

Self Worth and Hope as a Working-Class Woman in Three Parts

When considering my self-worth, I first consider the self.

The facets of self that are translatable to others.

Labels. Categories. Boxes. Attitudes.

Over the years, my everyday thoughts are often taken up by considering my position on one sliding scale or another, one binary or another, with the hope of aligning myself with other humans. Searching for connections to share and to feel less solitary.

This list of have and have nots, of us and them's, of friends and foes, is eternal and ever-changing. The lists I've made and remade over the years are made up of definitions that other people have placed onto me. Some I've wanted to hold on to and some I've desperately wanted to shed:

woman, tomboy, working-class, middle-class, quiet, artsy, logical, white, foreign, Londoner, straight (then gay, then bi, then, "what are you?"), British, not-British, council estate kid, 1st-time buyer, married, artist, hipster, forgetful, late, Irish, Portuguese, mixed, exotic, person of colour, mysterious, melancholic, moody, empathetic, etc. etc. etc.

There are people that help define who you are through your life, for better or worse. My father, a proud Portu-geezer and immigrant to London in the late 70s, gave me my serious resting bitch face, artistic perspective and ability to carry a tune. He also taught me how to label almost every type of person we'd come across or see on TV. The 29 years that I had him around included a free PhD in what was wrong with every category of human. Race, country, class, accent, wealth, job were all signifiers of how anyone could, quite specifically, be lesser than he was.

Of course, we were not left out of my Dad's perceptual categorisation. My Mum being Irish meant that she was likely an alcoholic (she wasn't), and my being raised in state schools in London meant that there was a high chance that I would be a slut and a binge drinker. My brother was a boy, so I think he got away pretty unscathed.

Looking back now, I can see the terrible sadness that must have spawned all the contempt that my Dad felt for everyone, but in some ways, I am grateful for the voice in my head that he buried deep, which, without control, spews the racist, homophobic, classist, 'facts' that I know still exist as truths in other people's minds. This voice is a reminder of the past. A past where, after years of internalising, I grew the strength as a rebellious teenager to question and push back on these ideas. