BRICKLAYER’S BOY

Alfred Lubrano

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1 My father and I were college buddies back in the mid 1970s. While I was in class at Columbia, struggling with the esoterica du jour, he was on a bricklayer’s scaffold not far up the street, working on a campus building.

2 Sometimes we’d hook up on the subway going home, he with his tools, I with my books. We didn’t chat much about what went on during the day. My father wasn’t interested in Dante, I wasn’t up on arches. We’d share a New York Post and talk about the Mets.

3 My dad has built lots of places in New York City he can’t get into: colleges, condos, office towers. He makes his living on the outside. Once the walls are up, a place takes on a different feel for him, as if he’s not welcome anymore. It doesn’t bother him, though. For my father, earning the dough that paid for my entrée into a fancy, bricked-in institution was satisfaction enough, a vicarious access.

4 We didn’t know it then, but those days were the start of a branching off, a redefining of what it means to be a workingman in our family. Related by blood, we’re separated by class, my father and I. Being the white-collar son of a blue-collar man means being the hinge on the door between two ways of life.

5 It’s not so smooth jumping from Italian old-world style to U.S. yuppie in a single generation. Despite the myth of mobility in America, the true rule, experts say, is rags to rags, riches to riches. According to Bucknell University economist and author Charles Sackrey, maybe 10 percent climb from the working to the professional class. My father has had a tough time accepting my decision to become a mere newspaper reporter, a field that pays just a little more than construction does. He wonders why I haven’t cashed in on that multi-brick education and taken on some lawyer- lucrative job. After bricklaying for thirty years, my father promised himself I’d never pile bricks and blocks into walls for a living. He
figured an education—genieliike and benevolent—would somehow rocket me into the consecrated trajectory of the upwardly mobile, and load some serious loot into my pockets. What he didn’t count on was his eldest son breaking blue-collar rule No. 1: Make as much money as you can, to pay for as good a life as you can get.

He’d tell me about it when I was nineteen, my collar already fading to white. I was the college boy who handed him the wrong wrench on help-around-the-house Saturdays. “You better make a lot of money,” my blue-collar handy dad wryly warned me as we huddled in front of a disassembled dishwasher I had neither the inclination nor the aptitude to fix. “You’re gonna need to hire someone to hammer a nail into a wall for you.”

In 1980, after college and graduate school, I was offered my first job, on a now-dead daily paper in Columbus, Ohio. I broke the news in the kitchen, where all the family business is discussed. My mother wept as if it were Vietnam. My father had a few questions: “Ohio? Where the hell is Ohio?”

I said it’s somewhere west of New York City, that it was like Pennsylvania, only more so. I told him I wanted to write, and these were the only people who’d take me.

“Why can’t you get a good job that pays something, like in advertising in the city, and write on the side?”

“Advertising is lying,” I said, smug and sanctimonious, ever the unctuous undergraduate. “I wanna tell the truth.”

“The truth?” the old man exploded, his face reddening as it does when he’s up twenty stories in high wind. “What’s truth?” I said it’s real life, and writing about it would make me happy. “You’re happy with your family,” my father said, spilling blue-collar rule No. 2. “That’s what makes you happy. After that, it all comes down to dollars and cents. What gives you comfort besides your family? Money, only money.”

During the two weeks before I moved, he reminded me that newspaper journalism is a dying field, and I could do better. Then he pressed advertising again, though neither of us knew anything about it, except that you could work in Manhattan, the borough with the water-beading high gloss, the island polished clean by money. I couldn’t explain myself, so I packed, unpopular and confused. No longer was I the good son who studied hard and fumblied endearingly with tools. I was hacking people off.

One night, though, my father brought home some heavy tape and that clear, plastic bubble stuff you pack your mother’s second-string dishes in. “You probably couldn’t do this right,” my father said to me before he sealed the boxes and helped me take them to UPS. “This is what he wants,” my father told my mother the day I left for Columbus in my grandfather’s eleven-year-old gray Cadillac. “What are you gonna do?” After I said my good-byes, my father took me aside and pressed five $100
bills into my hands. “It’s okay,” he said over my weak protests. “Don’t
tell your mother.”

When I broke the news about what the paper was paying me, my father
suggested I get a part-time job to augment the income. “Maybe you could
drive a cab.” Once, after I was chewed out by the city editor for something
trivial, I made the mistake of telling my father during a visit home. “They
pay you nothin’, and they push you around too much in that business,”
he told me, the rage building. “Next time, you gotta grab the guy by the
throat and tell him he’s a big jerk.”

“Dad, I can’t talk to the boss like that.”

“Tell him. You get results that way. Never take any shit.” A few years
before, a guy didn’t like the retaining wall my father and his partner
had built. They tore it down and did it again, but the guy still bitched.
My father’s partner showed the guy into the freshly laid bricks. “Pay me
off,” my father said, and he and his partner took the money and walked.
Blue-collar guys have no patience for office politics and corporate bile-
swallowing. Just pay me off and I’m gone. Eventually, I moved on to a
job in Cleveland, on a paper my father has heard of. I think he looks on it
as a sign of progress, because he hasn’t mentioned advertising for a
while.

