

CROSS CLASS DIALOGUE

Cross-Class Dialogue

By Jennifer Ladd, with other group members

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One of us has several million dollars for personal use; one of us is in debt with absolutely no financial cushion. One of us grew up with an indoor swimming pool; one of us grew up being called "white trash." Half of us can live on inherited money, and half of us have to work to support ourselves.

We are a group of six men and women—originally eight—from different class backgrounds who have been meeting over the past three years to talk intimately about our experiences with class and money. One person is of Cuban descent, the others of us are Caucasian-American. The youngest person was 27 when we started and the oldest was 57. Most of us are in our forties. We are a laboratory group for one another, doing research on ourselves in hopes of being better organizers in our social change work and of sharing what we learn about bridging the class divide with others down the road.

We are not practicing Buddhists, but all of us have an important relationship to spirit. Three of us are Jewish, two practice Wicca, one practices Authentic Movement, one of us is a student of an esoteric studies course. All of us are committed to equity and come to it from a sense of compassion, are personally familiar with suffering, and are aware of others' suffering in a world with ever-growing disparities of wealth.

Our goal was to learn as much as possible about how class dynamics work in this society, using ourselves as guinea pigs. The initiators, who were from two different edges of the class spectrum, each recruited three others. Our experiences span the economic spectrum, from rich to poor. We sat down in August 1996 and set up ground rules.

We decided we would strive for:

- Honesty
- Understanding about confidentiality
- Commitment to "clean up" problems that may arise
- Good listening
- Willingness to go deep while respecting limits
- Respect for all types of feelings—sadness as well as fear and anger
- Communication about participation (i.e., alert others if we can't come)
- Room for fun, lightness, and singing
- Speaking from our own experiences
- Periodic check-ins about the process

We agreed to meet for five hours every month from 4-9 PM with a potluck dinner in the middle. We also agreed to meet between our whole-group meetings in two "caucus" groups, one composed of the working class and poor members, the other of the upper- or owning-class members. (Although some of our members now identify as middle class, all of us come from either owning class or working class backgrounds.) We facilitate our own meetings with teams made up of one wealthy and one low-income person. We meet in each other's homes, for each of us a very immediate and vulnerable place to address class issues.

Over the years we have explored a variety of challenging areas. We have striven to stay on the edge, to follow our fears and resistance, knowing that there is a gold mine of material to work with in those hidden corners. In one of our earliest sessions, we told stories of when we had felt betrayed by someone of a different class. One woman recalled that when the Ku Klux Klan started harassing a civil rights group she was working with in the South, all the white, middle-class members left. On the other side of the spectrum, an upper-class man spoke of agreeing to be on a panel about class, only to be skewered and railed against by members of the audience.

Our group has explored what it would be like to walk in each other's shoes. Some people with wealth imagined feeling fear, some imagined relief, others, insecurity but also a sense of belonging that they had not experienced growing up or even now. Each of those with wealth had grown up feeling separate from others; their families often paid for the help they needed rather than establishing mutual, beneficial relationships with neighbors and friends, as the others in the group had done.

When the people from the working-class and poor backgrounds imagined suddenly having money, they felt a sense of freedom and excitement about all the possibilities for helping others and nurturing themselves. They also acknowledged the burden of extra responsibility that accompanies having wealth; the time needed to pay attention to socially responsible investing and giving away money strategically, not to mention coping with all the requests (spoken or silent) from friends and family.

In our first year, we held a two-day retreat, during which time we revealed to each other our total financial worth—bank accounts, portfolios, cars, houses, debt, and potential inheritances: all of our assets and debts. This was a very scary exercise, and we had to do much work to create safety for this sharing. The people of wealth, in particular, felt apprehensive about this process, so we took time to go around and put up on newsprint all the projections that each of us thought people from the other class backgrounds might feel about us.

The sharing of numbers was indeed challenging. The person with the most money had four times more than anyone else and so grappled with a sense of isolation even from fellow wealthy caucus members. A woman from a working-class background, by working multiple jobs, had managed to save a fair amount of money, and another member of the working-class/poor caucus was shocked by the amount. Another woman

struggled with the shame she felt about having so much debt, even though it was her huge, unavoidable, and class-related health care bills that had put her in that position.

During this retreat we also began to look at what kind of society we would like to build. What gap between those with most and those with least would be tolerable? What might we be willing to sacrifice to actually make that world come into being? What will it take to build a movement that seriously addressed these questions? Following the retreat, we decided to wade into even more revealing territory: telling each other exactly how much we had spent the previous year, and on what. This was an even scarier exercise for some, because all kinds of desires are exposed in one's check register or Quicken files. Although we are not personally responsible for our inheritances, or our lack thereof, we are all responsible for our spending choices. It was also painful to witness how unmindful or mindful we are with money. For example, one wealthy woman could not account for \$8,000 that she had withdrawn from her ATM, while a woman in the working-class/poor group reported that she feels compelled to write down every cent she spends, since she needs to know exactly where she stands. Some of the folks from working-class/poor backgrounds found it hard to hear the amounts spent by people of wealth on self-care, from travel to massages.

At one point in our meetings, two of our members were going through parallel life changes. One was heterosexual from an upper-class background, one was lesbian and working class; both were getting married or having a commitment ceremony at about the same time, both were going on honeymoons, both were considering having children. We shared openly the different choices each was making, the different amounts each was spending, and explored the accompanying feelings. Both humor and challenge flowed through these conversations, as did empathy for the struggles of getting pregnant.

