

March 30, 2026 Tales Seldom Told/Classism

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Classism is the systemic institutional, cultural and individual set of practices, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, systems and policies, that assign differential value to people according to their socioeconomic class and are set up to benefit the wealthy.

Despite the long-standing United States exceptionalist idea that our nation is different from others, the beginning of the United States colonies was not a utopian community of cooperation and equality.

Indigenous peoples, Black and brown people, and even European people were enslaved, were indentured servants, and were child laborers, all exploited at the hands of European and then United States businessmen to further increase their wealth. This wealth increase of a few by abusing others labeled powerless became the blueprint for the United States' exploitive capitalist economy. Wealth continues to be created by the impoverished and the working classes and as I said before with the wealthy reaping the biggest benefits. It is nearly impossible to escape these barriers of classism.

Classism has always existed in the United States, but there is a myth that the United States does not have an unjust system implying that everyone in the United States can pull themselves up by their bootstraps in order to overcome obstacles and succeed, gaining reward for their own individual merit. This is simply not true as historic and current disparities on the basis of race, sex, ethnicity, disability, and health can be traced to the structural injustices of class.

And class is a slippery subject in the United States. Commonly and easily, we frequently merge race and class, assuming all white people are middle class, and all people of color are working class or poverty class. An example: Believing someone lacks intelligence because they do not have a high-paying job or are unimportant because they wear cheap clothes are generalizations that are inaccurate.

Wealth amassment is upheld by false ideas of meritocracy, morality, and capitalism. This has a whole host of consequences, from lack of corporate leadership accountability to poor mental health to abandoning initiatives aimed at helping marginalized communities, again protecting the wealth potential of a few white people.

Naomi Winterfalcon

I wanted to talk about the connection between class and culture. I think we're taught to think about class in terms of economics, which is a small part of what class is about. But the whole culture that you grow up in is whatever class you are is different. I remember when I was 10, I was sent to camp because I really like horses, it was a riding camp, but it was also the first time I was ever with people who were upper class, I suppose, and that was a real lesson in just about everything. I was way too direct for them. There are a lot of things that just were completely different. They didn't like the way I ate. They didn't like the clothes I wore. I remember one time somebody was wearing these really fancy shoes and I started talking to him about his shoes. And there was another camper there who later when he was no longer in earshot, started to criticize me and said I should never have talked to him about his shoes. It just felt like a minefield, that there was absolutely nothing I could do right. I had no idea that going to this camp was going to be this completely foreign experience for me. I think it's important to understand that everything we do is within some kind of cultural context. It has to do with your sense of self, the ways that you are inculcated in your culture. My mother went to a particular church because it reminded her of her family. And it was socially very similar to her family. So she replicated that and my parents were very different. My mother was middle class, and my father was working poor. There's absolutely no connection between the two of them in lots and lots of ways. So I feel like I got pieces of both of their experiences and to understand different cultures. But the thing that I have learned and

had reinforced many times since then is that I am definitely not middle class or upper class. Every time I'm in a situation like that, I'm very aware of how much I don't fit in. I think that economics is important of terms of class, but it doesn't really describe the experience of what it means to be working class. I think one of the appeals of Trump is that he's much more direct and that he even though he has money now is from a working class background. So, I think that he is familiar to a lot of people who don't have privilege and they're sick to death of politicians that do have privilege that are polite and kind of backstabbing. I am not arguing at all that I think Trump is good, I'm just saying I think culturally, he's familiar and people assume that because he's direct, he's truthful, which is a mistake to assume. So that's what I wanted to contribute about, class and culture.

