family utilizes, on the other hand, is in a much more modest part of Denver, serving persons from a wider variety of social class backgrounds. What struck me about my friend’s response is the lack of critical language around class. She used a coded phrase, “down-to-earth,” to indicate that its class status more closely matched her own.

Since this encounter, I’ve been listening to people around me and the language they use to refer to distinctions of what I would call social class. Outside of airports, class language is almost never used. Instead, we speak in coded phrases: well-to-do, struggling-to-make-ends-meet, trashy, distinguished, chic-chic, refined, modest, highbrow, common.² Even though as a cultural norm North Americans do not typically think in terms of the critical analytic category of social class, people sort themselves into class groups, assess other people in terms of social class categories, and perform class identity constantly. Congregations sort themselves by social class as well, although that sorting does not often receive the kind of attention that the racial segregation of congregations receives.

As an aspect of political and social identity, social class has a profound impact on community identity and formation, the kinds of knowledge that are valued in a community, and appropriate manners of address and conversation in a teaching/learning situation. However, broader cultural ideologies about social class allow us to know our social class standing only through social practices, manners, stylistic performance, and other embodied forms of understanding rather than through critical and conscious reflection. Because social class is a fluid and complex phenomenon, it is often difficult for religious educators to understand and articulate the variables impacting their own

¹ This is the name of the first of a series of *New York Times* articles about social class, now published as the book *Class Matters*. New York: Times Books, 2005. PBS called their recent series on social class “People Like Us,” which perhaps is the most common way we evaluate social class...by finding people who seem like us.

² Tex Sample notes how this use of language is one strategy in what he calls “the politics of distinction and the strategies of condescension” to maintain class inequality, with a particularly helpful discussion of the racist history of the terms “highbrow” and “lowbrow.” In Sample, Tex. *Blue Collar Resistance and the Politics of Jesus: Doing Ministry with Working Class Whites*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2006, 13-16.

social class identity, much less consider consciously the impact of social class in the practice of religious education in a local community of faith.

Suffering is often caused by a lack of language or critical capacity around class. Often, an experience of class oppression or class injury gets defined as a personal deficiency or failure when individuals do not understand the class structures and valuations that are impacting a given situation. At the same time, talking about classism causes people to tell narratives that are defined culturally as individual “failures” or “problems” rather than instances of oppression, which can evoke a sense of shame rather than liberation. I want to contribute to the capacity of religious leaders to function across class boundaries, even as they recognize the powerful, identity-bearing contribution class has made to their own perspectives and value systems.

This paper engages in literature-based analysis of the nature of class identity with consideration of its impact in religious educational settings. By putting this initial analysis into conversation with insights and examples from my own youth ministry involvement, I hope to offer a beginning point for considering the relationship of class identity to religious educational practice.

Understanding Social Class And Performed Cultural Identity

When I worked for a home repair ministry in the lower part of the Appalachian range the summer before I started college, the forms we had to fill out when we did a first visit for potential clients had a category for the socioeconomic status of the homes. We had four choices: MC, LMC, P, and EP (middle class, lower middle class, poverty, and extreme poverty). I was utterly puzzled by how I was supposed to make such distinctions between the homes I visited, all of which would have been considered more impoverished than the suburbs of Houston and Birmingham in which I had grown up. When I asked, I was told that MC homes were more likely to be brick and have garages and be in decent repair. They would be “like something the teens coming to work on them would recognize in their neighborhoods at home.” Lower middle class homes were made of less expensive building materials, and moving down through the ranking system would be indicated by increasing disrepair, disheveled interiors, and other signs of economic distress. The difference between poverty and extreme poverty? “EP smells,” was the blunt answer.

Setting aside for the moment all of the ethical complexities and transgressions of such a categorization system (and there are many), I’m struck these twenty years later by the simplicity of such a schema. The idea that in a complex community of varying levels of education, styles of interaction, income levels and other markers of class status we could in a single visit easily categorize homes in a way that would be meaningful to our colleagues in their planning seems utterly naive. I became more aware of the ethical power dynamics of this kind of labeling on my first weekend break from this job. I took three of my co-workers to my grandmother’s house, which was located about two hours from the county in which we were working. I had a deeply unsettling moment when I realized that they were likely to look at her home and rate it LMC at best, maybe P. I had never thought of my grandmother as lower middle class. In truth, I had never thought of her as having any class at all.