When he was my age, my father was already dug in with a trade, a wife,
two sons and a house in a neighborhood in Brooklyn not far from where
he was born. His workaday, family-centered life has been very much in
step with his immigrant father’s. I sublet what the real-estate people call
a junior one-bedroom in a dormlike condo in a Cleveland suburb. Unmar-
ried and unconnected in an insouciant, perpetual-student kind of way, I
rent movies during the week and feed single women in restaurants on
Saturday nights. My dad asks me about my dates, but he goes crazy over
the word “woman.” “A girl,” he corrects. “You went out with a girl. Don’t
say ‘woman.’ It sounds like you’re takin’ out your grandmother.”

I’ve often believed blue-collaring is the more genuine of lives, in
greater proximity to primordial manhood. My father is provider and pro-
tector, concerned only with the basics: food and home, love and progeny.
He’s also a generation closer to the heritage, a warmer spot nearer the fire
that forged and defined us. Does heat dissipate and light fade further
from the source? I live for my career, and frequently feel lost and code-
less, devoid of the blue-collar rules my father grew up with. With no baby-
boomer groomer to show me the way, I’ve been choreographing my own
tentative shuffle across the wax-shined dance floor on the edge of the
Great Middle Class, a different rhythm in a whole new ballroom.

I’m sure it’s tough on my father, too, because I don’t know much about
bricklaying, either, except that it’s hell on the body, a daily sacrifice. I ide-
alized my dad as a kind of dawn-rising priest of labor, engaged in holy rit-
ual. Up at five every day, my father has made a religion of responsibility.
My younger brother, a Wall Street white-collar guy with the sense to
make a decent salary, says he always felt safe when he heard Dad stir be-
fore him, as if Pop were taming the day for us. My father, fifty-five years
old, but expected to out as if he were three decades stronger, slips
on machine-washable vestments of khaki cotton without waking my
mother. He goes into the kitchen and turns on the radio to catch the tem-
perature. Bricklayers have an occupational need to know the weather.
And because I am my father's son, I can recite the five-day forecast at any
given moment.

20  My father isn't crazy about this life. He wanted to be a singer and actor
when he was young, but that was frivolous doodling to his Italian family,
who expected money to be coming in, stoking the stove that kept hearth
fires ablaze. Dreams simply were not energy-efficient. My dad learned a
trade, as he was supposed to, and settled into a life of pre-scripted rou-
tine. He says he can't find the black-and-white publicity glossyes he once
had made.

21  Although I see my dad infrequently, my brother, who lives at home, is
with the old man every day. Chris has a lot more blue-collar in him than I
do, despite his management-level career; for a short time, he wanted to be
a construction worker, but my parents persuaded him to go to Columbia.
Once in a while he'll bag a lunch and, in a nice wool suit, meet my father
at a construction site and share sandwiches of egg salad and semolina
bread.

22  It was Chris who helped my dad most when my father tried to change
his life several months ago. My dad wanted a civil-service bricklayer fore-
man's job that wouldn't be so physically demanding. There was a written
test that included essay questions about construction work. My father
hadn't done anything like it in forty years. Why the hell they needed
bricklayers to write essays I have no idea, but my father sweated it out.
Every morning before sunrise, Chris would be ironing a shirt, bleary-
eyed, and my father would sit at the kitchen table and read aloud his prac-
tice essays on how to wash down a wall, or how to build a tricky corner.
Chris would suggest words and approaches.

23  It was so hard for my dad. He had to take a Stanley Kaplan-like prep
course in a junior high school three nights a week after work for six
weeks. At class time, the outside men would come in, twenty-five con-
struction workers squeezing themselves into little desks. Tough blue-
collar guys armed with No. 2 pencils leaning over and scratching out
their practice essays, cement in their hair, tar on their pants, their work
boots too big and clumsy to fit under the desks.

24  "Is this what finals felt like?" my father would ask me on the phone
when I pitched in to help long-distance. "Were you always this nervous?"
I told him yes. I told him writing's always difficult. He thanked Chris and
me for the coaching, for putting him through school this time. My father
thinks he did okay, but he's still awaiting the test results. In the mean-
time, he takes life the blue-collar way, one brick at a time.
When we see each other these days, my father still asks how the money is. Sometimes he reads my stories; usually he likes them, although he recently criticized one piece as being a bit sentimental: "Too schmaltzy," he said. Some psychologists say that the blue-white-collar gap between fathers and sons leads to alienation, but I tend to agree with Dr. Al Baraff, a clinical psychologist and director of the Men-Center in Washington, D.C. "The core of the relationship is based on emotional and hereditary traits," Baraff says. "Class [distinctions] just get added on. If it's a healthful relationship from when you're a kid, there's a respect back and forth that'll continue."

Nice of the doctor to explain, but I suppose I already knew that. Whatever is between my father and me, whatever keeps us talking and keeps us close, has nothing to do with work and economic class.

During one of my visits to Brooklyn not long ago, he and I were in the car, on our way to buy toiletries, one of my father's weekly routines. "You know, you're not as successful as you could be," he began, blue-collar blunt as usual. "You paid your dues in school. You deserve better restaurants, better clothes." Here we go, I thought, the same old stuff. I'm sure every family has five or six similar big issues that are replayed like well-worn videotapes. I wanted to fast-forward this thing when we stopped at a red light.

Just then my father turned to me, solemn and intense. His knees were aching and his back muscles were throbbing in clockable intervals that registered in his eyes. It was the end of a week of lifting fifty-pound blocks. "I envy you," he said quietly. "For a man to do something he likes and get paid for it—that's fantastic." He smiled at me before the light changed, and we drove on. To thank him for the understanding, I sprang for the deodorant and shampoo. For once, my father let me pay.