One summer we talked about the different vacations we were taking. A woman from the working-class/poor caucus had saved up so that she could finally take a walking trip in England and Scotland. Because of some health problems she became more frightened about whether she could really afford to go and still be able to take care of her health needs and continue to work. She resented the freedom that the wealthy folks had to go on vacation when, where, and for as long as they wanted without getting too close to the bottom line.

This freedom to make choices, to have options, has been one of the most marked differences between those from different classes. One woman would love to spend her life walking and writing poetry but feels she will be chained to paid work forever.

Another working-class woman has always had to sell her skills and her ideas and visions to others in order to have enough funding to do the organizing work she believes in. She has felt resentment toward wealthy members who have freely decided to fund their own work with no accountability to other colleagues, while she has had to test the value of her work in the marketplace, always accountable to employers or funders.

Class is also linked to the issue of security, another central theme in our discussions. The people of wealth have talked about the security of being able to "buy" their way out of different situations. The security for people from working-class/poor backgrounds has tended to come from relationships-their families and communities. The issue of security underlies one of the key questions in our group: Why don't people of wealth give all their money away? Or, put another way: How can you tolerate living with that much money while so many others have so little? One person answers by saying that she has poured money that would have gone to her personally into her foundation instead, the same amount of money that her sister has taken for herself. Another wealthy person's principal has not grown significantly since he inherited because he has chosen to give a lot away and to support his work in organizing other donors. He rationalizes about not giving more away, saying that his million dollars gives him just enough legitimacy in the world of the wealthy to be able to speak out as a wealthy activist, to be taken seriously, and yet it is not so much money that he can live extravagantly.

Working class members stress the importance of investing in social change movements now, and question whether the upper class members are more attached to their privilege than they are willing to admit. We continue to discuss what it would take for people with wealth to be willing to give up privilege. We've had many discussions about the need for a movement for social change, one that would inspire risk-taking where our sense of security would lie more in spirit, in authentic relationships, and in making change than in staying with the status quo.

One of the most important recurring themes has been how to allow ourselves to dream, to see ourselves within those dreams, and then to actually think our dreams are possible. The working-class/poor caucus has explored deeply the ways internalized oppression operates, preventing one from even being able to imagine, stunting those "possibility" muscles. And then, even when one can dream, it takes a lot of work to overcome the societal messages of inadequacy and ineligibility. It is difficult to arrive at a place of truly feeling powerful and entitled to bring dreams into reality-even when these dreams are ones that serve the larger community, not just the individual.

Not surprisingly, the wealthy people have less trouble dreaming, have more resources to follow their dreams, with less accountability in terms of having someone else to report to who holds the purse strings, and with lots of support to go forth and manifest them. These folks often went through school systems that affirmed them and reinforced their sense of capability. It is important to add, however, that not all the wealthy people feel so entitled, or so free to dream. Having the money, in fact, often feels like an obligation to have a brilliant dream. They have the sense that "you had better be good at what you do; there are no excuses for failure or for depression or for feelings of inadequacy." A challenge for people of wealth has been to define their self-worth separately from their net worth. In the course of our discussions, we have realized that none of us feels exactly representative of our class. None of us feels at home with where we come from; we are all boundary crossers. We have also realized that each one of us brings a whole crowd of inner voices with us into the group. These inner voices are as present as we are in our dialogues. One woman hears the voices of the poor women she works with who are

actively organizing against welfare cuts, low wages, lack of day care and transportation. A wealthy woman in the group hears the voices of her wealthy clients and fellow donors who would never make themselves vulnerable in a group like this. One man, originally from Cuba, carries the voices of poor people in third-world countries, all of whom are exponentially poorer than the poorest person in our group. Wealth is relative; our felt experience is often based on those to whom we compare ourselves. The disparities, however, are clearly unjust.

So what has been the impact of these meetings on our lives outside the group? Have the people with wealth given financial help to those with less in the group? How have we dealt with the disparities and contradictions? Two wealthy members have increased the amount they give to economic justice work. All the members of the group have joined the organization United for a Fair Economy, and the wealthy folks in the group have become members of Responsible Wealth, a project of UFE, in which wealthy people speak out publicly for fair taxes, living wages, and a reasonable pay ratio between CEO and lowest-paid worker. One of the members of the group expects to give away all the funds in her foundation over the next 25 years, a foundation dedicated to human rights and economic justice. In order for the group to work in the first place, it was important for us all to understand that the group was not for fundraising; there were no expectations that any of the wealthy people would fund those without money or their projects. (Though it is important to note that all four wealthy people were already supporting the organizations that two low-income folks led.) All of us are committed to institutional social change and feel that individual solutions are needed but are not at the core of the problem. This does not mean that some of the wealthy members of the group have not supported low-income members of the group outside of the group context. This has happened, but the low-income folks have thought it important for wealthy folks to remember that they cannot "buy" relief from guilt or from the larger problem of outrageous disparities in wealth.

Now, in our fourth year together, we are looking at new layers of commitment. We are exploring the possibility of pooling money, time, and attention on some common project. This may entail some of the low-income members being able to take time off from their jobs to reflect, think, and dream. We may put more effort into sharing what we have learned with others, in workshops and writing. We are very excited about "upping the ante" and are searching for the next risk-taking piece of work that we can do with one another.

It has been and continues to be an amazing journey. We have been angry with each other. We have felt deep compassion for each other. We have become aware of our projections onto each other. We have been moved by each other's stories and struggles. We are continuing our exploratory journey, moving toward building something together. Our dialogues have been, in the healthiest ways, both humbling and inspiring. We hope that sharing our story and insights will contribute to social justice and right livelihood for all.

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