This is not surprising given an United States cultural context. In our “classless” society, this kind of blunt class ranking is considered crass and inappropriate. In the

home repair ministry we were cautioned to keep the system of class ranking of homes quiet because it would communicate disrespect to our clients to let them know we were thinking of them in these kinds of categories. (Unfortunately this did not stretch to actually changing the practice, just in avoiding the revelation that we engaged in it.)

As I have begun to explore social class in a more systematic and theoretical way, I have come to realize that social class, like race and gender, is not an essentialized identity marker that can easily be named. Rather, social class is a cultural and political identity marker that is fluid and historicized. This is not to say that social class is not powerfully and hierarchically active in human interaction. However, it is a socially performed variable rather than a “categorical” variable.³ In other words, I kept thinking that if I could just come up with a complex-enough schema to categorize people by such variables as educational attainment, income level, preferred forms of entertainment, sources of authority, etc., then I would be able to help myself and my students “get” class in a way that would enable us to engage in religious educational ministry that took into account social class in a nonpatronizing way. I hope that religious educators might be able to work across the shadowy lines that still divide in a way that enables more culturally appropriate forms of ministry. I have come to realize that part of the difficulty of “thinking class⁴” is that class identity is much more complex than any six or eight variable schema can encompass.

The classic Marxian understanding of class as relationship to the means of production emphasizes material reality and access to economic resources as key to social class identity. This formulation was broadened by other European sociologists such as Gramsci and Bourdieu, who expanded class identity to include “common sense” understandings and ways of viewing the world, cultural and social capital, and other aspects that lead us to understand social class as a form of cultural identity. Of course, the individual material variables of class identity (educational attainment, income, profession, etc.) are important, but the ways that they combine and are inflected through other markers of identity are critical to understanding the status granted by social class. This is the absurdity of the four class schema offered in upper class, middle class, working class, and lower class. There are such plentiful variations within each of these classes that easy distinctions between them become almost meaningless as cultural variables. And yet, our everyday experience tells us that class identity is a powerful aspect of power relationships in human life, so seeking more adequate ways to “think class” becomes an important task of the religious educator.

One powerful way that social class is experienced is through cultural identity markers such as lifestyle and taste. Julie Bettie, a sociologist working on understanding how social class is inflected through gender and racial identity, notes: “One’s experience of class may be expressed not only in terms of work identity and income but also in terms of familial relations, social relations unrelated to those of employment (such as school and peer relations), and in leisure and consumption practices, including the ‘identity

³ Connell, Robert W. 1987. *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

⁴ Ortner, Sherry. “Ethnography among the Newark: The Class of ’58 of Weequahic High School.” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 32:2, 423. cited in Bettie, Julie. *Women without Class: Girls, Race, and Identity*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2003, 48.

formation material' offered up by popular culture.⁵ Bettie notes that class identity among the adolescents in her research context was often indicated by the kind of clothing they wore, whether they were tracked into college preparatory or vocational tracks in schooling, and even their choice of hairstyle and nail polish color.

While the adolescents were clear about the distinctions between groups in the school and had their own shorthand for referring to various groups, they were not able to utilize the language of social class to talk about them. Bettie's adolescents make a compelling case for the relationship between social class and the experience of "taste" first laid out by Pierre Bourdieu: "Taste, the propensity and capacity to appropriate (materially or symbolically) a given class of classified, classifying objects or practices, is the generative formula of life-style, a unitary set of distinctive preferences which express the same expressive intention in the specific logic of each of the symbolic sub-spaces, furniture, clothing, language or body hexis."⁶ While Bettie's adolescents couldn't talk about class distinctions within and between the racial/ethnic populations of the high school, they clearly knew the distinctions were there based on the lifestyle and taste performed by each group.

Another difficulty in talking about social class identity is the occasional slippage between the social class culture evident in adolescents' homes and those class cultural identities that they performed at school. Bettie discusses the ways in which the high school students in her ethnographic study didn't necessarily perform their "inherited" class identity from their homes of origin in their "chosen" public identity at school.⁷ Some girls worked hard to "pass" as more middle class despite their family's more working class economic position, and some "passed" as working class even though their home status may have been more middle class. This experience led her to begin to conceptualize class as both performed and performative. Normally, social actors perform the cultural capital that their context of origin has made available to them: "Cultural performances most often reflect one's *habitus*—that is, our unconsciously enacted, socially learned dispositions, which are not natural or inherent or prior to the social organization of class inequality, but are in fact produced by it."⁸ However, this is complicated by the fact that some persons choose to perform the cultural identity of a class group that does not closely adhere to their *habitus*. While people can "pass" as members of other class cultural groups, passing inevitably involves anxiety because the required cultural capital is intentionally learned rather than habitually socialized, and there is always the fear of being discovered as being "out of your league."

