

Blue-Collar Brains: Minds in Motion on the Manual Job Front

Mike Rose, *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker*, pp. 249 (Viking 2004).

Reviewed by Mathew T. Bodie

Since childhood, I have always been fascinated by the annual “What People Earn” edition of *Parade Magazine*. The issue seeks to provide a cross section of Americans and their relative economic success. The data is provided through photos, a dazzling array of smiling faces with a name, an age, a town, a job, and a salary. Although this “survey” is entirely anecdotal, and the jobs listed too cursory to be definitive, there is still something compelling about this glimpse beneath America’s economic curtain. The uniformly small square photos provide a sense of equality, but that sense is immediately broken by the salaries underneath. On this year’s cover, Ronald Smith, a blackjack dealer, looks comfortable and handsome next to Lindsey Lohan, the 18-year-old actress/singer. However, he makes only \$10,000 a year, while she brings in \$10 million.¹ Jennifer Lacopo, a teacher from Plymouth, Indiana, makes \$24,300, while Peyton Manning, a football player from Indianapolis, Indiana, makes \$42 million.² Inside the magazine, in an article entitled “How Did *You* Do?,” the magazine discusses job prospects for the future.³ “A college education means a higher paycheck,” the article notes, and it lists a number of “hottest” college degrees.⁴ But the article also reports a serious shortage of skilled industrial workers, such as electricians, plumbers, and welders, and reports that a senior power-system operator earned \$162,000 last year.⁵

Such a high salary for a worker in a traditional hard-hat job may surprise some readers. After all, such workers are not supposed to be success stories in the new information economy. In *The Mind at Work*, however, UCLA education professor Mike Rose takes on the societal presumptions that blue-collar workers are not as intelligent as their white-collar counterparts. He argues that stereotypes about blue-collar work, such as the notion that physical labor is “mindless” work, have eroded the dignity and prestige of such positions based on false premises. The purpose of his book is to restore that dignity by reassessing the types of intelligence that are required in traditional blue-collar occupations. As a result, Rose hopes to reinvigorate and reposition so-called “vocational” education to better educate students to be workers and citizens for the future.

The heart of *Mind at Work* is a series of in-depth analyses of different occupations, focusing on the “intelligence” necessary to perform those jobs well. Rose employs a common-sense definition of intelligence: “the ability to learn and act on the environment, to apply knowledge to new situations, to reason, plan, and solve problems.” (p. xxiii) In his case studies, Rose follows workers as they carry out their daily duties and engages them on their thought-processes as they undertake particular tasks. These slices of life are elegantly written; they eschew technical jargon and provide wonderful examples of people working through their everyday responsibilities. Rose draws some wonderful insights from a series of hair stylists, who attempt to convey their organizational and aesthetic sense to him. “You’ve got to add up the pieces of the puzzle,” one stylist tells him, so that you end up with “a road map as to how [you’re] going to cut this haircut.” (p. 33). “Don’t assume you know what [the customers] want,” says another stylist, “because *they* may not even know what they want.” (p. 43). Rose’s prose gracefully illustrates the dance between stylist and customer, noting the ability of a talented

stylist to bring her own artistic vision to bear on the customer's (perhaps poorly articulated) desires. Although Rose references sociological literature about power and class differences, such as Debra Gimlin's article on a Long Island salon,⁶ he doesn't stop there. In fact, he worries that such analyses may have diminished the stature of such work. "The social science tendency to analyze service encounters in terms of power dynamics – combined with Romantic and individualist notions of aesthetics – may limit our understanding of the many ways aesthetic response is manifested in workplaces like the salon." (p. 53)

