

Growing Up Class-Conscious

By Howard Zinn

I was in my teens when I wrote this poem:

*Go see your Uncle Phil
And say hello.
Who would walk a mile today
To say hello,
The city freezing in the snow
Phil had a news stand
Under the black El.
He sat on a wooden box
In the cold and in the heat.
And three small rooms across the street.
Today the wooden box was gone,
On top the stand Uncle Phil was curled,
A skeleton inside an Army coat.
He smiled and gave me a stick of gum
With stiffened fingers, red and numb.*

*Go see your Uncle Phil today
My mother said again in June
I walked the mile to say hello
With the city smelling almost sweet
Brand new sneakers on my feet.
The stand was nailed and boarded tight
And quiet in the sun.
Uncle Phil lay cold, asleep,
Under the black El, in a wooden box
In three small rooms across the street.*

I recall that, certainly not as an example of "poetry," but because it evokes something about my growing up, in the slums of Brooklyn in the 1930s, when my father and mother, in desperate moments, turned to saviors: the corner grocer, who gave credit by writing down the day's purchases on a roll of paper; the kind doctor who treated my rickets for years without charging; Uncle Phil, whose army service earned him a newsstand license, who loaned us money when we had trouble paying the rent.

Phil and my father were two of four brothers, Jewish immigrants from Austria, who came to this country before the first World War and worked together in New York factories. My father, looking to escape the factory, became a waiter, mostly at weddings, sometimes in restaurants, and a member of Local 2 of the Waiters Union. While the union tightly controlled its membership, on New Years Eve, when there was a need for extra waiters, the sons of the members, called "Juniors," would work alongside their fathers, and I did too.

I hated every moment of it. The ill-fitting waiter's tuxedo, borrowed from my father, the sleeves absurdly short (my father was five-foot-five and at sixteen I was a six-footer). The way the bosses treated the waiters who were fed chicken wings just before they marched out to serve roast beef and filet mignon to the guests. Everybody in their fancy dress, wearing silly hats, singing "Auld Lang Syne" as the New Year began and me standing there in my waiter's costume, watching my father, his face strained, clear his tables, feeling no joy at the coming of the New Year.

My father's name was Eddie. In the depression years, the weddings fell off, there was little work, and he got tired of hanging around the union hall, playing cards, waiting for a job. So he became, at different times, a window cleaner, a pushcart peddler, a street salesman of neckties, a WPA worker in Central Park. As a window cleaner, his supporting belt broke one day and he fell off the ladder onto the concrete steps of a subway entrance. I was perhaps 12 and I remember him being brought, bleeding, into our little flat. He had hurt himself badly. My mother would not let him clean windows again.

All his life he worked hard for very little. I've always resented the smug statements of politicians, media commentators, and corporate executives who talked of how, in America, if you worked hard, you would become rich. I knew this was a lie, about my father and millions of others, men and women, who worked harder than anyone, harder than financiers and politicians, harder than anybody if you accepted that when you worked at an unpleasant job that made it very hard work indeed.

My mother worked and worked, without getting paid at all. She had grown up in Irkutsk, in Siberia. While my father worked his hours on the job, she worked all day and all night, managing the family, finding the food, cooking and cleaning, taking the kids to the doctor or the hospital clinic for measles and mumps and whooping cough and tonsillitis and whatever came up. And taking care of family finances. My father had a fourth grade education and could not read much or do much arithmetic. She had gone as far as seventh grade, but her intelligence went far beyond that; she was the brains and strength of the family.

Her name was Jenny. She told of her mother's arranged marriage in Irkutsk: "They brought a boy home, a Jewish soldier stationed in Irkutsk, and said, this is who you'll marry." They emigrated to America. Her mother died in her 30s, having given birth to three boys and three girls, and her father—against whom she boiled with indignation all her life—deserted the family. Jenny, the eldest, but only a teenager, became the mother of the family, took care of the rest, working in factories, until they grew up and found jobs.