Sally Tatnall

As soon as you're born, you have identities, you become a sex, you're a girl, you become a race, you're whatever race you are, you become a class, you've maybe become a religion. You have no choice over that, that's just where you're starting. And in order for you to always feel like you belong, you will be trained around what expectations of those various identities are. That doesn't really change through your lifetime. As we get old, we're still rooted in that training. However, we have begun to look at things to say, oh wait a minute, that doesn't quite fit. And that's the journey that we're all on. So, the reason I'm saying this is because it's nobody's fault. You didn't make those choices. Those were made way, way long before you arrived, to keep you within the group that you belong to. My first experience with class difference was in sixth grade. My mother was a schoolteacher and she was upper class. She grew up in Attica, New York, I grew up in Buffalo, New York. Her father was a big deal, he was a police officer, they had money and my mother went to college which was unusual. But we grew up poor. So, my first experience in sixth grade was that there was a practice school in Buffalo at the state teachers college where people who went there became teachers that used this practice school to practice. So, since my mom was a teacher she got me tested so I could go to that school. That school actually functioned as a private school. I am 11 years old in this school, and I was aware of what others had that I didn't. For example, our teacher assigned us a report to give and when it came to give the report, the other kids would come in with articles from *National Geographic*, and they'd have little trinkets or something that would back up their report and I would just sort of hand in my handwritten report. So I was so aware that there was a difference, that it was a big difference. So, one of the ways in which I tried to deal with that difference and remember I'm only 11, I figured out if you wanted something, you had to get it somehow. How did you get it? You had to work. So, I began to sell cheerful cards door-to-door. Now let me tell you, in the 40s you could get away with that. Then when I'd get some money, I'd go and buy penny candy. Well, I got into a little bit of trouble because when it was time to send in the money to the Cheerful Card Company for the cards that I had bought from them I didn't quite have all of it so my mother had to back me up. As I look back on that, it was very clear that I think one of the so-called assumptions that working class and poor people have made about them is if you don't ever get extras, if you suddenly do get an extra you use it to get something you'd like. So that difference between saving and spending becomes very different along class lines. My next example is that I am at a gathering or a conference where they have big tables that you sit at to get your meals and stuff. At our table the breadbasket that they put out was muffins and my friend asked the waitperson, "Do you think I could get a bagel or something? I can't eat the muffins." Now I'm an adult, a big girl so I looked at her and I said, "Do you know how classist that is?" and she said, "What do you mean? I can't eat these muffins, they have sugar." I said, "I just want you to know that somebody who was raised working class or poor, it wouldn't even enter their mind to ask for something different, it just would not be there." To sort of have that reality, people ask for a lot, but we rarely do. And if we do, we're very careful about it.

I remember when I worked in New York State where you could start working at a regular job when you were sixteen, my girlfriend and I went to a business that served people at a counter, there weren't any tables. You were supposed to put your tips in the drawer, not allowed to keep your tips so we put them in our shoes. One day, I mean there's stuff that goes on in people's minds that fascinate me, the boss told us to take off our shoes and put the tips in the drawer. My friend and I were outraged and we went in the next day and quit. We told them that it was because it was so unfair. Now that's odd because we were getting money with the job, but there was just one level that we just couldn't stand. Another example that happened recently at the at large chapter of OLOC, they were going to have a discussion on travel, people were going to talk about where they had been and where they went. A woman asked if we could limit the travel to in the United States because she hadn't been out of the country to travel. I said that made sense to me, too. After that question was raised, several people had to defend being able to talk about travel out of the country. This is huge in terms of class distinctions. Because what happens, what I learned from this is people stick up for each other especially if they sense that somebody in their area might be getting challenged. Every time you'll find a lot what they are sticking up for is the privilege, it's that guarding against any attack against those who have. I also wanted to say something about money. The different classes look at money differently. Working class and poor people that do not have class privilege, if they want something they know they have to work for it - what do I want to spend my money on, how am I going to get the money to spend. People with a lot of class privilege look at money, look at the thing and say, is that worth my money, is what I'm getting worth that money. It's a subtle but a very clear difference. I remember in Cleveland in the 70s we developed a huge women's community and one of the things that we had was a production company that brought women singers to Cleveland. The ticket was five dollars and people would complain, what am I getting for that five dollars, but they'd spend forty dollars on a Michael Jackson concert. It's that kind of thing where people who have privilege are constantly guarding about whether or not they're going to have a problem and get into a situation that they don't feel is important. Another thing that I wanted to reference was the sort of difference between want and need. When you have class privilege, you pretty much kind of get what you want, you'll always have what you need but there are extras that are available. You grow up with that expectation. We grow up with the sense that I should be able to have that, whereas if you don't have that class privilege, you really don't, you don't ask, you don't assume that you're entitled. I remember again in Cleveland with all of the stuff that we did always had a sliding fee scale and that used to upset me because it would be people with class privilege who would ask for sliding scale and people who were poor didn't even bother to ask, they just didn't come. Again, it's that situation where class privilege means you'll ask, you'll assume you can ask and maybe get it. Without class privilege, you don't even ask. There are so many ways in which it's about money, but it's also about so much else, a way that we grew up, how we had to be, what we had to think, in order to belong to where we were and yet when you sort of get out in the world you find out. I want to go back to the woman who asked out travel in the United States - what happens when other people are defending the idea that people, that women should be able to talk about their vacations in wherever they went outside of the United States. What that does is erase both the woman who initially asked and me. That's a very subtle but important difference. When you're backing up your own opinion or backing up others, the impact is never your intention to inflict some of the stuff that happens. But the impact is that we're erased. That if we can't join at that level, we're erased, it's about whether or not I'm included or excluded.