Rose also writes a wonderful chapter on waitressing that is based on discussions with his mother, a former waitress of thirty-five years. Rose acknowledges concern about the objectivity of this material, but he is able to present a compelling portrait of the memory, multitasking abilities, and negotiation skills necessary to be a proficient waitress. In his analysis, Rose discusses the "physically punishing" aspects of the job (p. 26), the need to tolerate rude or insulting behavior (p. 26), and the roles that can play out during waitressing: "servant, mother, daughter, friend, or sexual object." (p. 21). But he spends most of his time discussing how waitresses remember all of their orders, how they regulate the flow of orders and food between the customers and the kitchen, and how they structure their time and effort so as to perform all of their tasks most quickly and efficiently. Rose's analysis provides a powerful contrast to Barbara Ehrenreich's description in *Nickel and Dimed*. Although Ehrenreich is sympathetic in her portrayal of her fellow waiters and waitresses, the focus of her analysis is the suffering and degradation she experienced on the job. She is so worn down by her experience that she admits to seeing her job as a war and her customers as the enemy.⁷ While Rose acknowledges the difficulty of waitressing, he ultimately seeks to show what a challenging yet rewarding job it can be. "You know," his mother tells him, "you learn a lot as a waitress. You work like hell. But you learn a lot." (p. 24)

Similarly enlightening are Rose's analyses of various trade occupations: plumbing, carpentry, electric wiring, and welding. We meet an amazing welder who fought sex and race discrimination to become one of the few African-American women who weld. While her story of overcoming these hurdles is powerful, even more striking is the aesthetic sense she conveys about her approach to welding. "It's like calligraphy . . . or signatures. You can have thirty beautiful signatures, and they all look different – and that's how it is with welding" (p. 125). In another striking comparison, she notes: "You're like a surgeon, but you're working on metal. You're taking two separate entities and making them one." (p. 127). In chapters on plumbing and carpentry, Rose watches two gifted teachers convey their arts to students in vocational classes. The most touching vignettes involve students, some of whom have had limited success in traditional academic programs, reaching new levels of skill and recognition through these classes. Throughout, Rose is cataloguing the many ways that these occupations require problem-solving, math, memory, logic, and planning abilities beyond our stereotypical assumptions.

It is a little difficult, however, to know what Rose ultimately wants to come from his endeavor. The penultimate chapter concerns the history of vocational education, particularly its tendency to put lower-class students on a dumbed-down educational track. Rose himself had been put on such a track before escaping into a more "gifted" system of instruction. At the same time, however, Rose recognizes the value of vocational training, particularly its ability to reach otherwise disengaged students.⁸ He even wants to celebrate such training – to show that it is much more than just mindless busy work. But *Mind at Work* is not an effort to accomplish VocEd reform. It is instead simply an effort to change the way we look at blue-collar vocations. One byproduct of such a recognition, in Rose's view, is that a new approach to vocational classes would flourish.

Mind at Work attempts to change the conversations we have about the division between blue-collar and white-collar labor. It wants to show us that, in some ways, being a surgeon is not all that much different from being an electrician. Perhaps this will not be news to most Americans. After all, the blue-white dichotomy may only be a self-interested bias of the educational elite. Certainly, educational success is not perfectly correlated with economic prosperity; witness the salary of a "dumb" football player like Peyton Manning. But in its effort to bring respect to jobs that are often stereotyped as rote or mindless, *Mind at Work* is to be applauded. For it manages to convey a sense of dignity about work that is all too neglected in our hyper-efficient day and age.

Perhaps our educational system – and even our culture – may better incorporate these notions as a result of Rose’s efforts.

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¹ “What People Earn,” *Parade Magazine*, p. 1, March 13, 2005.

² *Id.*

³ Lynn Brenner, “How Did *You* Do?” *Parade Magazine*, p. 4, March 13, 2005.

⁴ *Id.* at 10.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Debra Gimlin, “Pamela’s Place: Power and Negotiation in the Hair Salon,” *Gender and Society* 10, no. 5, pp. 505-25 (October 1996).

⁷ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed* (Metropolitan / Owl Books, 2001), pp. 35-36, 47.

⁸ Rose has a nice anecdote about an otherwise uninterested student who was delighted and engaged by a demonstration in a high school electronics class. Upon seeing a model house light up when its circuits are connected, the boy exclaims, “Man, that’s crazy!” (p. 183)

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