She met Eddie through his sister, who worked in her factory, and it was a passionate marriage all the way. Eddie died at 67. To the end he was carrying trays of food at weddings and restaurants, never having made enough money to retire. My mother outlived by him many years. She lived by herself, fiercely insisting on her independence, knitting sweaters for everybody, saving shopping coupons, playing bingo with her friends. But towards the end she suffered a stroke and entered a nursing home.

We lived in a succession of tenements, sometimes four rooms, sometimes three. Some winters we lived in a building with central heating. Other times, we lived in what was called "a cold water flat"—no heat except from the coal cooking stove in the kitchen. No hot water except what we boiled on that same stove.

It was always a battle to pay the bills. I would come home from school in the winter, when the sun set at four, and find the house dark—the Electric Company had turned off the electricity, and my mother would be sitting, knitting by candlelight.

There was no refrigerator, but an icebox, for which we would go to the "ice dock" and buy a five-cent or ten-cent chunk of ice. In the winter a wooden box rested on the sill just outside the window, using nature to keep things cold. There was no shower, but the washtub in the kitchen was our bathtub.

No radio for a long time, until one day my father took me on a long walk through the city to find a second-hand radio, and triumphantly brought it home on his shoulder, me trotting along by his side. No telephone. We would be called to the phone at the candy store down the block, and pay the kid two pennies or a nickel who ran upstairs to get us. Sometimes we hung out near the phone to take the call and race to collect the nickel.

I don't remember ever being hungry. The rent might not be paid (we moved often, a step ahead of eviction). No bills might be paid. But my mother was ingenious at making sure there was always food: always hot cereal in the morning, always hot soup in the evening, always bread, butter, eggs, milk, noodles, cheese, sour cream, chicken fricassee.

My mother was not shy about using the English language, which she adapted to her purposes. We would hear her telling her friend about the problem she was having with "very close veins," or "a pain in my crutch." She would look in the dairy store for "monster cheese." She would say to my father, if he forgot something: "Eddie, try to remember, wreck your brains."

We four boys grew up together—sleeping two or three to a bed, in rooms dark and uninviting. So I spent a lot of time in the street or the schoolyard, playing handball, football, softball, stickball, or taking boxing lessons from the guy in the neighborhood who had made the Golden Gloves and was our version of a celebrity.

In the time I did spend in the house, I read. From the time I was eight I was reading whatever books I could find. The very first I picked up on the street. The beginning pages were torn out, but that didn't matter. It was *Tarzan and the Jewels of Opar* and from then on I was a fan of Edgar Rice Burroughs, not only his Tarzan books but his other fantasies: *The Chessmen of Mars*, about the way wars were fought by Martians, with warriors, on foot or on horses, playing out the chess moves; *The Earth's Core*, about a strange civilization in the center of the earth.

There were no books in our house. My father had never read a book. My mother read romance magazines. They both read the newspaper. They knew little about politics, except that Franklin Roosevelt was a good man because he helped the poor.

As a boy I read no children's books. My parents did not know about such books. But when I was ten, the *New York Post* offered a set of the complete works of Charles Dickens (of whom they had never heard, of course). By using coupons cut out of the newspaper, they could get a volume every week for a few pennies. So they signed up, because they knew I loved to read. And so I read Dickens in the order in which we received the books, starting with *David Copperfield*, *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations*, *The Pickwick Papers*, *Hard Times*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and all the rest, until the coupons were exhausted and so was I.

I did not know where Dickens fit into the history of modern literature because he was all I knew of that literature. What I did know was that he aroused in me tumultuous emotions. First, an anger at arbitrary power puffed up with wealth and kept in place by law. But most of all a profound compassion for the poor. I did not see myself as poor in the way *Oliver Twist* was poor. I didn't recognize that I was so moved by his story because his life touched chords in mine.