Sandy Covahey

I'm going to try not to be theoretical about this, and to try to just be talking about my own life. What Sally said was something that I was thinking about, we don't choose our parents, we end up born into a situation, a race, a class, an ethnicity, whatever it happens to be, a country and then we have a set of identities, and religion. We have a set of identities, and we have a set of expectations for behavior. I was born the eighth child of my mother and father on the kitchen table at home in Lutherville, Maryland. No doctor. Years later, my mother told me that I almost killed her even though she had eight children and it was because I was a huge, big baby. Where I was born was primarily a wealthy area. There was a little strip of houses where I was with working class people and then behind my house was a little apple orchard and an acre of crops. All this land was owned by the farmer who lived across the street which was a major road. Then there were all these huge hedges and then the rich people lived behind there and right behind that there was a private girls school, and behind that was the railroad track used for commuting from Baltimore to Pennsylvania. Then behind that was the landed gentry horse farms where people with really serious money, in the Maryland Blue Book, old money lived. My parents divorced when I was three years old, which was a very odd thing in those days where I lived and my father got custody of the four of us who were still there which was also a very odd thing. The whole area was WASP (white Anglo-Saxon protestant) and we were catholic, although I was pretty nominal. So, I always knew that I was different in a whole lot of ways. My best friend lived next door and we ran around everywhere, I had more freedom with the fields and trees, streams and ponds and all these things happening. But I had no mother in my house. I had four older sisters, old enough to be my mother so I was basically raised by five part-time mothers. We never had a vacation, we never ate out anywhere, there were no books in my house, there was no music in my house. My father told wonderful stories from his Irish mother who was long dead. And what happened to me was I was happy. We were working class at that time and I was happy. I had all this love; I loved my parents, they loved me, life was good. I had what would be called neglect now, but I had freedom, so I just ran all over the place. I was a serious tomboy, an athlete, I had friends, life was good. But I always knew I was different. There were no other girls in my immediate area. There were some boys I hung out with. My brother taught me to play baseball, I played softball where there were two leagues in the county 9-11 years old league and 12-16 years old league. I was moved up to the 12-16 league. Years later I had a CAT scan and my doctor said, "How did you get all those broken ribs?" And I didn't know I had broken ribs which were from playing softball and getting injured. I didn't know because we didn't go to doctors, we were tough, we did not have money for doctors. And of course, dentists were out of the question, we just didn't do that. Because of softball I met all these prep school girls who lived in the big houses, who lived around in the area. When I was in fifth grade I finally met somebody who had divorced parents because everybody was in a nuclear family, I was never in a nuclear family ever. I met this guy in 6th grade who was a transfer student and he invited me back to his house. It was the very first time I had ever been in one of the big houses. They had big double doors, a huge staircase. When I met his mother she clearly was not pleased with me. We went into the kitchen, and of course they had a maid, and we had milk and cookies, which is what they did with the kids in those days. Two things fascinated me about his house, first one was they had huge oriental carpets and when you walked on them, they were squishy and second, when we got into the kitchen they had a back stairway. Through softball I became friends with all of these girls who had a lot of money, they had their own horses. When they were sixteen they didn't get their driver's license, they got their own cars too. It was a different world. We then ended up moving because they were selling the property. My father had rented that house for over thirty years, he didn't own it, nobody owned their houses in our little row. We moved far away and I was unhappy. When my sister left, it was just me and my father and I got in trouble. All these things