To talk about social class as performance may imply that we are aware of the performance we are giving. However, class status is most often performed through the preconscious rituals of social interchange. Theologian Tex Sample notes that social class is performed through "rituals of inequality," such as giving and taking orders, getting and giving respect, and deference and demeanor.⁹ Deference may be indicated through verbal manner of address (use of titles or first name), but it is often communicated through very

⁵ Bettie, 42.

⁶ Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 174.

⁷ Bettie50.

⁸ Ibid, 51.

⁹ Sample, 13-16.

subtle bodily mannerisms, such as whether and how eye contact is made, and how much space is allowed another person as you pass in the street. Most of these forms of interchange happen without conscious awareness, though we know that things “feel wrong” if we violate our unspoken place in the hierarchy. Bettie notes these learned bodily indicators of class, “such as the use of standard or nonstandard grammar, accents, mannerisms, and dress (all of which are also racially/ethnically and regionally specific),” serve as expressive cultural practices that indicate class membership.¹⁰ Many a person from the American deep South has dropped her regional accent intentionally because of the association with being “unlearned” or ignorant.¹¹ Bettie noted that the hairstyles and makeup choices of the adolescents she studied were “key markers in the symbolic economy that were employed to express group membership,” and the body “a resource and a site on which difference was inscribed.”¹²

Of course, none of the young women in Bettie’s study utilized the language of class to describe their choices about dress and clothing. Each group simply felt that their choices were in better taste than those of their peers, and they were consciously used to establish group identification. At times, these choices were intentionally over-and-against those of their peers. Each group expressed disdain about the choices of other groups: the preps too-readily conformed to the expectations of adults and remained childlike, the working class Latinas were sexually suggestive in their clothing choices. In particular, Bettie focused on the ways that non-middle-class young people felt the inequality of classism and didn’t want to “play the game” to validate the upper and middle class norms:

Las chicas, having ‘chosen’ and/or been tracked into non-college-prep courses, showed little interest in the formal curriculum offered at the school, finding a variety of ways to kill time. They employed rituals of girl culture [fashion, soap opera conversation, scrapbooking, makeup application] as an alternative to and refusal of official school activities, including the kind of classroom learning that prep students embraced.¹³

Their stylistic choices about dress, language, and mannerism express resistance that they don’t articulate as a politics of class resistance. However, as Bettie notes: “These modes of expression can represent antibourgeois, antipatriarchal, or antiracist meanings even when social actors don’t articulate them as such.”¹⁴ The economy of symbolic performance routinely hides the class political ideologies, leaving the struggle between groups mediated through the commodities which we buy and other modes of identity expression.¹⁵

As indicated by the example of losing a Southern accent, class is always mediated by racial/ethnic, gender, and sexual cultures, place in history, geography and national identity and other factors that affect the way the culture is constructed and performed by individuals and communities. Class inequality is often organized by race and gender

¹⁰ Bettie, 51.

¹¹ Again, this is a place where social class and racial/ethnic heritage are deeply intertwined, as some rural Southern dialects are not distinguishable by race. To lose the accent might also remove one from an “undesirable” connection with persons of another racial group.

¹² Bettie, 62.

¹³ Ibid, 60.

¹⁴ Ibid, 44.

¹⁵ Ibid.

projects, and at times our conversation about class is encoded in conversation about racial or gender inequality because we have much better public discourse for describing those forms of oppression. To talk about class outside of its relationship to other identity markers that are performed within hierarchical power relations is to risk flattening a complex topography into a single line on a map. None of these other distinctions can be reduced to class, but class is a powerful independent strand interwoven among them. As Bettie notes, “They are always already mutually implicated in one another.”¹⁶