For my 13th birthday my parents, knowing that I was writing things in notebooks, bought me a rebuilt Underwood typewriter. It came with a practice book for learning the touch system, and soon I was typing book reviews for everything I read and keeping them in my drawer. I never showed them to anyone. It gave me joy and pride just to know that I had read these books and could write about them on a typewriter.

From the age of 14 I had after-school and summer jobs—delivering clothes for a dry cleaner, working as a caddy on a golf course in Queens. I also helped out in a succession of candy stores my parents bought in a desperate attempt to make enough money so my father could quit being a waiter. The stores all failed, but my three younger brothers and I had lots of milk shakes and ice cream and candy while they existed.

I remember the last of those candy-store situations, and it was typical. The six of us lived above the store in a four room flat in a dirty old five-story tenement on Bushwick Avenue in Brooklyn. The street was always full of life, especially in spring and summer, when everyone seemed to be outside: old folks sitting on chairs, mothers holding their babies, teenagers playing ball, the "older guys" throwing the bull, fooling with girls.

I especially remember that time because I was 17 and had begun to be interested in world politics. I was reading books about Fascism in Europe. George Seldes' *Sawdust Caesar*, about Mussolini's seizure of power in Italy, fascinated me. I could not get out of my mind the courage of the Socialist Deputy Matteotti, who defied Mussolini and was dragged from his home and killed by brown-shirted thugs.

I read something called *The Brown Book of the Nazi Terror*, which described what was happening in Germany under Hitler. It was a drama beyond anything a playwright or novelist could imagine. And now the Nazi war machine was beginning to move: into the Rhineland, Austria, Czechoslovakia. The newspapers and radio were full of excitement: Chamberlain meeting Hitler at Munich, the sudden, astonishing non-aggression pact of the two arch-enemies, Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany. And finally, the invasion of Poland and the start of World War II.

The Civil War in Spain, just ended with victory for the Fascist general Franco, seemed the event closest to all of us, because several thousand American radicals—communists, socialists, anarchists—had crossed the Atlantic to fight with the democratic government of Spain. A young fellow who played street football with us—short and thin, the fastest runner in the neighborhood, disappeared. Months later, the word came to us: Jerry has gone to Spain to fight against Franco.

There, on Bushwick Avenue, among the basketball players and street talkers, were some young communists, a few years older than me. They had jobs, but after work and on weekends they distributed Marxist literature in the neighborhood, and talked politics into the night with whoever was interested.

I was interested. I was reading about what was happening in the world. I argued with the communist guys. Especially about the Russian invasion of Finland. They insisted it was necessary for the Soviet Union to protect itself against future attack, but to me it was a brutal act of aggression against a tiny country, and none of their carefully worked out justifications persuaded me.

Still, I agreed with them on lots of things. They were ferociously anti-Fascist, indignant as I was about the contrasts of wealth and poverty in America. I admired them—they seemed to know so much about politics, economics, what was happening everywhere in the world. And they were courageous—I had seen them defy the local police who tried to stop them from distributing literature on the street, or to break up their knots of discussion. Besides, they were regular guys, good athletes.

One summer day they asked me if I wanted to go with them to "a demonstration" that evening. I had never been to such a thing. I made some excuse to my parents and a bunch of us took the subway to Times Square. When we arrived, it was just a typical evening in Times Square—the streets crowded, the lights glittering. "Where's the demonstration," I asked my friend Leon. He was tall, blond, the ideal "Aryan" type, but the son of German communists who were also nature-worshippers and part of a little colony of health-conscious German socialists out in the New Jersey countryside.

"Wait," he said. "Ten o'clock." We continued to stroll among the crowd.

