



"An eloquent tribute to our
working men and women . . .
It knocked me out."
—STUDS TERKEL

The Mind at Work

**Valuing the Intelligence of the
American Worker**

MIKE ROSE



INTRODUCTION: MIND AND WORK

I grew up a witness to the intelligence of the waitress in motion, the reflective welder, the strategy of the guy on the assembly line. This, then, is something I know: the thought it takes to do physical work. Such work put food on our table, gave shape to stories of affliction and ability, framed how I saw the world. I come from a family of immigrants who, with two exceptions, did not finish high school, and who worked in blue-collar or service jobs all their lives. I did not do so well in school myself, spent several years in the vocational track, and squeaked my way into a small college on probation—the first in the family to go beyond high school. Measures of intellectual ability and assumptions about it are woven throughout this history. So I've been thinking about this business of intelligence for a long time: the way we decide who's smart and who isn't, the way the work someone does feeds into that judgment, and the effect such judgment has on our sense of who we are and what we can do.

It was tough work that my family did. I would later come to understand the dynamics of occupational status and social class, but I could sense early on how difficult the work was, and that without it, we'd starve. I also saw that people knew things through work. And they used what they learned. This experience was all very specific to me, not abstract, emerging from the lived moments of work I had witnessed, from all sorts of objects and images, from

sound and smell, from rhythms of the body. These sensory particulars stay with me, resonant.

There was a table covered with slick plastic in the center of my grandmother's kitchen. Anyone who visited drank a cup of coffee there, wooden chair turned sideways to talk to her as she cooked. All meals were eaten at this table. My uncle Frank, a welder for the Pennsylvania Railroad, has come in from work, soiled denim, the smell of machinist's oil in it, his face smeared with soot. He washes at the kitchen sink, sleeves rolled up, scrubbing his arms, full lather, angling them under the faucet. He settles in at the table; there's a radio at its edge, and he turns it on to hear the evening news. My grandmother sets a large plate of steaming macaroni before him, deep red sauce; there is a bowl of chops, cooked earlier, in the center of the table. Frank's hands are huge, and as he talks to us—a deep voice that can quickly rise in amazement—he tears off a big chunk of Italian bread and begins to eat with a focus and capacity that made its way into the comic tales told about him by his brothers, stories I would acquire through the hearing. After a while, he pushes the chair back, but not too far, unbuttons the top of his trousers, says he's eaten way too much, dear Lord, and reaches for a chop, or for that loaf of bread, and leans in again, a deep pleasure against the bitter cold and exhaustion of the roundhouse.

Frank was a guy who made it a point to know things; he read a lot and inquired until he understood how something worked. It felt good to be with him. I remember him, his well-spoken voice, guiding me through the Railroader's Museum: cutaways of running gear; diagrams and technical information on steam, diesel, and electric locomotives; photos of wooden freight cars, cabooses, the interiors of luxury passenger cars; posed workmen; lots of repair equipment; an operational model railroad. I knew of Frank's many complaints about the railroad: layoffs and erratic scheduling, the brutal hours, the biting cold or sweltering heat, the burns over

his arms and legs. But Frank also saw himself as a “railroad man,” someone who had made his contribution to this major American industry. Doing a job well mattered. “Work hard,” he wrote to his son, away in the army. “No one likes a half-assed man.” One of the moments I remember from that day at the museum, a simple but lasting one, is Frank standing before a display case, pointing to some miniature assembly of cable and gear, explaining in detail how it worked, taking his time until I got it.

Many testaments have been written, both in fiction and memoir, about the physical labor of our forebears: from accounts of the prairie farm, the mills, and the mines to tales of immigrant life—the Lower East Side to the agricultural fields of Central and Southern California. One of the most stirring moments in Mario Cuomo’s keynote address to the 1984 Democratic National Convention is the memory of his father working long and hard hours in the family grocery store, teaching the young Mario “all I needed to know about faith and hard work by the simple eloquence of his example.” Such invocation speaks powerfully to Americans, stirs things deep in our cultural and personal histories. How interesting it is, though, that our testaments to physical work are so often focused on the values such work exhibits rather than on the thought it requires. It is a subtle but pervasive omission. Yet there is a mind at work in dignity, and values are intimately related to thought and action.

It is as though in our cultural iconography we are given the muscled arm, sleeve rolled tight against biceps, but no thought bright behind the eye, no image that links hand and brain. I find myself here wondering about Cuomo’s father. I imagine the many decisions he had to make, the alternatives large and small he weighed, the moments when he had to think quickly through his fatigue.