then happened, and I was told that I had to go stay with my mother who had remarried a man with money, and a surprise to her she had another child. I had to go stay with my mother until I had my court date and then I was supposed to go to reform school which was what they did with young girls who didn't behave in those days, I was twelve. What saved me was that I found a library nearby and I just started reading a book a day. I hated the whole world and everybody in it for a long time. My mother's husband had a heart attack and died. I lived there for a little less than eight years and not one person in that neighborhood ever said hello to me, spoke to me, or said anything to me ever. I would meet people on the street, and they would just walk right by. Before too long and this is what I really want to talk about today mostly because people don't talk about this, but I'm going to talk about it. What happened was that my mother ran out of money, there was no money. By that time I was in junior high school. Then a whole bunch of things happened in a row, sort of gradually and then it picked up steam but basically it was we had no food. Now what happens when you don't have food? Over time your body starts to actually eat itself and since I was an athlete still playing softball and other sports, I was all muscle and no body fat. So, what happened to me since we didn't have food over a long period of time, I became very malnourished and started losing muscle, because my body was eating muscle. That is what happens with poverty, when you're hungry so my athletic career got to be a little screwy with losing muscle and it also does things to your brain. We were eating weird things like fried bologna for dinner, cracker cereal which some people call saltines/little crackers where you put them in a bowl and add warm water that's cracker cereal. My lover's parents, the university professor had grown up in the depression, and his father had lost his business, so he had been poor for a while. So, they had this huge walk-in freezer in their basement and shelves of food, all kinds of stuff. So, what happens when you don't have something and you're in a poverty situation it is this combination of pride and shame, this little battle going on all the time. Nobody knew my situation even some of my family members didn't know. I told my lover and she was at my house a lot, so she knew so she started stealing food from her parents and bringing it to my house. Then eventually we both started stealing food. Her mother was a gourmet cook but since she worked, she also had some of the new fast food things like those cooking bags. So, I remember a Thanksgiving where we had one piece of white bread and a cooking bag, that was it. My mother smoked and my brother and I hated smoking and then I discovered what poor people have known forever and what the government has known forever. They used to give cigarettes out to the soldiers, put them in prisons to keep people calm and also, they cut down the hunger. You can really stave off hunger with cigarettes. So then life was moving along and they cut off the phone which just about killed me not being able to talk to my lover every day after school. Then the electricity went and that was difficult and then the heat went which was more difficult, it was an oil burner. So, what I discovered for myself was that I could cope with the lack of a lot of things but I really never learned to cope with hunger and cold at the same time. I still can't cope with those two things. I think the thing that people don't realize is that when people are hungry that is the focus. When you don't have money, the focus is how to survive, how are you going to survive, you have to function. You have to do things, work, go to school. You have to do whatever you have to do and it's really, really difficult to do. And when you're really, really hungry, that's what you think about most of the time, the fact that you're hungry, it sort of takes over your life. People have this idea about class and money and all of these different things, but it's a complicated situation, not a little tiny thing. I know some of the women that I knew back in the day who were quite wealthy, are now old lesbians and have no money. One of my old friends from back in that time period, I then sent her money all the time, which is so odd, but that's the way life works, things just happen and you never know.