Class distinctions exist within racial groups and between them. For example, Evelyn Parker, in talking about her home congregation in Hattiesburg, MS, notes the class issues in the congregation with helpful clarity: “The schisms among the middle class, the working class, and the very poor send strong signals of who’s in and who’s out. My cousin Jose, for example, comes from a poor family and never felt that the St. James congregation and youth group offered a place where he could flourish. Jose’s experience significantly contrasts with my experience in the way our church and community nurtured hope.”¹⁷ However, dominant cultural narratives often talk about race in the United States in ways that fail to make careful distinctions between racial and class analysis. Bettie talks about several instances in popular culture in which the two categories are collapsed and race becomes shorthand for geographic and racial identity: “On the *Oprah* show, as on the magazine cover, the same set of binaries surface repeatedly: white is middle-class is suburban; black is lower-class is urban. But a slippage occurs in which class references are dropped out, and white stands in for middle where black stands in for lower, or suburban stands in for white and urban for black.”¹⁸ These overly simplified expressions begin to construct broader cultural notions of “authentic” class identity, making other social locations, such as middle-class youth of color or rural white persons living in poverty invisible and nearly unthinkable.

Class status differences are something we know and don’t know at the same time. Among the Mexican-American students that Bettie interviewed, class differences were often “expressed as issues of assimilation (who was more or less ‘traditional’), language fluency, gang antagonism, and acting white.”¹⁹ The lack of critical and analytical category of social class led the young people to reach for more readily available categories of analysis to describe the differences between them. Most often, class distinctions within racial minority groups were described in terms of “acting white,” with racial categories substituting for class distinctions. Likewise, teachers in the school were likely to dismiss the “girl culture” forms of resistance expressed by the Latina young women as being “typically female” behavior (being concerned about physical appearance) rather than as class-based practices of resistance to the normalization of valuing conformance with adult educational expectations in the classroom. Rather than maintaining the tension between multiple identity variables at work in any given behavior or practice, the social actors generally turned to categories that seem more fixed and natural, such as gender and race, for causal explanations.²⁰

¹⁶ Bettie, 49.

¹⁷ Parker, Evelyn. *Trouble Don’t Last Always: Emancipatory Hope Among African American Adolescents*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003, 6.

¹⁸ Bettie, 47.

¹⁹ Ibid, 89.

²⁰ Ibid, 85.

In trying to teach about social class, I have found that students often resist acknowledging class identity, noting that class mobility in the United States makes class a meaningless category for understanding any element of identity or behavior. The language we use to talk about class is inadequate, and often causes shame reactions because the language is fraught with evaluative meaning (high and low class, poverty and wealth, etc.). Everybody wants to be in the middle, because to be poor or to be wealthy is a source of cultural shame. (Depending on either social welfare or a trust fund for your income evokes unfair images of laziness and moral decline.) Class is a category that is often maintained socially through somatic knowing, gesture, and social practice, rarely theorized or brought to conscious, articulated attention. Because there is not much broader cultural conversation about class that uses the analytical categories of class and classism, students have little sense that it is a valuable topic. We don't "know" class, even as it is a powerful social structure generating subjectivities and cultural styles of being.

Class Identity and Religious Educational Practice with Adolescents: Four Examples of its Impact

The previous discussion indicates that the initial steps of thinking about class as a religious educator are particularly unclear. There are no easy categorizations or shared understandings on which to draw. Class is intricately interwoven with regional, racial/ethnic, gender, and orientation identity performances of meaning and significance. On an individual level, many people have experienced a fair amount of class mobility in their lifetime, and find it difficult to articulate their own experiences of loss, gain, and stability through these transformations. The lack of cultural discourse on class often simplifies the complexity of its intersection with gender, race, geography, and orientation in ways that are unhelpful. At the same time, the complexity of these intersections in combination with the ideological stance of our culture (e.g. to discuss class at all is to engage in "class warfare") makes approaching the topic difficult at best. And yet, despite all of these concerns, I believe that social class has a profound impact on the work of religious education.

In this section, I explore my own involvement in religious education through Iliff's Lilly-funded theological education with youth program, FaithTrek. By all accounts, this was a strong and successful program that invited adolescents, many from social class backgrounds that might be categorized as working and/or poverty class, to engage in theological exploration of vocation. However, a few aspects of the program continued to struggle despite the best efforts of the directors and program staff over the years. My involvement as consultant and conversation partner meant that I read participant and staff evaluations, interviewed staff and participants, engaged as participant observer, and generally heard stories of how things were going from the year-round staff. The following reflections indicate the ways in which I think social class distinction was one factor influencing some of the struggles of the program. I describe four examples of the ways in which class analysis might have been a beneficial practice to improve our religious educational efforts in this program.²¹

²¹ I am indebted to Anne Carter Walker and Allyson Sawtell, the two directors of FaithTrek over its five years of existence, for their powerful work with this program. While my analysis reflects their generosity

A final caveat: To focus on class in this section courts the problem of speaking about class in ways that ignore the complexities that I so carefully delineated in the first half of the paper. For efficiency's sake, I follow the lead of the authors I quote in using categories such as working and middle class, at times without the careful contextualizing of racial, gender, geographic, and other elements at play. I recognize that I may in fact provide an apt case study of why talking about class in appropriately contextualized ways is quite difficult to do well.

