

Fighting for Crumbs

Time to take our place at the table

One of my earliest jobs was as a busboy at a fancy restaurant along the Susquehanna River in southeast Pennsylvania. The building was a Revolution-era tavern, partly made out of giant river stones, and rumor said that George Washington really had slept there – or at least he had stopped somewhere nearby.

Wealthy people came to dine there; we served them lavish meals and cleaned up what they left behind.

The dining room was intimate, with about twenty tables and a huge stone fireplace at one end. Menu items were written in French on one side. On weekends a trio played Baroque music, dressed in period costumes right down to the powdered wigs.

We worked in teams. Two waiters in tuxedos and one busboy in a white dinner jacket served five or six tables set up in candlelight, linen tablecloths, hand-made metal serving plates, half a dozen forks and spoons, and three or four goblets for drinks.

We filled wine glasses without picking them up, we noiselessly set their dinner courses down from the left and removed their finished meals from the right, we lit their cigarettes with a silver lighter, we opened champagne bottles without spilling a drop.

When someone ordered baked Alaska for dessert, the entire dining room watched as the lead waiter rolled out the gas-powered hot plates and poured flaming liqueurs into the pan. The sizzle and fire always brought better tips.

Even with the best tips, we could never afford to eat there. Back in the kitchen after we'd cleared the tables, we were not averse to picking morsels from the wealthy diners' plates before scooping the bones and bits of rice and coagulated sauces into the trash.

Sometimes at the end of the night the chefs would put out a plate of leftover pheasant legs or a piece of trout that had too many bones to serve the diners. We didn't mind that it was cold.

Sometimes we shared our crumbs with others; sometimes we ate them ourselves. No one begrudged the system because we all worked hard for our crumbs. You might call it a kind of cooperative scavenging.

The system worked because each night we divided our tips, and each Friday we cashed our modest paychecks. It wasn't a lot, but it was something. And for most of us, there was the belief that with time, energy, and perhaps a little luck, there might be something more.

We could easily have turned on each other, though, if the system were reversed – if we served and cleaned up after the wealthy diners, then handed them our paychecks and tips as they left. Then, we would have only the leftover scraps and cold pheasant legs. And the fights would begin.

This of course is absurd; no one would submit to such treatment. And surely no one would attempt to force it on others. Yet this is exactly what has been happening to the American worker for more than a generation.

Over the last three decades, we have been serving and cleaning tables for "people" called corporations and the people who benefit from them. As their profits and bonuses have soared, our wages have stagnated. As their tax percentage has dropped, ours has remained roughly the same. As the laws have been changed to reduce their responsibility to workers, other laws have made it harder for the workers to make it alone.

For 30 years we have been serving the wealthy diners ever-more fancy meals and steadily handing them more and more of our paychecks and tips as they leave the dining room.

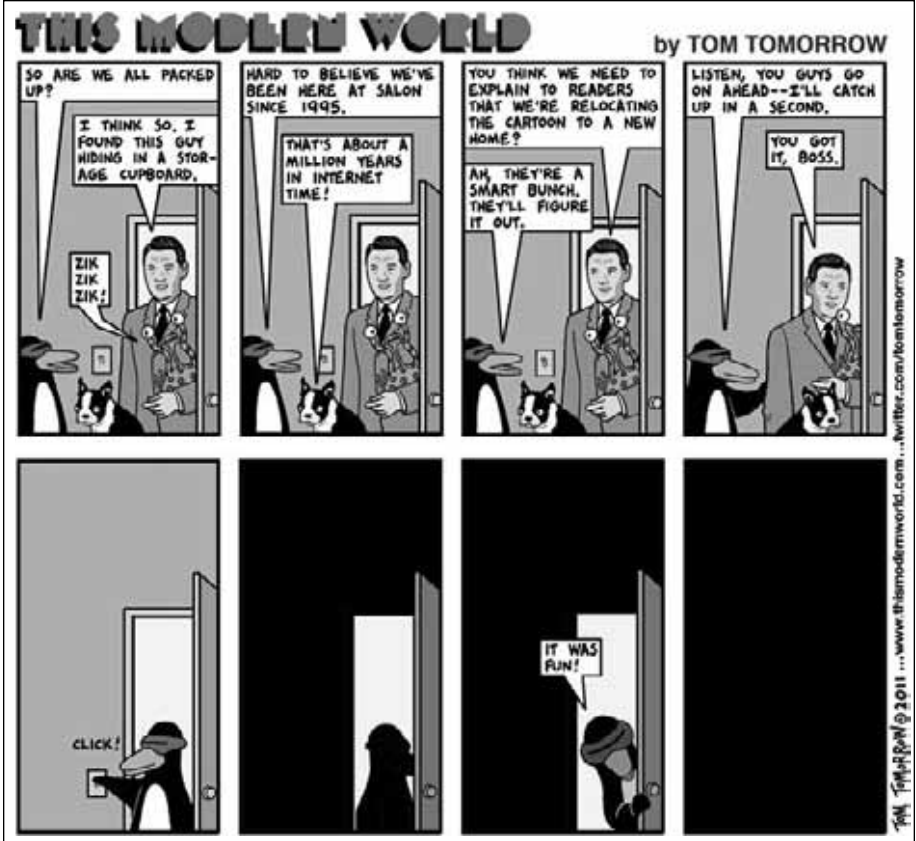
When they recently took the economy to the brink of collapse, we served them the largest feast of all, some \$300 billion on a menu called the Troubled Asset Relief Program, or TARP, signed into law in October 2008 by President George W. Bush. Then we paid their bill.