Discussion

- One of the things that happens often is that as all lesbians get old because they have less money, they think they've changed their class and that is not true. Your class is what you grew up with, that's where you learned, what you could expect, what you needed to do, etc.
- I was very excited about coming to this session today because I grew up poor but I didn't understand like other people, other women have said. I didn't understand that I was poor until I got into an economics class or civics class where it was made very apparent that I was a poor person because I had very many people around me who were much poorer and we helped them. We always had food to share, we always had a bed for people to sleep in, and we always had people sleeping in the beds and at our table who were not direct family members. But one of the reasons that I identify so much with my working poor class is that I was ashamed for that, I felt the shame because in retrospect it was the things that people had said and the way I had been treated prior to understanding what poverty was. I really shut my mouth, stopped speaking up because I was ashamed. I was ashamed of who I was by what I was told about myself. I just recently finished watching a documentary on hillbilly America the Appalachian culture. I don't come from Appalachia but come from a part of the Catskills in New York that is very poor, but I identified with so much of what was being said in that documentary. The first thing that got me was the person doing the documentary and she was talking with her own family during Trump's first campaign, and they were all going to vote for Trump because he was going to bring back pride and dignity to the working people. And then her cousin or uncle talked about most of the people living there had never left except to go into the military or to go to college and they talked about the shock and shame they felt when they got out of their communities. They found out how people thought of them, the stereotypes that were supposedly legend about the laziness, drugs, drinking, teen marriages, or pre-teen marriages, marrying your cousin, whatever all those things were. The man talked about his experience in boot camp and started sobbing and I really identified with that level of shaming for being from an area that was not respected and being from a culture that was not good enough. And how we repeat that, how it's been stereotyped over and over and over. I just wanted to talk about how we spread our own bigotry, how it affects other people. I've had attitude towards people with money and people of other classes more than I've ever had an attitude about race. I want to change that about myself so much but I'm seventy-five and I haven't, eat the rich is how I feel and I don't like it, it's the truth of who I am from having been so ashamed.
- I would like to bring up the issue about those of us who were very active lesbians in the second wave of the women's movement. As we met with other women of diverse backgrounds, we sat in meetings, we were parts of collectives, we were in support of groups and working groups, and we were dealing with the issues of violence against women. But whenever someone was brave enough to bring up class so often it was seen as divisive. It was seen as someone stopping the forward movement of the goals of the group, it was painful. And the individuals who were brave enough to bring up class in the context of what we were working on and how we were relating to each other were incredibly courageous and mostly did not get the support that she needed to do that. I learned a lot. I'm not going to talk about my class background because I wanted to hear from others, maybe if you want to talk about memories of your activism or being in the second wave movement and with being with women and having the issue of class brought up and how that felt and how that was seen as divisive. One woman in the theater group I was in, we were founding mothers, she grew up very poor and she was white. She got pregnant deliberately, she was a lesbian and she brought up the issue that poor women even educated, and feminists assumed that if you were poor, you should not get pregnant. You had no right to bring any children into this

world, none which leads one to think who has the right to bring children into this world. I'd encourage the others on this Zoom I'd love to hear more about your memories of the 70s, 80s, and 90s when class would come up whether you were poor, working class, middle class, or upper class, how did that land on you in those days of our activism.

- I wanted to go back to the last thing Sally said that really touched me, yes we are born to our class and you cannot turn your back to it, you cannot say I renounce that, that's no longer my class and she is absolutely correct. You are born to your class and that's what it is and there's no point in trying to change that. You need to try to understand it. But also talking about shame. In my elementary school, some of us are still in touch and we talk about how we never knew we were poor until we went to high school. All the different things went together, we just didn't know that at all and then we learned. But for me, it was because I was chosen to be a token. During that time there were different things about tokenism, to prove that everything is equitable so you have to pull some people out and say, see these people can make it, they just have to work. It's not a matter of who works the hardest, it's who was chosen and so I was chosen. Part of that is also it creates shame not only in yourself but shame for your ancestors, for your parents, shame for all of your family. It took a while because I bought right into it and so I needed to change the way I talked, lose the accent, change my vocabulary and try to change the way my parents talked and it's really insidious. I did get past that and sort of learned to have a lot of pride in my family and what they had done and accomplished for generations. Shame is a big weapon.
- I am really glad for Naomi for talking about mixed class background because I come from a mixed class background where my mother had gone to college and came from a middle class family and my father was totally working class. I grew up in a working class suburb, a suburb where everybody there thought that because they lived in one of the first suburbs of tract houses that they were really lower middle class, but everybody, all of the fathers had working class jobs. And that was my elementary school and then when I went to high school the woods around had become much wealthier homes, but I did not understand that it was about class. I could not figure out what was wrong with me that nobody liked me. I wanted to say about the women's movement in the 70s, I feel like a lot of us used class as a club against each other in a way that I feel kind of ashamed about because at least where I was the working class women and I identified as one. I didn't understand my mixed class background at that time. We really used it against wealthier women, and I just wanted to acknowledge that. But I come from mixed class, and I have white privilege and I ended up not finishing college and ended up within ten years of then finding a way to get into the welfare system so that I could work as a political activist in unpaid jobs. And that's basically what I've done most of my adult life so that I've lived a life that is not like most of the other lesbians around me who have more money because being in the welfare system, you never make that much money obviously. I was actually the one who said that about international travel, that I wanted to just hear about travel in this country because the truth is, I have never traveled internationally because it's not a possibility in my life, period. I do take advantage of sliding scales because I don't have the money to pay for more expensive stuff and I don't feel shame about that. I'm glad that everybody brought something that was interesting to me. I'm glad that Sandy brought up hunger because I was hungry as a young college student at a state university because that is all my parents could afford about \$250 semester which is amazing to me now. But I was hungry and I would go into the college cafeteria and where people had left plates on the table, I would sit down and eat their leftovers that they didn't eat. And to this day, it really irks me to see women in restaurants leaving food, sending back food. I have at times take care of an Airbnb for my landlady and the amount of food that gets thrown out by people who stay there is not really surprising to me because I know