Forms of Mentoring and “Concerted Cultivation”

Each young participant in FaithTrek selected a mentor from their home community with whom they established a year-long relationship. This aspect of the program mirrored many other mentoring programs in which occasional pairings found great success. However, the adolescents were also often disappointed by absent mentors, or mentors who did not seem to take the same level of interest in them as those of their peers in the program. Year by year, the staff devoted considerable time and energy in training mentors, outlining clear expectations for the role they could play, encouraging them by talking about how important their role was, providing resource guides for mentor/mentee meetings throughout the year, and making phone calls to check in on mentors. Still, the problem persisted that many mentors did not seem to invest the kind of energy in relationship with the young people that we had hoped. We began to write it off as part of a larger cultural problem that adults seem to have little faith that adolescents want or need their presence in their lives.

Another explanation for the trouble with the mentoring aspect of our program could be that it drew primarily on middle class understandings of the appropriate relationship between adults and adolescents. In fact, our most successful mentor/participant pairs were often ones in which the mentor was a teaching professional or clergy member or where both mentor and participant were from middle class settings. Sociologist Annette Lareau engaged in a study of parenting styles across social class groups and articulated a “dominant set of cultural repertoires about how children should be raised.” She noted: “[T]here is little dispute among professionals on the broad principles for promoting educational development in children through proper parenting. These standards include the importance of talking with children, developing their educational interests, and playing an active role in their schooling. Similarly, parenting guidelines typically stress the importance of reasoning with children and teaching them to solve problems through negotiation rather than with physical force.”²² Lareau demonstrates how this professional consensus closely mirrors middle-class parenting styles across racial groups in her ethnographic study of parents of elementary age schooling, naming the style *concerted cultivation*. In the *concerted cultivation* model of parenting, parents share a cultural logic that primarily understands their children as a project to be developed through actively assessing and fostering talents, skills and opinions.²³ Our vision of appropriate mentoring clearly grew out of the cultural logic of

in inviting me into the program and their wisdom as conversation partners over the years, any deficiencies of the analysis are mine alone.

²² Lareau, Annette. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. Berkely, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003, 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, 238.

concerted cultivation. We asked mentors to listen to the dreams and opinions of the young people, and to assist them in completing a year-long project designed to further develop those talents and visions that the young people identified as central to their vocational call.

However, *concerted cultivation* was not the primary style of parenting engaged in by the working-class and poor parents in Lareau's study. Rather, they participated in a cultural logic of child rearing that the sociologist dubbed the *accomplishment of natural growth*. In this parenting style, children's development is understood as unfolding spontaneously, and good parenting requires primarily provision of food, shelter, medical care and other basic support. Given the economic and social challenges faced by many of these parents, these activities required much of the available energy of their parents.²⁴ While Lareau describes the clear benefits of such a model of parenting (less sibling conflict, children better able to negotiate free time and interaction with peers, less pressure and more freedom from assessment in everyday activities), these practices are not afforded respect and value by important social institutions such as schools, social service agencies, and medical institutions.²⁵ As Lareau noted: "There are signs that middle-class children benefit, in ways that are invisible to them and to their parents from the degree of similarity between the cultural repertoires in the home and those standards adopted by institutions."²⁶

Our program, like schools and other institutions, assumed that the model of concerted cultivation was a shared value with the mentors. However, we were asking many of the mentors to engage in a form of relationship with young people that was perhaps culturally foreign, probably making very little common sense to them. Lareau's research would suggest that our request that adults move into a peer-like relationship with adolescents and spend a lot of time providing adult direction for an enrichment project was not a normal form of relationship valued in working class and impoverished communities. Given this possibility, it is not surprising that many of the mentors did not leave the cultural logic of their class culture of origin to embrace the concerted cultivation model. Since we coached the young people to expect adults to move into this role, many became disappointed when they saw their middle class peers receiving adult attention and companionship that they were not receiving.