My mother shaped her adult identity in the restaurant business

and, all the while I was growing up, worked as a waitress in coffee shops and family-style restaurants. My father and I would sometimes visit her at Coffee Dan's, waiting for her shift to end, riding the bus home together, her feet killing her. When she worked the counter and took cash, we would find two stools by the register; when she had the main room, we sat at the back booth where the waitresses took their break. We would pass the time with her once the lunch or dinner rush had faded. There wasn't much for a child to do, the hours stretched out, so I listened to the cooks and waitresses. They talked about the customers, or the boss, or each other; about the things going on at home with their kids; about how tired they were. And I watched what they did.

I remember particular people, like my mother's coworker Rose Goldstein, a gentle woman whose house across town we visited, and Bobbi, the new hire just out of high school, on whom I had a desperate crush. And there was a cook whose name I've forgotten, but who would sit in the booth on break, smoking, solemn, food splattered all over his white uniform, down to the shoes. At the back booth, you would catch the thick smell of the grill and the whiff of stale food and cigarettes, scraped and dumped. These odors hung in my mother's uniform and hair. When things got busy, there was a heightened clatter of kitchen and dishwasher, and I could feel the rise in the pulse of the place: the cacophony of customers' voices; waitresses weaving in and out, warning "behind you" in a voice both impassive and urgent; all these people eating separately in one big public space.

I remember the restaurant's lingo, remember liking the code of it. Tables were labeled by the number of chairs—and, thus, customers—around them: *deuces*, *four-tops*, *six-tops*. Areas of the restaurant had names: the *racetrack* was the speedy front section. Orders were abbreviated for the cook: *fry four on two*, my mother would call out as she clipped a check onto that little rotating

wheel. To speak this language gave you a certain authority, signaled know-how.

I have many images of my mother at work, distinct from the other domains of her life: her walking full-tilt with an armload of plates along one arm and two cups of coffee somehow cradled in her other hand; her taking orders, pencil poised over pad; her flopping down in the booth by my father, the whoosh of the cushion; “I’m all in,” she’d say, and whisper something quickly to us about a customer. She would stand before a table, her arm stacked with those plates, picking one order off for this person, then another, then another—always seeming to get it right, knowing who got the hamburger, who got the fried shrimp. She’d argue with the cobb over a returned order; “he gave me lip,” she’d tell us, rushing by. I remember her sitting sideways at the back booth, talking to us, her one hand gripping the outer edge of the table, watching the floor, and noting, in the flow of our conversation, who needed something, who was finishing up, whose order was taking longer to prepare than it should.

What did I come to know about work like Frank’s or my mother’s, mechanical-industrial or life in the restaurant? Surely, that it was hard, physically taxing, dirty, injurious. I never knew my grandfather—he died of pneumonia before I was born—but I heard, with some frequency, a story about him losing his leg in the railroad stockyards, the same place where Frank worked. This was not the kind of work my parents and uncles and aunts wanted their kids to do. I knew, as well, that work was unsteady; you could lose your job, with disastrous consequences. Hard as it was, railed against as it occasionally was, work was coveted, for it was a stay against poverty. One reason my mother valued waitressing was that she knew she could always find work. I also got the clear sense from observing people in my family or in the neighborhood that having work, though you’d be wiped out at day’s end, affected your

overall mood, your bearing. The men in the neighborhood who were out of work were unhappily at loose ends, sitting around, listless, time on their hands. My mother bemoaned the physical punishment of her job, but she spoke as well about “being among the public.” The phrase carried for her a claim of achievement. The Pennsylvania Railroad had Frank—had much of the town—in its grip, and he cursed it often. But he was, finally, a railroad man—hard work, masculine, with national consequence. The work that my uncle and my mother did affected their sense of who they were, and, though limiting in so many ways, it provided a means of doing something in the world.

Doing something in the world. I couldn’t have expressed it this way when I was growing up, but the work I saw connected in my mind with agency and competence—that’s what being an adult meant to me, and it was intimately tied to physical work. And, as does any child, I craved competence. Special terminology caught my ear, the idiom of freight trains or food orders, because not everyone could speak it, especially speak it the right way, and it made things happen. Particular movements of the body made things happen, too, in the restaurant or the stockyard. And there was knowledge of tools and devices, wrenches and hacksaws and measures, but the cash register, too, and the whirring blender. Tied to this knowledge were tricks of the trade. And what a kick it was when one of my uncles or a cook or a waitress showed me how to do something a little more effectively, with a little less effort and a little more finesse. Hold it this way. Move it in, like this. See? I became the work’s insider, if just for a moment.

