

Class Action

Talking about class: the last taboo?

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By Janice Beetle Scaife

Growing up in New York City in the 1950s, Felice Yeskel learned well that a gap existed in this country between the rich and the poor. A child who lived on the Lower East Side with her working class parents but attended a public elementary school for gifted students at 68th and Park Avenue, Yeskel lived within that gap. She saw two worlds, and learned quickly that they did not meet anywhere. Yeskel felt conflicted; she felt ashamed of her background, yet she didn't ever feel she belonged in her school friends' world.

Jenny Ladd, too, saw two worlds as a child, but she was the privileged one. Living in Cambridge and attending private schools, she felt how her family's wealth separated her from her friends who lived in Roxbury and attended school on scholarship. Ladd felt conflicted; she enjoyed the family's second home in Vermont and the other advantages that wealth brought, but she was embarrassed, too, by the crater that existed between the classes.

Yeskel is 50 now, Ladd, 51. They live in Amherst and Northampton, respectively, and they see the gap between rich and poor growing ever wider each year. Educated activists with more than a half dozen graduate degrees between them, they have taken action. Through an organization called Class Action in Northampton, they are together leading workshops and support groups, getting people from various classes to talk about their experiences, their limitations, their dreams and the stereotypes they hold on to.

"We want to bring people with class differences to the table and help people acknowledge that and get beyond the barriers," Yeskel says. "We hope this leads to the kind of world we'd all like to live in, a more just, caring and sustainable one.

"A world where resources are so inequitably divided is not sustainable or healthy," she adds.

Yeskel and Ladd's childhood experiences of class gave them a sense of social consciousness. Yeskel's consciousness propelled her to become part of all the major change movements—civil rights, women's rights, peace. Ladd's call, after inheriting nearly \$1 million at the age of 21, was toward teacher education efforts around global and multicultural education and toward social change philanthropy.

Yeskel has a bachelor's in psychology from the University of Rochester, N.Y., a master's in psychology from Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania and

a doctoral degree in organizational development and social justice education from the University of Massachusetts (UMass) at Amherst.

Ladd has a bachelor's in political science from Antioch College in Ohio, a master's in human development from Pacific Oaks College in California and a doctoral degree in elementary education from UMass, where she focused her dissertation on how rural, white, public schools were preparing their students for a multicultural world.

They use these degrees to work tirelessly on dozens of causes and movements. In the mid-90s, the taboo of classism—which Yeskel says is one of the last taboos because it is so connected to a person's sense of survival and self-worth—became one of them.

In 1989, Yeskel and Ladd met at a presentation on the creation of a training center for social justice activists. “Within five minutes, we were talking about class issues and the differences in our backgrounds,” Ladd says.

The two women began a friendship and several years later began what they call a Cross Class Dialogue group with six people who met monthly over a period of six years to talk about issues of money and class. The benefits, “ahas” and intimacy of the group was liberating, so the two decided the next step for them was offering daylong workshops together on “Playing With Money.”

Two years ago, they officially joined forces under the Class Action, which Ladd founded in 1996 to organize wealthy people and help them align their actions with their values. They now offer a dozen or so workshops on class, money and the taboos they bring. They also offer support groups for people who have more than enough money, for partners who come from different class backgrounds, for people who have moved up the class/money spectrum and for students at the elite area colleges.

“The feminist movement taught us that change has to happen on many levels,” Yeskel says. “You can't just change the laws. You have to change what happens in the kitchen, in the workplace, in the bedroom.”

In any given workshop, Yeskel says of the 20 to 25 people who are likely to attend, several are privileged, several are low-income and 15 or 20 are middle class. There are folks who are independently wealthy, people who work as therapists or church leaders, and house cleaners or people receiving public assistance. As they explore their own class backgrounds, they find they have some similar experiences, and they often laugh together at this discovery.

But the energy in the room can also get charged. Conflicts develop. A privileged person is likely to be asked how he or she can tolerate not having to

work for a living while others have no resources. A working class participant might be asked, “Do you hate me?”

Helping the participants resolve their conflicts by learning how to communicate their thoughts, feelings and experience of class is a large part of the learning, Yeskel says. A privileged person, for instance, who has asked someone from the lower class how to offer financial help to a needy friend in a sensitive way might get as a response, “The way to do it is to develop an open and honest relationship and discuss it. I can tell you how I feel, but that’s not going to tell you how your friend feels.”

But looking at class doesn’t just mean looking within, Ladd and Yeskel note. Both women are active in movements to reform the social and economic structures that maintain class inequity. Ladd works closely with Responsible Wealth, a project of the Boston-based United for a Fair Economy concerned primarily with tax fairness, corporate responsibility and living wages.

In the mid-90s, Yeskel helped found United for a Fair Economy, whose vision is of a society in which concentrated wealth and large corporations do not dominate the economy or dictate the content of popular culture. To achieve this social change, the organization works closely with grassroots groups to help them organize and economic education workshops on a variety of topics. Yeskel says that nearly 100,000 people across the country have participated in these workshops, in which people are taught how tax and trade policies affect the economy and how that, in turn, affects them personally. Participants are encouraged to build a movement for social change, and they are asked to think of one call to action before they leave the workshop, whether that might be practicing responsible wealth for a privileged person to becoming involved in a labor union for a blue-collar worker. “We believe that change will come about with everybody doing something,” Yeskel says.

Yeskel says Class Action’s group offerings give people a chance to identify and understand their own class backgrounds, to feel the impact of that—how it has affected their relationships, careers and life choices and their dreams or lack of. They estimate that so far they have worked with at least 500 people, in the Pioneer Valley and in the Boston and Philadelphia areas. They intend to keep broadening the scope, geographically and in terms of those they counsel. They want to do more work with churches and other organizations, helping board members from different class backgrounds come to the table to better achieve their missions, to see the effect that class has on the creation of salary scales, on fundraising, staff-board relationships, communication styles.

Ladd says that until now, there hasn’t been a venue for talking out loud on class in the country, which leads Yeskel to predict, “I think we will end up being a national organization.

“We want to break the taboo of talking about class, to repair individual psyches and the world,” she adds. “We live in a class-segregated world and we want to break down those barriers.”

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