Before I move to the next example, I want to reflect a moment on the cultural logic of concerted cultivation, which underlies many forms of religious educational practice with young people in communities of faith. Adult-directed enrichment activities are the cornerstone of many churches' children's and youth ministries. Lareau notes the largely unexamined benefits and costs of concerted cultivation: "For example, the close fit between skills children learn in soccer games or at piano recitals and those they will eventually need in white-collar professional or technical positions goes unnoted. Similarly, that middle-class children have trouble adjusting to unstructured time and that they often find it difficult to forge deep, positive bonds with siblings are largely unrecognized costs of concerted cultivation."²⁷ In particular, Lareau's researchers were struck by the overscheduled middle class children who were quite unable to entertain

²⁴ Lareau, 238-239.

²⁵ Ibid, 76.

²⁶ Ibid, 237.

²⁷ Ibid, 64.

themselves and establish relationships with peers when not mediated by adults. Her work may inform religious educational practitioners who are frustrated with families for whom church activities are yet one more activity of enrichment among many for their children and with families who do not find such activities more valuable than free play with peers and cousins. Having some awareness of the cultural logics of parenting that Lareau describes may help practitioners understand and respond appropriately to these different families.

While I cannot speak for my colleagues at FaithTrek, I must confess that I did not have the kind of class cultural competency to recognize the ways in which our mentoring model was thoroughly class-biased. Lareau notes, “Perhaps there is little understanding of the ways in which the middle-class approach to child rearing intertwines with the dominant ideology of our society, making the idea that a middle-class childhood might not be the optimal approach literally unthinkable.”²⁸ Unfortunately, our funding and program ended before I recognized this issue, so I was unable to explore what other models of mentoring more appropriate to the other class groups represented in our young people’s communities might have been. My suspicion is that rather than mentoring in a peer-like way, we should have worked with multiple models of “eldering” and “sponsoring” that might have been more intelligible culturally to the adults with whom we worked. Although Lareau found the models across racial groups in her study, I also would suggest that a racial/ethnic-based cultural analysis of appropriate mentoring/eldering in various communities would have been important to further improve our work with the adult/adolescent pairings in FaithTrek.

Enabling Agency and “Cultural Capital”

Another element of FaithTrek’s program with young people that required adjustment based on the social class of our participants was the year-long projects that we invited young people to engage. The idea was that, once they had begun to identify their gifts and passions for how they might share in God’s work in the world, they would take on a “project” in which they would begin some of that work in their home community with the support and direction of their adult mentor. We hoped that this supported effort would enliven the agency of young people as they recognized that they could have a positive impact on the world. Particularly in the early years of the program, we didn’t always factor in how the young people’s efforts would be received in the community given their social class status or their lack of cultural capital in terms of the skills of “entitlement” (demanding institutions to respond to them) more common among middle-class adolescents.²⁹

One of the benefits of the cultural logic of middle-class parenting is that young people are habituated into practices and skills that are highly valued among the institutions of our culture. Lareau notes the effects of concerted cultivation on self-understanding of middle-class kids: “They learn to think of themselves as special and as entitled to receive certain kinds of services from adults. They also acquire a valuable set of white-collar work skills, including how to set priorities, manage an itinerary, shake hands with strangers, and work on a team.”³⁰ This is a powerful form of cultural capital

²⁸ Lareau, 65.

²⁹ Ibid., 60

³⁰ Ibid, 39.

that sets middle-class children in a place where institutions are likely to respond to their requests because they know the behaviors valued in those settings and because they carry an attitude that demands response from such institutions. Once our middle-class participants had identified their projects, they often had an enormous amount of cultural capital to make them a reality. For example, they had contacts in non-profit worlds; they knew how to make phone calls to discover from whom they needed to get permits to throw a block party; they spoke more easily with adults in positions of power and authority.

Our participants from working class and impoverished settings often did not have these same sets of skills. In fact, they were often met with a double whammy: they lacked practice in navigating institutions and negotiating with authority figures and many of them were met with suspicion because of their racial background. Adolescent young men of color, in particular, do not often receive respect from middle-class institutions even if they are utilizing common forms of address and demonstrating cultural competence with middle-class processes. In the first years, as we listened to young people talk about how their mentors helped make their project a success, we learned that some of the strongly functioning mentors/elders of these youth provided direct instruction and coaching on how to navigate such situations, particularly given the sometimes racist response they received. Our program, however, had not initially recognized this need in the design of the project element because many of us had assumptions about the basic skills that young people would possess, many of which turned out to be class-biased. While we learned that some mentors could provide the kind of eldering necessary to support young people, others lacked “social networks and skills and knowledge to enable their child.”³¹ Again, our vision of mentoring the projects required mentors to have certain kinds of class-biased competencies that the mentors from working-class settings sometimes didn’t have.