As the clock on the tower struck ten, the scene changed. In midst of the crowd, banners were unfurled, and people, perhaps a thousand or more, formed into lines carrying banners and signs and chanting slogans about peace and justice and a dozen other causes of the day. It was exciting. And non-threatening. All these people were keeping to the sidewalks, not blocking traffic, walking in orderly, non-violent lines through Times Square. My friend and I were walking behind two women carrying a banner, and he said: "Let's relieve them." So we each took an end of the banner. I felt a bit like Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*, when he casually picked up a red signal flag and suddenly found a thousand people marching behind him with raised fists.

We heard sirens, and I thought: there must be a fire somewhere, an accident of some kind. But then I heard screams and saw hundreds of police, mounted on horses, and on foot, charging into the lines of marchers, smashing people with their clubs.

I was astonished, bewildered. This was America, a country where, whatever its faults, people could speak, write, assemble, demonstrate without fear. It was in the Constitution, the Bill of Rights. We were a democracy.

As I absorbed this, as my thoughts raced, all in a few seconds, I was spun around by a very large man, who seized my shoulder, and hit me very hard. I only saw him as a blur. I didn't know if it was a club or a fist or a blackjack, but I was knocked unconscious.

I awoke in a doorway perhaps a half hour later. I had no sense of how much time had elapsed, but it was an eerie scene I woke up to. There was no demonstration going on, no police in sight, my friend Leon was gone, and Times Square was filled with its usual Saturday night crowd—as if nothing had happened, as if it was all a dream. But I knew it wasn't a dream. There was a painful lump on the side of my head.

More important, there was a very painful thought in my head: those young communists on the block were right. The state and its police were not neutral referees in a society of contending interests. They were on the side of the rich and powerful. Free speech? Try it, and the police will be there with their horses, their clubs, their guns, to stop you.

From that moment on, I was no longer a liberal, a believer in the self-correcting character of American democracy. I was a radical, believing that something fundamental was wrong in this country—not just the existence of poverty amidst great wealth, not just the horrible treatment of black people, but something rotten at the root. The situation required not just a new President, or new laws, but an uprooting of the old order, the introduction of a new kind of society—cooperative, peaceful, egalitarian.

Perhaps I am exaggerating the importance of that one experience. But I think not. I have come to believe that our lives can be turned in a different direction, our minds adopt a different way of thinking, by some significant, though small event. That belief can be frightening, or exhilarating, depending on whether you just contemplate it or do something with it.

The years following that experience in Times Square might be called "my communist years." That would be easy to misunderstand because the word "communist" conjures up Joseph Stalin and the gulags of death and torture, the disappearance of free expression, the atmosphere of fear and trembling created in the Soviet Union, the ugly bureaucracy that lasted 70 years, pretending to be "socialism."

None of that was in the minds or intentions of the young working-class people I knew who called themselves "communists." Certainly not in my mind. Little was known about the Soviet Union, except the romantic image, popularized by people like the English theologian, the Dean of Canterbury. In his book *The Soviet Power*, distributed widely by the communist movement, he gave idealists disillusioned with capitalism the vision they longed for: of a place where the country belonged to "the people," where everyone had work and free health care, and women had equal opportunities with men, and a hundred different ethnic groups were treated with respect.

The Soviet Union was this romantic blur, far away. What was close at hand, visible, was that communists were the leaders in organizing working people all over the country. They were the most daring, risking arrest and beatings to organize auto workers in Detroit, steel workers in Pittsburgh, textile workers in North Carolina, fur and leather workers in New York, longshoremen on the West Coast. They were the first to speak up, more than that, to demonstrate, to chain themselves to factory gates and White House fences, when blacks were lynched in the South, when the "Scottsboro Boys" were being railroaded to prison in Alabama.

My image of "a communist" was not a Soviet bureaucrat, but my friend Leon's father, a cabdriver who came home from work bruised and bloody one day, beaten up by his employer's goons (yes, that word was soon part of my vocabulary) for trying to organize his fellow cabdrivers into a union.