that people with privilege and money do that. It does help me with food because I go through the trash and pull out things that they've thrown out.

Chat comment: We have a common work history. I also chose the welfare system so I could work with poor women and children. I also know how to make lots of good food from trash.

- I want to respond to class in the 70s and stuff. I just remember going out on a date with this woman, it was a first date, and I had to stop for gas and she asked what class I was. I said both my parents were factory workers and she said oh my god, you're working class and you could have anything you want in the women's movement. That's how she reacted. When I was living in Seattle, I was in an organization where we kept throwing fundraisers and the sliding scale bit drove me nuts because I knew who was getting it and who wasn't getting that break on the price. It took me a long time to recognize class differences and class stuff to find where I was. I didn't know where I was. I got involved in socialist organization and they said you're middle class, but you could support the working class. It's the kind of thing misidentifying even though I was kind of looking around for things, how it affected me a lot. I'm a very quiet person and I feel like I'm not very articulate, especially in groups, a bunch of people are talking and that I never ever am able to get words in, it wasn't encouraged in my house to talk. I wasn't encouraged to go to college, they really didn't want me to go to college, but I wasn't a very good student. I was then dealing with being out of a very restrictive house and being a lesbian, trying to study and what was I going to do, I didn't know. But that's about when I started learning about class and it's when I'm surrounded by a lot of these really articulate women that I admire and I still do that.
- I got in the women's movement really early and I was in Baltimore where most of the feminists were socialists and straight. I was a lesbian and not a socialist so that was an odd thing, and I was much younger than most of the women I knew. Socialists then were all about organizing the working class, that was a major theme and I heard it all the time. Then there was also this whole thing in the 70s of downward mobility. Women were traveling all over the country and so it was hard to tell what a woman's class background was, except for teeth which I always looked at immediately. That was my big tell because women were trying to look like they were working class. In the Baltimore and the feminist movement and the women's movement there was all these women who came out as lesbians after the women identified woman, the straight women came out. There was this huge class war here and it was bad. For me, it was particularly bad. I wrote about this a long time ago, but what happened was at the time it started, I was involved with one of those rich women from a wealthy background. The working class group had decided they were going to boycott the middle class women and not have anything to do with them anymore. There was a big meeting that I had heard about ahead of time, that I didn't agree with. At the meeting, all the working class women left and I stayed with my lover. One of the middle class women said to me, "What do you think about all this?" I didn't want to talk about all of that then in the group, so I had to leave. My lover and I were seriously pressured from all sides to break up because there was this little class thing. So we became sort of away from the women's community. What I found out later because I ended up becoming lovers with one of the women who was in the planning group for the working class who had walked out that a couple of the women in that group manipulated the entire thing to get a printing press, to manipulate the middle class women. There was a lot of that going on in those days. In my experience in life, women will use whatever they have, if they have a certain mindset about wanting to have power, to use it.
- From the chat: what is the definition of working class, middle class. What's the difference? Some responses have a number on it, amount of money. The others said that the middle class could buy a house, the working poor could pay rent, and the poor received welfare. It really

revolves around what you believe, you have access to, and what you have to do to get it. Working class and working poor all understand that whatever they need, they've got to work for it. In this culture, it's fine to have that ethic but then you have to deal with the fact that you can't find a job. There are just different expectations. If you can buy a home, if you can pretty much have what you want, and you develop what you want, and you'll ask for what you want. That's in the middle class to upper class range. If you looked at my parents they were both middle class and in fact my mom was upper class from a farm community, but we had no money. The family was supported by my mother as a teacher. We just knew that if we wanted something, we had to work for it, and it was better just not to want, just don't even ask.