If I Never Hear the Word “Reflection” Again...

Another interesting form of resistance that we received from some of the young people was disdain at their sense of the overuse of the word and practice of “reflection” on the part of the staff. As one young man said at the end of the three-week residential element of the program: “If I never hear the word reflection again, it will be too soon.” We reflected(!) on this resistance in many ways. The first was to note that our context of graduate theological education valued reflection highly, and since most of our staff was currently engaged in the process of theological education, we may have gone a little overboard with it. Our second response was to remind ourselves that the program was designed largely through the work of five or six adult women, and that perhaps this was a gender and age bias towards conversation rather than bodily action. In fact, our response was to intentionally schedule in more times of recreation and body involvement, which were in fact gratefully received by later years of young people.

While I believe we found an appropriate response to the resistance, we continued to value reflection highly as a mode of being central to the practice of religious education. I have since wondered if there may also be an element of class analysis that would help us to understand better the resistance to reflection and to consider alternative forms of education. Here I turn again to Tex Sample: “The professional and managerial classes

³¹ Bettie, 82.

are noted for their use of introspective practices and an ongoing focus on their own interiority. While working-class people are not without self-insight and concern about their inward states, nevertheless they are not typically occupied with their ‘innards’ on the scale of the middle class.”³² Sample states this as if it were an essentialized identity experience of working-class persons. I think we might consider whether the more infrequent attention to interior states might be a byproduct of the class injuries of disrespectful behavior towards working-class persons. If nobody else cares much about your internal response to a lack of respect and concern for your opinions and perspective, over time you might learn it’s not fruitful to spend much time thinking about it and pass that mode of being on to your children.

The young man who made the statement about reflection bore certain working-class identity markers. He was tracked into vocational education in high school, and was planning to pursue a career as an auto mechanic. This path was in line with his parents’ vocations and those of his older siblings. Sample indicates that drawing on the value of the craft tradition of knowing and the role of apprenticeship learning would be an important educational response to working-class traditions of learning.³³ In fact, one of this young man’s more meaningful connections to his home church was as a nursery worker working alongside adults in his community. As a religious educator, to consider the possibility that “reflection” might be a class-biased rather than a normative mode of education has been a major source of consternation and consideration for me. Yet, it was Socrates and not Jesus who said that the unexamined life was not worth living. The disciples were asked to get up and follow, not to think about what it might mean if they did. Again, I became aware of the blinders that my class perspective has placed to other possibilities and values in the practice of religious education. This is not to say that reflection is not valuable, or that working-class persons wouldn’t benefit from, enjoy or desire engagement in practices of reflection. Rather, my concern is the extent to which religious education without intensive reflection had almost become “unthinkable” in my own mind.

Growing Up Too Fast and “Practices of Resistance”

Practices of resistance are an important site of knowledge about the impact of class identity in religious education. As Bettie noted, resistance may or not be articulated or even consciously understood within the category of class politics and still be powerfully active in a given situation. Tex Sample endorses strongly the importance of ministry that joins working class persons in practices of resistance: “Working-class people engage pervasively in practices of everyday resistance to the social inequalities of class. Incarnational ministry will discover the spaces of this resistance and join it in opposing the unjust and demeaning rituals of inequality. Indeed, to join such practices and to bless them can turn loose the congealed anger of working people in constructive directions for life together.³⁴” While Sample doesn’t believe that the church should join in practices of resistance uncritically, rather colorfully indicating that orgies would never be an appropriate cultural accommodation for the church, he makes a powerful case for the importance of standing against classism in this concrete way. He notes that the worst

³² Sample, 27.

³³ Ibid, 93.