Everyone knew that the communists were the first anti-fascists, protesting against Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia and Hitler's persecution of the Jews. And, most impressive of all, it was the communists, thousands of them, who volunteered to fight in Spain, in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, to join volunteers from all over the world to defend Madrid and

the Spanish people against the Fascist army of Francisco Franco, which was given arms and airplanes by Germany and Italy.

Furthermore, some of the best people in the country were connected with the communist movement in some way; there were heroes and heroines one could admire. There was Paul Robeson, the fabulous singer-actor-athlete, whose magnificent voice could fill Madison Square Garden, crying out against racial injustice, against fascism. And literary figures (weren't Theodore Dreiser and W.E.B. DuBois communists?), and talented, socially conscious Hollywood actors and writers and directors (yes, "The Hollywood Ten," hauled before a Congressional Committee, defended by Humphrey Bogart and so many others).

True, in that movement, as in any other, you could see the righteousness leading to dogmatism, the closed circle of ideas impermeable by doubt, an intolerance of dissent by people who were the most persecuted of dissenters. But however imperfect, even repugnant sometimes, were particular policies, particular actions, there remained the purity of the ideal, represented in the theories of Karl Marx, and the noble visions of many lesser thinkers and writers.

I remember my first reading of the *Communist Manifesto*, which Marx and Engels wrote when they too were young radicals; Marx was 30, Engels 28. "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle." That was undeniably true, verifiable in any reading of history. Certainly true for the United States, despite all the pretensions of the Constitution ("We the people of the United States...." and "No state shall deny...the equal protection of the laws.").

Their analysis of capitalism made sense, its history of exploitation, its creation of extremes of wealth and poverty, even in the liberal "democracy" of this country. And their socialist vision was not one of dictatorship or bureaucracy but of a free society. Their "dictatorship of the proletariat" was a transitional phase, in which society would go from a dictatorship of the rich to a dictatorship of the poor to a classless society of true democracy, true freedom.

A rational, just economic system would allow a short workday and leave everyone free to do as they liked—to write poetry, to be in nature, to play sports, to be truly human. To fulfill their potentiality as human beings. Nationalism would be a thing of the past. People all over the world, of whatever race, of whatever continent, would live in peace and cooperation.

In my teenage reading, those ideas were kept alive by some of the finest writers in America. I read Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. Work in the Chicago stockyards was the epitome of capitalist exploitation. And in the last pages of the book, the vision of a new society is thrilling. John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* was an eloquent cry against the conditions of life where the poor were expendable and any attempt on their part to change their lives was met with police clubs.

When I was 18, unemployed, my family desperate for help, I took a much-publicized Civil Service examination for a job in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Thirty thousand young men, (women applicants were unthinkable) took the exam, competing for a few hundred jobs. It was 1940, and the New Deal programs had relieved but not ended the Depression. When the results were announced, 400 of the applicants had gotten a score of 100 percent on the exam and would get jobs. I was one of them.

For me and my family, it was a triumph. My salary would be \$14.40 for a 40-hour week. I could give the family ten dollars a week and have the rest for lunch and spending money.

It was also an introduction to the world of heavy industry. I was to be an apprentice shipfitter for the next three years. I would work out "on the ways," a vast inclined surface at the edge of the harbor on which a battleship, the *USS Iowa*, was to be built. (Many years later, in the 1980s, I was called to be a witness at a trial in Staten Island of pacifists who had demonstrated against the placement of nuclear weapons on a battleship docked there—the *USS Iowa*).

Our job, basically, was to fit together the steel plates of the hull, doing a lot of crawling around inside the tiny steel compartments of the "inner bottom," where smells and sounds were magnified a hundred times. We measured and hammered, and cut and welded, using the service of "burners" and "chippers."

No women workers. The skilled jobs were held by white men, who were organized in AFL craft unions known to be inhospitable to blacks. The few blacks in the shipyard had the toughest, most physically demanding jobs, like the riveters.

