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Just Thinking, 01/13/03:

A New Chance for a Memory

by Justin Katz

A coworker from my dockworker days came to mind recently, and thoughts of him have persisted, although I've never placed him on the list of people who've made an unexpected, unacknowledged impression on me. It seems there's some personal observation, social lesson, or both that my mind has sensed, but that I've been unable to articulate. Lest phantom memories of Chris continue to follow me through my days, I thought it best to spend some time with them.

Chris was a broad, tough kid, already laboring at 17 and considering life as a commercial fisherman because the money was better than most of the other prospects that he had. Yet he was extremely friendly, with a face that often bore expressions indicating eagerness, interest, and openness. As hard a life as that in the fishing industry can be, and as undesirable as those who start adulthood from better positions might find it, the work was of great advantage to Chris.

His social position was such that *everything* depended on circumstances. With work – a regular, decently paying job – he was part of a community centered around a productive endeavor and could make his way to a satisfying life. Perhaps he'd meet a woman who would settle some of the bubbling aggression that I observed in him; perhaps he'd come across some way of making a living at which he excelled and that he found rewarding; perhaps he would find purpose in religion.

On the other hand, perhaps some escapade of his street-savvy life would go awry and send him in another direction. This is the central difference for the laboring class: fewer buffers, fewer fail-safes, and fewer repeat chances. Degrees of money, connections, and opportunities may all come down to that. The altruistic impulse, therefore, would be to put allowances in place for people in Chris's position, and that is the correct impulse to have. As long as it is tempered with some requirement from their end.

If "chances at life" came to mean, for Chris, a free ride, then he would have had no reason to continue pushing toward a career. The fishing industry is a rough one — early mornings, long days, exhausting labor. Still, such jobs, even where the potential for advancement is limited, can bring inward rewards in the form of work ethic and experience as a member of a diverse team with no option but to coordinate efforts. These lessons are essential to any attempt to reach a higher socioeconomic plateau, and those on the low, steep incline know it. Furthermore, they will foster that knowledge in each other because theirs are relationships as people, as equals.

A year or more after connections that I made at the university at which I was a student led me from the pier to a campus office, I found myself on line behind Chris at a local McDonalds, and there was a definite awkwardness between us. The cliché — and not a little arrogant — conclusion would be that society's class sensibilities put a wall between us, particularly were it revealed that Chris was Hispanic. Such boundaries may have played a role, but having spent so many long, tedious days among the dock crew, I'd suggest that his reaction was more likely the result of words spoken and jokes made after I'd left.

I can almost hear the cracks, and I know that they are natural to make about somebody who leaves hard work for easy work. "He couldn't cut it — a college boy, too busy reading poetry and balancing letters in equations." Perhaps Chris wondered whether I unjustly and incorrectly felt above them. Whatever the case, the point is that the awkwardness was more of a personal thing

than a class thing. It was about our one-on-one impressions of each other, even if social convention had some influence.

Of course, it is significant that I say this from better times, but I consider those years that were objectively more trying to have been among the most valuable of my youth. I will be able to mine the memories of circumstances and people for lessons throughout my life. Placing dramatically different epochs beside each other yields broader conclusions. How much it would improve society, I've mused, if it were woven into our culture that everybody spent compulsory time gaining the perspective that comes with working among different people — on their terms, not from a position as supervisor or with a charitable attitude. Only over the hours of shared experience do we begin to learn personalities and take an interest in them.

In college, the juxtaposition of lives was not a matter of years but was proximate, sometimes immediate. One bar-hopping night, I was standing with a fraternity brother when I felt myself lifted from the floor and heard a deep voice growling about a debt of beer. Quick laughter gave away that it was one of my fellow dockworkers in high spirits, a large man of African and American Indian descent. The whole gang was there, and my frat brother and I spent the evening in their company. I remember being a little embarrassed at the obvious tingle of excitement that he conveyed at being around earthy people, the vicarious feeling of toughness.

There was a time when I was prone to that feeling, as well, but by that point, at that time, I was merely enjoying sociable downtime with coworkers — friends. And it makes me chuckle to imagine the quips that might pass over the slick wet boards were those who tread them to discover the effect that they've had on me.