³⁴ Ibid, 62.

choice a pastor (and I would add youth leader) can make is to fight against such resistance, which means to join the dominant culture and become identified as part of the problem.³⁵

One practice of class resistance common among working- and underclass adolescence is adopting forms of dress and demeanor that reject the middle class norm of adolescence as extended childhood in preparation for a promised economic future. In Bettie's study, one form this resistance takes is in non-prep adolescent girls wearing heavy makeup and sexualized clothing, thus violating middle-class norms by claiming their adult status "prematurely." She notes, "For them, expressions of sexuality, and by extension motherhood, operated as a sign of adult status and served to reject teachers' and parents' methods of keeping them childlike."³⁶ While Bettie notes that sexual activity was fairly constant across all of the group categories that she studied, only those marked as racially nondominant and working or underclass were perceived as being *too* sexually active. In other words, sexual morality was a site of class injury, as well as a shorthand category used in the place of social class.³⁷

When we had the culminating reunion of participants in FaithTrek at the end of the four-years of residential programs, several of our male and female participants, from three different racial groups but all either from working or underclass backgrounds, had become parents. All of them were still in their teens. While we had certainly validated parenthood as a legitimate form of Christian vocation, in all the years that we had talked about what exploration of vocation might mean for our participants, we had never seriously considered the fact that some of them might become parents in the immediate future. For me, this marks again a class-biased understanding of appropriate forms of adolescence that limited our perception of what forms of conversation might be appropriate. Bettie notes:

Regardless of how a girl becomes pregnant (which occurs for a variety of reasons, including the use of birth control that fails), after the fact, having a baby can be a marker of adult status (just as sexuality was), and girls recognize it as such. For non-prep girls who do not have college and career to look forward to as signs of adulthood, motherhood and the responsibility that comes with it can be employed to gain respect, marking adult status.³⁸

Bettie notes that the teachers at the school expressed surprise at how the babies were celebrated and did not become a source of shame for the girls. The expectation of adolescent pregnancy as a shameful experience lies both in the public acknowledgement of adolescent sexual activity (again, shorthand for "low class" behavior) and the violation of middle-class assumptions about the norm of extended adolescence resulting in increased economic capacity to provide for children.

What would it mean for a religious educator to "find the spaces of resistance and to join the people in them"³⁹ in this situation? How might we reject class "liturgies of inequality, ...self-empty [our] practices of affluent taste, bourgeois etiquette, dominant

³⁵ Sample, 11.

³⁶ Bettie, 61.

³⁷ Ibid, 68.

³⁸ Ibid, 69.

³⁹ Sample, 35.

language, and the grammar of privilege, and pitch tent with the practices of resistance found in working-class life⁴⁰”? How could we have talked with the young people about the possibilities and struggles of entering the path of young parenthood without reinscribing class and racial injury through the equation of sexual activity with class status? We may have made the conscious choice not to address these issues because there was no way to do it without being patronizing or without inflicting undue class injury, but my concern is that it was part of the null curriculum of our program without much conscious reflection on our part. In my own history, despite working class cousins who became parents in their teenage years and a history in youth ministry practice in the local church where this had also happened, I literally could not imagine this possibility for our participants.

Concluding Questions and Quandaries

It may be that youth ministry in particular is fraught with class-biased perspectives and blindspots because adolescence itself is so bound up with middle-class economic history and realities. For example, I often have students say things like, “You can’t do youth ministry without mission trips. Service is the best education for teenagers,” without ever considering the class biases and entitlement often performed in the unreflective practice of mission trips. However, I think it is worth questioning the extent to which common models of religious education and our own creative practice of religious education might be significantly bound to middle class cultural norms across age levels.

As the previous section of this paper demonstrates, while I strongly desire the capacity as a religious educator to work across class boundaries without patronizing or “passing,” I find that my social location in terms of class often limits my vision in ways that I do not even recognize at the time. Of course, this is true for other identity elements such as race, gender, sexual orientation, national identity, etc. One response to this reality is a healthy understanding of human finitude and recognition that our perspectives are inherently limited. This recognition means that we need conversation partners and critics across the shadowy lines of division to continue to broaden possibilities for good practice in religious education.

Additionally, we can all seek to become more critically aware of how class identity and class injury work. As Sample notes, “The first step of ministry with working-class whites is a sharp awareness of the practices of social inequality and a commitment to work against such practices in oneself, in the church, and in the community. This involves challenge to the practices of class and the politics of distinction.”⁴¹ With increased understanding will undoubtedly come increased recognition of our own failures and finitude. However, without increased cultural competence about class identity and values, religious educators can fail in cross-cultural attempts at religious education without ever understanding why their attempts at ministry were not appreciated. Without increasing awareness that our values and perspectives are socially located in terms of class, we are vulnerable to relational misunderstandings and practices of ministry that re-inscribe classism in our various contexts.

⁴⁰ Sample, 105.

⁴¹ Ibid, 61.