Now the diners tell us some waiters and busboys are getting a few more cold pheasant legs than others. They say this is not fair, that we should pass laws to make sure no busboy gets more bony trout than any other.

They are telling us that we should fight each other for the crumbs.

We must stop fighting for crumbs. Instead, we should take a good, hard look at that table we have been serving and clearing all these years. We should require those who dine at our tables to pay for their meals. And we should then reclaim our rightful seat at the table, a seat we have left unoccupied for far too long.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

DRINK THE RADIATION

I've admittedly been waiting to hear some wise palliatives from our favorite local nuclear expert, Art Robinson, recently revealed as a "helicopter-dad," but Nolan Nelson beat him to it with an amazing piece (*R-G Letters*, 3/18) regarding Japan.

His initial statement: "As the nuclear events unfold in Japan, they not only fail to reveal a cascading crisis, but represent a favorable confirmation of the viability of nuclear power. Japan has just undergone once-in-a-millennium seismic events beneath the plants, with minimal consequences." Causes one to wonder what he uses for a news source (even a week ago!?).

He concludes, after this amazing piece of divination with advice for future nuclear-plant construction: "... nuclear power plants do not explode like atomic weapons, but can only release proportionately infinitesimal amounts of alpha particles through explosions of hydrogen gas. The particles would be lethal in groundwater contamination, if containment and monitoring plans were not in place already for such unusual events."

I trust he will be taking kids to Japan to demonstrate his comfort with a little radiation to publicly drink the tapwater in Tokyo, and partake of some delicious Japanese salads from local produce. In the meantime I hereby award him the "Art Robinson Nuclear Disaster Remote Divination" award. Clearly rebuilding in the Fukushima area and for miles inland will be enhanced by the nuclear waste available for foundations, etc.

Said Albert Einstein: "Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I'm not sure about the universe."

R. L. Thompson
Eugene

No doubt, Japanese officials constantly assured the public that the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant was perfectly safe. Their counterparts in the U.S. and elsewhere will continue to do the same. Meanwhile, similarly ridiculous decisions are being made elsewhere:

People in the natural gas drilling industry feel that "hydraulic fracturing" of gas wells is a reasonable practice to achieve a short-lived increase in production even though it permanently poisons the ground water wherever it is done.

People working for British Petroleum felt that pouring millions of gallons of toxic "Corexit" dispersant into the Gulf of Mexico was a reasonable way to address the oil spill there even though it didn't make the oil go away but instead merely dispersed it, making it less visible.

Knowing that artillery projectiles made of hard, heavy metal are extremely effective at piercing armor, the U.S. military makes such weapons out of depleted uranium even though their use has poisoned military personnel and created countless radioactive waste sites in Iraq and Afghanistan.

If those making these crazy decisions didn't believe that their behavior was acceptable, they wouldn't make such decisions and they would be fired and replaced with someone else. Therefore, to progress in their careers, they must develop a strong degree of denial, delusion and/or sociopathy. Just as we would talk about an abusive alcoholic, we must begin talking about the psychological state of those in power.

Robert Bolman
Eugene

WHERE WERE YOU? PART II

Betsy Ragland wrote a letter entitled "Where were you?" (3/24). I have to ask where was someone like her and the other kind people who helped the fallen man with the walker when, the very next day, March 11, I was walking along the very same Coburg Road near P. F. Chang's.

I was enjoying a rare overhead blue sky and fluffy white clouds. Within

CRAZY IN POWER

With the ongoing nuclear disaster in Japan, we must begin questioning the psychological state of those in power.