

Preparation for Class

Betsy Leondar-Wright, founder of classmatters.org, offers the following definition of class: “*Class is relative status according to income, wealth, power and/or position.*”

As a starting point, Leondar-Wright proposes four classes based chiefly on economic security, education, and occupation. The **owning class** has enough income from assets that they do not need to work. They attend elite schools and can afford luxuries and multiple homes. The **professional middle class** is largely college educated. People in this class usually own a home, can afford some luxuries, and have some control over their working conditions. The **working class** typically does not have a 4-year degree, works at a job involving physical labor or limited control over working conditions, and often rents or owns a very modest home. The **low-income** class is a subset of the working class with lower economic security, often using public benefits and experiencing life disruptions.

But as the PBS documentary “People Like Us” notes, class isn’t just an abstract concept, it’s something that people deal with in their everyday lives. It influences where we live; what we eat; and how we socialize, speak, and spend our time.

Our different experiences result in different values, and it can be all too easy to confuse class values with moral values. The classmatters.org site describes values typically held by social classes. The upper-middle-class tends to be “future-oriented,” seeing life as “individualistic and transformative,” while the working class tends to be “present-oriented,” with life as “tangled webs of relationships.” Yet many upper-middle-class people yearn to live more in the present and to have more relationships.

Similarly, upper-middle class people often look down on the food, clothing, and entertainment choices of the working class and lower-income classes. For example, the social network Pinterest includes hundreds of “white trash party” ideas with tongue-in-cheek menus and purposely misspelled invitations. In contrast, the “Kentucky Derby party” posts are spoof-free, with tutorials for flower arrangements and mint juleps. What makes one set of choices more “deserving” of satire? Does it feel safer to oversimplify class than to confront its complexities?

The reality is that classes include people of varied race, culture, and politics – but the middle and owning classes are disproportionately white. Women, people of color, and children are more likely to be in the lower-income and working class. Gender, race, sexual orientation, able-bodiedness, and other identities influence how we experience class, as different types of oppression overlap and interact. The African-American scholar and advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” to describe this phenomenon.

As UUs, our traditions and sources call us to fight all forms of oppression, yet class bias can sneak into our churches. A *Preliminary Report on Class in the Unitarian Universalist Association* (June 16, 2015) notes that class issues surface in assumptions about car ownership, the ability to pay for church activities or denominational events, and even literacy.

The report quotes a participant in a UUA General Assembly workshop: “From age 20 to 51 I did not attend any UU church. Part of the reason was because I assumed I would now be out of place due to income and education.” Another participant remembered an instance when many people in a forum met for brunch in a “yuppie” restaurant that s/he could neither afford nor appreciate. When we inadvertently alienate potential members, the stereotype that UUs are upper middle class becomes self-fulfilling. Exploring our own experiences with and views on class is vital to affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every human being.

The middle classes and upper classes don't know whether they want to transform [the working class] and make them middle class, or withdraw from them, romanticize them, demonize them. I don't think we've ever quite gotten to the point where we just sort of understand each other. *John Dilulio*

What a strange thing that money can make us ashamed if we have too little of it and ashamed if we have too much of it. *The Rev. Rob Hardies, All Souls Unitarian Church, Washington, DC*

From a young age, I was rubbing elbows with a very different kind of person and social class, and I felt a lot of tension and conflict in my identity because of that. *David Lindsay-Abaire, playwright*

There will be no mass-based feminist movement as long as feminist ideas are understood only by a well-educated few. *bell hooks, Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*

Socialism never took root in America because the poor see themselves not as an exploited proletariat but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires. *Ronald Wright, A Short History of Progress*

Even now, the notion of a broad and supple middle class functions as a mighty balm, a smoke screen. We cling to the comfort of the middle class, forgetting that there can't be a middle class without a lower. *Nancy Isenberg, White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*

Questions to Ponder

1. Do you feel like you fit into any of Leondar-Wright's categories? Why or why not?
2. What was your family's view of class? Has your view changed as an adult?
3. Watch the PBS documentary "People Like Us" – it's long, but even the first part is interesting. <https://vimeo.com/122468054/>
4. Do you feel any conflicts of class identity within yourself?
5. In your experience, how has your class identity intersected with other aspects of your identity? (e.g., gender, race, or sexual orientation.)
6. Do you think that you have any unconscious assumptions about class?
7. Describe an experience where a class difference between yourself and another person or group left you uncomfortable.
8. Do you feel that our church should attempt to include different classes? Would such attempts work?

Words of the Day

Before coming to the gathering, think of few words, phrases, or metaphors that describe situations when class is "on your radar." The prompt for this activity will be to complete this sentence: "I think about class when ..."