

## *A Class Action Book Summary*

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### **Alfred Lubrano: LIMBO: Blue Collar Roots, White Collar Dreams (Wiley, 2004)**

Summary by Chuck Collins, Senior Fellow, Class Action

“Limbo” is a terrific book about the class “straddling” experience. “Straddlers” are people who grow up in the working class who find themselves in the middle class as adults. Through personal narrative, interviews and research, “Limbo” describes the pain and confusion people experience as they what journey from working-class origins to middle-class jobs and standards of living.

Alfred Lubrano is the son of a bricklayer who grew up in the working class neighborhood and culture of Bensonhurst in Brooklyn. He went to Columbia University as a commuter student at the same time his dad was working on a construction job on campus. He is currently a journalist at the Philadelphia Daily News.

Lubrano’s own assessment of his upbringing: “I will always love aspects of blue-collar culture that live on in me—the whatever-it-takes work ethic, the lack of pretense, people’s forthright manner—but working-class Brooklyn could be crowded and mean.... We lived so close and tight, we could hear arguments and lovemaking, squalling babies, and the disapproving squawks of meddling in-laws.... There was the surfeit of anger and fear and alcohol. Men’s jobs were hard and sapping. Women’s afternoons with babies were long and relentless.” (p. 14)

**Chapter 1 “Bricklayer’s Son”** discusses the Straddler experience. Many Straddlers are the first in their families to attend school. For those who go on to work in academia, the Straddler experience is even more bizarre: “working class raised professors teach the children of privilege how to “become the bosses of their parents, siblings, cousins, and childhood friends.” (p. 3)

Labrano describes the importance of what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls “cultural capital.” It’s the edge that more privileged kids pick up—knowledge of art, high culture, travel, knowledge of the world, and social networks.

Straddlers who choose middle-class professions that pay less than blue-collar work encounter the consternation of their families and friends (“Are you nuts?”). This violates what Lubrano calls “Blue collar rule #1,” which is “Make as much money as you can, to pay for as good a life as you can get.” (p. 12)

White Straddlers will say that racism was one of the first things that separated them from their friends. Because they did not share the prejudice, they felt out of rhythm with the neighborhood vibe.” (p. 15)

Lubrano’s description of “blue color values:” (p. 17)

- Well-developed work ethic
- Respect for your parents
- Need for close contact with extended family
- Open and honest manner devoid of hidden agenda
- Loyalty: a sense of solidarity with people you live and work with;
- An understanding and appreciation of what it takes to get somewhere in a hard world where no one gives you a break;
- A sense of daring
- A physicality that’s honest, basic and attractive

Straddlers find “resentment toward the middle class is never far below the surface.”

Interview with Jim Neal: “You just don’t find a hell of a lot of arrogant working-class people. And blue-collar people say what they mean. In the end, I avoid people with a sense of entitlement. Until you’ve had hard times, you’re not a complete person. And if you’ve never had them, well, a whole hunk of you is missing.” (p. 18)

“If you can get through college without having to work at some outside job or take out loans, for example, that says you did not know privation, and that, in turn, says something about you and your class. If your parents gave you the down payment on your house (Straddlers often hate hearing this one), that tells us something about you as well.” (p. 19)

Straddlers observe big differences in children rearing: middle-class kids are allowed some say and voice in their upbringing while working-class kids develop within a strict, authoritarian world. Experts say kids from authoritarian homes do less well in school. Hamilton College sociologist Dennis Gilbert: “The parent who stresses obedience over curiosity is championing the values of the working class, and helping to keep their kids in it.” (p. 20)

Psychologist and Straddler Barbara Jenson observes that working-class and middle-class cultures are based on different foundations. For the working class, it is loyalty to family, union, and community. For the middle class, it is individual achievement.

One interviewee observes: “Regarding racism, everyone is guilty. Minority Straddlers will say the working class is overt in its prejudices, while the middle class is surreptitious, devious, and hypocritical. Ultimately, writes social critical bell hooks, blacks fear poor and working-class whites more because, historically, they have acted out their hatred in more violent forms.” (p. 22).