What made the job bearable was the steady pay, and the accompanying dignity of being a working man, bringing home money like my father. There was also the pride that we were doing something for the war effort. But most important was that I found a small group of friends, fellow apprentices—some of them shipfitters like myself, others shipwrights, machinists, pipefitters, sheet metal workers, etc.—who were young radicals, determined to do something to change the world. No less.

We were excluded from the craft unions of the skilled workers so we decided to organize the apprentices into a union, an association. We would act together to improve our working conditions, raise our pay, and create a camaraderie during and after working hours to add some fun to our workaday lives.

This we did, successfully, with 300 young workers, and for me it was an introduction to actual participation in a labor movement. We were organizing a union, and doing what working people had done through the centuries, creating little spaces of culture and friendship to make up for the dreariness of the work itself.

Four of us, who were elected as officers of the Apprentice Association, became special friends. We met one evening a week to read books on politics and economics and talk about world affairs. These were years when some fellows our age were in college, but we felt we were getting a good education.

Still, I was glad to leave the shipyard and join the Air Force. It was while flying combat missions in Europe that I began to have a sharp turn in my political thinking, away from the romanticization of the Soviet Union that enveloped many radicals and others too—especially in the atmosphere of World War II and the stunning successes of the Red Army against the Nazi invaders. The reason for this turn was my encounter with the aerial gunner on another crew who questioned whether the aims of the allies—England, France, the United States, the Soviet Union—were really anti-fascist and democratic.

One book he gave me shook forever ideas I had held for years. This was *The Yogi and the Commissar*, by Arthur Koestler. Koestler had been a communist, had fought in Spain, but had become convinced—and his factual evidence was powerful, his logic unshakable—that the Soviet Union, with its claims to be a "socialist" state, was a fraud. (After the war, I read *The God That Failed*, in which writers whose integrity and dedication to justice I could not

question—Richard Wright, Andrew Gide, Ignazio Silone, and Koestler too—described their loss of faith in the communist movement and the Soviet Union.)

Disillusionment with the Soviet Union did not diminish my belief in socialism, any more than disillusionment with the United States government lessened my belief in democracy.

It certainly did not affect my consciousness of class, of the difference in the way rich and poor lived in the United States, in the failure of the society to provide the most basic biological necessities—food, housing, health care—to tens of millions of people.

Oddly enough, when I became a second lieutenant in the Army Air Corps, I got a taste of what life was like for the privileged classes—for now I had better clothes, better food, more money, higher status than I had in civilian life.

After the war, with a few hundred dollars in mustering-out money and my uniform and medals packed away, I rejoined Roz. We were a young, happy married couple. But we could find no other place to live but a rat-infested basement apartment in Bedford-Stuyvesant.

I was back in the working class, but needing a job. I tried going back to the Brooklyn Navy Yard, but it was hateful work with none of the compensating features of that earlier time. I worked as a waiter, as a ditch-digger, as a brewery worker, and collected unemployment insurance in between jobs. (I can understand very well the feeling of veterans of the Vietnam war, who were <W0>important when soldiers, coming back home, with no jobs, no prospects, and without the glow that surrounded the veterans of World War II—a diminishing of their selves.) In the meantime, our daughter Myla was born.

At the age of 27, with a second child on the way, I began college as a freshman at New York University, under the GI Bill of Rights. That gave me 4 years of free college education, with \$120 a month, so that with Roz working part time, with Myla and Jeff in nursery, with me working a night-shift after school, we could survive.

Whenever I hear that the government must not get involved in helping people, that this must be left to "private enterprise," I think of the GI Bill, and its marvelous non-bureaucratic efficiency. There are certain necessities—housing, medical care, education, about which private enterprise doesn't give a hoot about (because supplying these to the poor is not profitable, and private enterprise won't act without profit).

Starting college coincided with a change in our lives: moving out of our miserable basement rooms into a low-income housing project in downtown Manhattan on the East River. Four rooms, utilities included in the rent, no rats, no cockroaches, a few trees and a playground downstairs, a park along the river. We were happy.