From the chat: I just read a post from a woman who moved to England and had a shock learning the difference between the middle class there and in the US. It is subjective. Middle class meant working people who could buy a house. Working poor could pay their rent. Poor received welfare. There was a Social Science study that asked a number of Americans what was the range that indicated that one was "Middle Class"? Interestingly, the range was between \$35,000 to \$250,000. This study was done in the early 2000s. That's quite a stretch of income

- I was born into a very middle class family, but both my parents came from very poor, working class farms. It was very clear to me growing up and very clear to me right away. My grandparents didn't have running water but there's a real difference between city poor and country poor. Country poor at least in my experience, we never went hungry because a lot of work was put into raising and canning, preserving food. My parents didn't have anything else besides food growing up. Sally, I really appreciate what you said about work because with growing it was a big issue with my father. Work is what he respected, and he didn't care about your sex, your race, your religion, if you were willing to work, then you were a good person. If you weren't willing to work, then you were not worth as much as someone who was willing to work. We all grew up with that as a very strong ethic.

Panel Question: What did you get from this discussion?

- I would say one big thing I got is there's lots of ways, lots of different ways of being working class. My background is also working class but very different. I had no idea I was working class because everybody in Jewish Brooklyn, New York was exactly like me. My dad was a cop, my mom never worked outside the home, and I didn't really learn about class until I went away when I got a scholarship to an Ivy League school. That was really the first time that people of a vastly different class came into my life. So, it is great to hear people's different experiences of their upbringing, of their class, of who they were identified as, and as who they think of themselves as. I appreciate it and for all of you doing this. Thank you.
- What you learn in your class is your culture and it doesn't matter how much money or which class you end up in. And it doesn't matter how much money or which class you end up in. I ended up at a very prestigious women's college and I'm still working class. So, no matter where you go, there you are.
- What came up in this discussion for me was shame came up. I have been ashamed of my class my entire life. I was born into an upper class milieu (social setting or environment) - my parents, my grandparents, great grandparents. The family fell apart with extreme dysfunction, divorce, alcoholism, abuse, I could go on and on. My mother raised us from the time I was nine years old

when my parents got divorced and my father never supported us. Both of them had dropped out of college to marry each other, neither of them thinking that they were going to have to figure out a way to earn a living realistically in this world. We had a tough time with my mother having three little girls with no education beyond high school other than a couple years of college which was nothing. So, I was hungry. We had a house, we had a gardener because my mother had to keep up appearances, but we didn't have enough food. My mother went to a dressmaker to alter her dresses that she got from her wealthier friends from her former life, and we still never went on a vacation. I came out as a lesbian when I fell in love with my best friend in school and I was seventeen years old. I left home and was a persona non grata, I was on the streets. I spent years being ashamed. I was in the women's movement, the peace movement and the civil rights movement. I spent years being ashamed of the classes and I was beginning to understand that I came from. I didn't understand anything about class, no one talked about it, no one explained anything. I had no money but I want to say that because of the class I was born into and whatever I learned implicitly from that before I left home and worked less than blue collar jobs, I was able to fit in places without even really understanding the dynamics of how it worked, that could put me back into the class I came from. Without understanding that, I was able to get an education without help from anybody. I went to college when I was twenty-five years old and worked as a cook for minimum wage in order to put myself through college. In retrospect, I'm retired and I'm old and see that even though all my life I had shame and tried to repudiate the class I came from because I thought it was unfair that some had that and others didn't. I still was privileged by that in addition to my whiteness, I had whatever that is, that I was exposed to that enabled me to survive in places I wouldn't otherwise have been able to.

- I think one way of looking at the difference between being middle class and working class is like the difference between my parents. My mother had a long family history and my father had nothing, he didn't even know where his family was and nothing beyond. My mother went to college, my father finished the sixth grade. The message we got from my mother was that we would go to college and for my father, he wasn't going to pay for it. I also think my mother was downwardly mobile, she was a Quaker and was very solidly middle class and could afford to be downwardly mobile because she'd had this whole period of time when she belonged culturally, learned to see herself as being valuable. My father never had that, he had to really fight for the little bit that he had. So, I think that confidence, that sense that you belong is very important. And when I'm in situations with people who are upper class or middle class they have it much more than I do. I've worked really hard to have my own sense of my own value. I think I've changed a lot in that sense, but I've never gotten to the point where somebody who is upper class or middle class. This is an ongoing question, but I think it's an important one.
- One of the things is working class and poor have more of a community view than a "me" view. Working class/unions, the poor communities stick together. When you get up into the middle class and upper class, it's more what are you doing, where are you as an individual. I've seen this many times, let your money work for you, that's a common strategy. I have no relationship with, but this country is run on a middle class, upper class value system so it's very hard for us to talk about how that leaves us out in a very real way, particularly talking about class today. But this is true with race, true in all the ways in which there are oppressors, they do the same kind of stuff, they make you feel like you're not included, make you feel like you're invisible, and that happened in the women's movement with me. I am trying to explain how I'm different. I don't want to feel shame about it,