Straddler parents are telling them: “Don’t be like me.” “What does that make a father feel like, to have to instruct his son not to be like the old man?” (p. 27)

**Chapter 2: Crawling Out of the Black Hole**, relates several interviews for those who had a tougher start than Lubrano. Black hole families are ones that Straddlers have to escape to survive. This includes immigrant families that won't allow daughters to get higher education and families mired in addiction. Lubrano reflecting on the Italian experience: "They needed American for its opportunity, but despised it for its perceived weaknesses—its promiscuity, its multiculturalism, and its lack of recognizable tradition." (p. 41)

### **Chapter 3 –Shock of Education: How College Corrupts**

College is where Straddlers encounter "status dissonance" and a clash with parental values and attitudes about race, religion, open-mindedness, vocation, and avocation. Four-year college really shakes people up. "The best predictor of whether you're going to have problems with your family is the distance between your education and your parents." (p. 48)

As children, many Straddlers are academic standouts. They pay attention in class, read books, and go to the library. "Instead of "staying put, working in construction, getting into their fathers' trade unions" they go to college, leave home. (p. 51) They encounter peer pressure to put the books down, not "act so smart," etc. "Educators have long understood that minority children have these problems, says one Lubrano interview subject. "But they rarely understand or see that working-class white kids have similar difficulties." (p. 55)

"To lots of blue-collar moms and dads, college is simply a crowbar to pry money out of some corporation so the kid can have a better deal in life. But blue-collar parents can't know how college can change someone...College makes one understand there is no single way to look at things. That can be an unwanted revelation in a blue-collar place, where the rules are pretty much cast in concrete, and the primary colors are black and white." (p. 59)

What Straddlers gain and lose: "The strange thing about getting an education and piercing a class level higher than your parents is you gain a better lifestyle, money, status, but you lose your family." (p. 70). "No one wants to hear about what you've given up to join the middle class. You still agonize about what was lost? Tough. The middle class doesn't care. After all, you volunteered to leave your background behind." (p. 82)

### **Chapter 4 "Culture Conflicts: First Encounters with the Upper Class."**

This chapter is full of painful "first encounter experiences," that starkly describe the class differences that Straddlers confront. One person, Dana, describes how his parents always disapproved of rich people. "The rich, Dana's father told him, have no morals, and family means nothing to them. As a result, their children turn out badly. People with too much money get drunk, get divorced, and don't pay the medical bills when their parents get sick." (p. 79).

Straddlers are often the first members of their families to go to college. At college, they have to work, while the rich kids play. The wealthy students can volunteer for enriching unpaid internships and study semesters abroad. This gives them compound advantages. The Straddlers are all business when it comes to studying, as they've worked hard to be where they are—or family members have sacrificed for them. (p. 103)

“It's not that middle-class kids don't have issues in school, Straddlers and experts say. There are problems of self-esteem; there's drug abuse; there are adjustments that must be made. But middle-class students are doing something their parents did, something for which their parents could prepare and coach them. College is not such a leap from reality as the family knows it. However, it takes gutsy resolve for first-generation college kids to get there and stay there.” (p. 89)

Labrano tells an amazing story of being at Columbia University with a self-assured upper-class guy who, during a journalism seminar, critically rips into the editor of *Time Magazine*. To Labrano, it was a great example of upper-class fearlessness and entitlement; no deference to authority. He realizes, “I could never do what Tom did.” (p. 92). Many years later, a Columbia professor explains to Labrano “you didn't bring the same cultural capital to the reading as he did.” Though we read many of the same books, they resonated differently in our heads. More than likely, Tom had many more experiences to which he could relate the reading...accumulated more varied reference points from things his parents told him, or things he was exposed to as a young man in a family of resources—foreign countries, different foods, alternate ways of thinking, and a comforting sense that his was the right and proper way.” (p. 93)

There are occasional cases of “lower-class chauvinism” and “working-class superiority”—confidence that is rooted in knowing the strengths of working class culture and the weaknesses of middle and upper class cultures. Some come to appreciate the experience of “meritocracy”—getting ahead because of hard work and not inherited advantages. As one Straddler observes, “others were part of the aristocracy—very WASPy breeding stock, handsome, debonair, and polished. I got there in spite of my parents' poor educations. In my own snobbish way, I felt superior. I was the tough kid at medical school.” (p. 95)

Straddler observations about old wealth versus new wealth: “Old money had its own enclaves, of course, far from the just-made-it millionaires whose jewelry rattled a bit too loudly.” One woman described working as a waitress at a fancy club where she was mistreated by the nouveau riche. Old money was easier to deal with: “The rich treat you well, if they are secure in themselves. “The rich have a few things in common with the working class, when it comes to that pesky fork question. Truly wealthy folks don't have to know which is the proper utensil to use; they can wield ice-tea spoons to eat their Welsh rarebit, and people will call them colorful. Working-class people don't know; the seriously loaded don't care. Only the middle class and middle-class wannabes seem to fret.” (p. 101)

**Chapter 5 “Going Home”** tells moving stories about the dual lives of Straddlers that emerge when they return home to family and childhood friends. For some, this is a wrenching experience, reminding them of the two worlds in which they live.