I have been a teacher for over thirty years in a wide range of settings: from kindergarten to adult literacy programs, and now in a research university’s graduate school of education. Many of the populations I’ve taught and studied were considered to be educationally at-risk, and questions about intellectual capacity, either im-

plied or explicit, were ever-present. And in a school of education, issues of ability, schooling, and work are part of the conceptual terrain. One thing I've learned from all this is the powerful effect our assumptions about intelligence have on the way people are defined and treated in the classroom, the workplace, and the public sphere. It seems fitting, therefore, to turn with the investigative tools I now have to the work represented by my forebears—factory work, skilled and semiskilled trades, and service occupations—with a focus on the mental processes involved in doing such work, the thought that enables it. To be sure, our view of occupations is shaped by the form of capitalism that has developed in the United States and by the social traditions that attend particular occupations. But running through this economic and cultural history are beliefs about mind. *The Mind at Work*, then, offers an analysis of physical work and intelligence and a reflection on how we might think more clearly and fairly about them.



Labor, as a political and social force, has diminished in power and has less immediate grab on the national imagination. The work that currently captures our fancy involves high technology, electronic media, and “symbolic analysis.” Trumpeted as an unprecedented kind of work, such “knowledge work” represents emerging opportunity. It is associated with advanced education, and there is no doubt that work of this type requires high levels of analytic skill. What concerns me, though, is the implication—evident in popular discourse about work—that so-called older types of work, like manufacturing or service work, are, by and large, mindless, “neck down” rather than “neck up.” (There is, by the way, a degree of historical amnesia here: each industrial generation heralds the unprecedented intellectual demands of its work.) But, though identified with another era, work of body and hand

continues to create the material web of daily life. As with any human achievement, such work merits our understanding; the way we talk about it matters. And the dimension of it that is least discussed and appreciated—and that we can continue to learn from—is the thought it takes to do it well.

A related issue is the way we classify work itself. “Writers on work,” notes sociologist Steven Peter Vallas, “routinely employ certain stock categories—‘blue-’ versus ‘white-collar,’ ‘mental’ versus ‘manual’ labor.” Vallas acknowledges that these categories are sometimes useful, but we rely too heavily on them and fail “to observe subtle commonalities between apparently different forms of work.” These limiting categories reaffirm longstanding biases about particular occupations and cause us to miss so much: The mental processes that enable service. The aesthetics of physical labor. The complex interplay of the social and the mechanical. The choreography of hand, eye, ear, brain. The everpresence of abstraction, planning, and problem solving in everyday work.

More immediate policy deliberations about work—I write this, for example, during a period of economic downturn and a fragile “jobless recovery”—are focused on specific tangible remedies: economic stimuli, job creation, training programs, and the like. Tied to such discussions are assessments of the state of the workforce, the number unemployed, gross measures of skill level, breakouts by race and gender. And there is, as well, a broader assessment of the workforce that will be a central concern of this book: the general sense of what workers can do, their competence, their intellectual capacity. Such appraisals may well include specific measures—for example, high school graduation as an indicator of literacy and numeracy—but there is also a psychological and cultural dimension to this reckoning, just as there is, at least in some schools of thought, to assessments of the economy. Consider, then,

an observation by labor journalist John P. Hoerr: “Since the early days of industrialization, a peculiar notion has gained ascendancy in the United States: that wage workers and their representatives lacked the competence to handle complex issues and problems that required abstract knowledge and analytical ability.” This sense of deficiency is in our cultural bones, and it affects, and distorts, the specific economic responses we develop, from education and job training to the way work is organized.

The nation is currently engaged in a discussion about the training of the workforce and about a range of educational experiments involving the integration of the academic and vocational curriculum and the transition from school to work. Yet the educational literature on these issues tends to be pretty thin on any close analysis of the cognitive dimension of physical work. This absence, I think, is rooted in the reductive notions the society carries about such work and the people who do it, notions that prove to be especially troubling as we try to rethink the connection between the schoolhouse and the workplace.

I also believe that there are important social issues here. Judgments about intelligence carry great weight in our culture, and one of the ways we judge each other’s intelligence is through the work we do. There are many distinctions that can be made among types of work, distinctions related to income, autonomy, cleanliness, physical risk, and so on. These have a harshly real material meaning, but carry symbolic meaning as well. There’s a moral and characterological aura to occupational autonomy, income, cleanliness, leading us to slip from qualities of the work to qualities of the worker. This kind of generalizing, this slippage of assumptions, runs through our cultural history, from post-Revolutionary War mechanics who were portrayed as illiterate and incapable of participating in government to the autoworkers I heard labeled by one

supervisor as “a bunch of dummies.” These generalizations about mind and work are intimately tied to the dynamics of social class and affect the way we think about each other and ourselves. One of the more striking things writer Barbara Ehrenreich found as she worked a series of low-wage jobs to write *Nickel and Dimed* was how invisible she became. The way work gets defined and the attributions we make about it affect more than occupational rank and income; these attributions color the kind of social and civic life we can imagine.