While going to NYU and Columbia I worked the four-to-twelve shift in the basement of a Manhattan warehouse, loading heavy cartons of clothing onto trailer trucks which would carry them to cities all over the country.

We were an odd crew, we warehouse loaders—a black man, a Honduran immigrant, another veteran of the war (married, with children, he sold his blood to supplement his small pay check). With us for a while was a young man named Jeff Lawson whose father was John Howard Lawson, a Hollywood writer, one of the Hollywood Ten. There was another young man, a Columbia College student who was named after his grandfather, the socialist labor leader Daniel DeLeon (I encountered him many years later; he was in a bad way mentally,

and then I got word that he had laid down under his car in the garage and breathed in enough carbon monoxide to kill himself).

We were all members of the union, District 65, which had a reputation of being a "left-wing" union. But we, the truck-loaders, were more left than the union, which seemed hesitant to interfere with the loading operation of this warehouse.

We were angry about our working conditions, having to load outside on the sidewalk in rain or snow, with no rain or snow gear available to us. We kept asking the company for gear, with no results. One night, late, the rain began pelting down. We stopped work, said we would not continue unless we had a binding promise of rain gear.

The supervisor was beside himself. That truck had to get out tonight to meet the schedule, he told us. He had no authority to promise anything. We said: tough shit. we're not getting drenched for the damned schedule. He got on the phone, nervously called a company executive at his home, interrupting a dinner party. He came back from the phone. "Okay, you'll get your gear." The next workday, we arrived at the warehouse and found a line of shiny new raincoats and rainhats.

That was my world for the first 33 years of my life—the world of unemployment and bad employment, of me and Roz leaving our two and three-year-olds in the care of others while we went to school or to work, living most of that time in cramped and unpleasant places, hesitating to call the doctor when the children were sick because we couldn't afford to pay him, finally taking the children to hospital clinics where interns could take care of them. That is the way a large part of the population lives, even in this, the richest country in the world. And when, armed with the proper degrees, I began to move out of that world, becoming a college professor, I never forgot that. I never stopped being class-conscious.

I note how our political leaders step gingerly around such expressions, how, it seems the worst accusation one politician can make about another is that "he appeals to class hostility...he is setting class against class." Well, class has been set against class, not in words, but in the realities of life, for a very long time, and the words will disappear only when the realities of inequity disappear.

It would be foolish for me to claim that class consciousness was simply the result of growing up poor and living the life of a poor kid and then the life of a hard-pressed young husband and father. There are many people with similar backgrounds who developed a very different set of ideas about society. And there are many others, whose early lives were much different from mine, whose world-view was close to mine.

When I was chair of the history department at Spelman College and I had the power (even a little power can make people heady) to hire one or two people, I invited Staughton Lynd, a brilliant young historian, graduate of Harvard and Columbia, to join the Spelman faculty. We were introduced at a historians' meeting in New York, where Staughton expressed a desire to teach at a black college.

Staughton came from a background completely different from mine. His parents were quite famous professors at Columbia and Sarah Lawrence, Robert and Helen Lynd, authors of the sociological classic *Middletown*. Staughton had been raised in comfortable circumstances, gone to Harvard and Columbia. And yet, as we went back and forth on every political issue under the sun—race, class, war, violence, nationalism, justice, fascism, capitalism, socialism and more—it was clear that our social philosophies, our values, were extraordinarily similar.

In the light of such experiences, traditional dogmatic "class analysis" cannot remain intact. But as dogma disintegrates, hope appears. Because it seems that human beings, whatever their backgrounds, are more open than we think, that their behaviour cannot be confidently predicted from their past, that we are all creatures vulnerable to new thoughts, new attitudes. While such vulnerability creates all sorts of possibilities, both good and bad, its very existence is exciting. It means that no human being should be written off, no change in thinking should be deemed impossible.