“Middle-class kids are groomed to fly away, and they do. The working class likes to keep its young close to home. Those who drive 600 miles west are the odd ones.” (p. 108). This really comes up in jobs where working class folks are asked to relocate away from roots. “Middle-class life can include frequent relocation, that creates still more problems for workers from blue-collar backgrounds, who traditionally live closer to extended family and feel a cultural obligation to remain nearer the clan.” (p. 131)

**Chapter 6 “Office Politics: The Blue Collar Way”** talks about the Straddler experience in the workplace. “American corporate culture is based on WASP values, whether or not WASPs are actually running the company. Everything is outwardly calm and quiet. Workers have to be reserved and unemotional, and must never show anger. Its uptight, maybe even unhealthy...” (p. 130).

Getting along with people becomes one of the most highly valued workplace skills, but it requires a lot of suppressing your real feelings and reactions. Advancement is less about meritocracy and more about fitting in and getting along. There is an endless meeting culture with people who think meetings are work (which seems bizarre to working-class people).

“Lots of blue-collar people are taught as kids that boasting and self-promotion and credit hogging are wrong and unseemly; but that’s precisely what’s needed to succeed in the office, as long as it’s deftly and subtly done. Got that? Good. I never have.” (p. 139).

Is there working-class cultural capital? Barbara Jensen observes, “some blue collar people do network each other. But it’s fairly low-key stuff, like one drywall guy asking another if he’s heard of any jobs. It’s colleagues asking colleagues; nobody crosses any peer lines to hunt down opportunities.” (p. 144)

A big difference is over the idea of inviting coworkers for dinner, a more middle-class white-collar notion. “Straddlers say they find it distasteful in the extreme to invite people they don’t like or trust into their dining rooms and kitchens for a bit of work-related conviviality. In working-class culture, anyone who eats at the table is part of the tribe. Strangers—superiors from work especially—have no place there.” (p. 147) Middle-class spouses are expected to help build their partner’s career through helping host social events.

“Often enough, middle-class colleagues assume that you’re just like them, that you view life the same way, and that you’ve enjoyed a similar background. But because Straddlers have journeyed from the working class, they are in a distinct position to notice what the what the middle class may not recognize: its class-bestowed privileges.” (p. 149)

“[Straddlers] in white collar America feel like a basketball team that’s perpetually on the road, never playing before the home crowd and always dribbling on someone else’s court. What’s more, they have to adhere to unfamiliar rules and generally play the game in a way no one explained before.” (p. 149)

White Straddlers have mixed feelings about affirmative action; “...they believe America is blind to the needs of the white working class.” (p. 159) Labrano writes: “Growing up among hard-working blue collars, I’d always heard people complain that they were getting shafted in favor of African Americans. I’ve tried to tell them, you see a black person you say is unqualified getting ahead, but you never talk about the dead white wood that’s been hired and promoted for God knows what reason.” (p. 160)

“Race and gender have had, and continue to hold, our attention. In doing so, minorities and woman have, in effect, disallowed the white working class to be able to say that its part of an oppressed group.... With labor in disarray in this country, there is no class equivalent of the NAACP or the National Organization of Women. More fundamentally, there is no unified sense of class kinship that can be harnessed into a public voice for the rights of the working class. As a result, things probably won’t change anytime soon.” (p. 161)

Chapter 7 looks at “**Class, Love and Progeny: The Ultimate Battle.**” Being partnered across class lines presents all kinds of challenges. And raising children who essentially are middle class can be painful, as they have none of the positive experiences of working class-raised Straddlers.