and mostly at this point, I don't, I'm too old. But at the same time, we have to acknowledge the ideas and the behaviors that we grew up with that sort of identified how we belong, and trying to mix that up requires a lot of thought and a lot of trying to figure it out. I think that's one of the ways in which this country is difficult because it is hard to define yourself outside of the American way. Somebody will say, well I did that too, thinking that made them something, well maybe not.

- It struck me that in terms of answering the question is how much shame runs through our culture from the spectrum of classes and what was said about coming from a class and feeling ashamed because I've heard that from a number of folks who have come from wealthy classes then the shame that often is more associated with coming from lower classes. I just wanted to share an experience I had, I've been aware of it for quite some time. I went to graduate school after having a career, so I was 40 years old when I went back to school, grad school. I will never forget this, I was at UC Santa Cruz and there was a feminist scholar who came to our program and this place was packed, intense, people lining up outside the doors to hear - it was bell hooks. But then two weeks later Dorothy Allison, who wrote at the time, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, came to the same place, brought there by the same organization and no one was there except for me and a few other people. I was blown away because I did not understand, could not understand why it wasn't packed because her book was a bestseller, where were all the feminists? They weren't there. The shame is something I think we all need to look at because shame is so pervasive. It's pervasive in communities of color. I'm hearing that in a way I hadn't heard among most of you here.
- You were asking what people learned, or were getting out of all the different views, so to me it was that the views were very different. I think that I've been accustomed in both feminist and lesbian circles and hearing especially about class a more monolithic view that everything is just general and that we seem to feel that everyone has the same factual knowledge. We're hearing that people have very, very different experiences and those experiences really affect your culture. And I'm back to the same thing, I'm just so happy to hear people say that you're born into your class that it's not something that you choose. To me, that's one of the reasons that I can remember in college at one point basically being applauded when I finally came out and said, "That just because someone born with money didn't mean that they were evil." Because in the 70s, it seemed to be a mark that you couldn't undo, you had the mark of your parents. It was that if you were born into money, you could spend your life doing penance, but it would never do any good, you could never be worthy to be a leader. I'm hearing people have lots of different views and different experiences.
- We really don't choose our parents, we really don't choose any of these circumstances that we end up in. I finished college when I was thirty-five years old, so I have a college degree. One of the things that I learned was to slide back and forth between classes. I have friends who are so different from me and I really, really, really appreciate differences, difference of race, class, ethnicity, nationality. Those are all really important to me, to be able to deal with and talk and have friends who are not like me. One of the things that I have tried to do in my life is to get rid of those negative things like shame, like guilt, like hatred that weighs us down, that this culture teaches us from right and left, and tries to reinforce in every way possible. It has really helped me. What one person said really had a big impact on me because I don't hate anyone, I don't feel badly about women who grew up with a lot of privilege. What I'm interested in is actions, how people act, what they do in the world, not how they grew up, or other things about them that are different from me.

- From the Chat: We have to choose to be better than we have been in how we perceive others.

Continue this discussion through additional sessions? Have a different type or the same panel type?

Majority raised their hands yes.

- This was a good discussion, and I think it could go on many more times.
- We have many different experiences, and we should share those experiences more.
- Class and culture
- Shame: Shame is one of the biggest ways class is perpetuated.
- I'd like to see us do this topic again in two months or so. This is a very compelling subject for so many reasons.
- I hope we have this talk again.
- A good film to watch is "A Lottery of Birth".
- I think it would be interesting to discuss today and living in a mixed class relationship.
- I really would like to talk more about the women's movement and class in the past and now
- I agree that talking of women's movement and class then and now would be interesting.