In art and cinema, there are lots of Cinderella myths, of “love conquering class differences between people with uneven pedigrees.” (p. 167) Differences that might emerge in “mixed class” love partnerships include:

- Attitudes towards vacations. Straddlers want down time. Middle-class want “mind-expanding” educational and recreational adventures.
- In communication, “working class people are more likely to believe someone who shows emotion when he talks,” observes Barbara Jenson, who does counseling with couples from different class backgrounds. (p. 168.)
- On parenting: “Bill Cosby once joked that the first rich kids he ever met were his own.” (p. 181). Class differences emerge in approaches to child rearing. Middle-class assumptions about future orientation, college, and entitlement get passed on by middle-class parents. Straddlers wonder, “Where’s the struggle?” They think its good if there kids work for their college education, instead of getting it handed to them.

One interview subject, Joe, commented there is “no foolproof way to avoid a sense of entitlement in children, except to constantly remind them not to take for granted the stuff

they have.... I think about the danger of having your kids grow up and not know what it's like to put in a hard day's work." (p. 184)

One Straddler dad, Ed, worried that money would soften his son and rob him of the blue-collar drive and ambition he possessed. But he reflected: "Although toughness is usually a good thing, an awful lot of self-centered aggressiveness comes with it. Matthew doesn't have any of that. He's not selfish. And that's good." (p. 187)

One father worked to avoid "spoiled brat syndrome" by practicing a sort of segregation, keeping kids away from the offspring of upper-class parents...staying away from clubs and elite associations.

### **Chapter 8: "Duality: The Never-Ending Struggle with Identity"**

"Ideally, a Straddler becomes bicultural: Understanding what made you who you are, and learn to navigate the new setting.

Labrano tells the story of how he resented "DQs –dressage queens" and rich kids with horses. But thanks to love, he is married to a woman who breeds and raises horses. "To me, horses have always been symbols of the rich. Now, I must reconcile the irreconcilable and deal with being a guy from the working class who owns slick and lovely hay-burners. I hate the idea that some people in our area think I'm well-to-do. In their eyes, I am the kind of guy I grew up blindly disliking and mistrusting." (p. 196)

Barbara Jensen notes that some Straddlers have a "survivor's guilt." Others feel shame in admitting their working class roots "because its not safe." "There is great contempt from the upper classes. There's an assumption that you're dumb." (p. 200)

Lubrano describes those who have handled the duality with some ease and perspective (pp. 202-204). But they are the exceptions in smooth transitions. One Straddler, after going to her high school reunion, reflected that her old friends are held back by fear: "People stay blue collar, she thinks, because they're afraid to move out of the neighborhood, go to college, and build new lives." (p. 207)

Lubrano talks about some employers who seek Straddlers: "they like the combination of book and street smarts and use it to advantage." (p. 213).

Straddlers often find each other. "Limbo folks are drawn to people like themselves." They connect with their experience. "They are the ones who moved beyond the original neighborhood folks intellectually and culturally, and now enjoy classical music, goat cheese, literary novels, and movies in which nothing explodes. But they retain a raft of working class characteristics, and a kind of pugnacious resistance to a full embrace of white-collar life. They've picked and chosen the characteristics they believed were right for them from both collar groups." (p. 216).

Some Straddlers lament that the transition from working class to white collar cost them their families: “I can’t talk to them.” “There’s nothing to say when we get together.” “They don’t like who I’ve become.” (p. 218)

Lubrano reflects on his own bricklayer dad, who spends a lot of time at the doctor dealing with the wounds of his working class jobs: “...his body all at once collecting on a bill. The tonnage he’s lifted brings night pains that interrupt sleep.” (p. 222) Great description of his telling his dad about a repetitive strain injury he has (a common occupational hazard for journalists). He says his dad was “half right when he predicted I’d need a professional to come over and hammer a nail into a way for me.” He can do minor chores: but for tougher jobs, he has to call others.

“The times that I have to summon workers bristling with tools to come and fix something that’s well beyond my capabilities make me feel rotten and low. These I call my tiny-manhood days. When blue-collar fixer guys are around, I try to stay out of their way and hope they leave quickly.” (p. 222)

## **Conclusion**

“For Straddlers, life’s ultimate goal is reconciliation: finding peace with the past and present, blue collar and white, old family ways and the new middle class life.”

“Straddlers can take pride in a resilience born of relative deprivation.” (p. 226)

“Limbo folks can consider themselves fortunate if they can be upwardly mobile but still rooted in the blue collar world. Peaceful reconciliation comes to us when we can finally meld the two people we are.” (p. 227, last sentence of the book.)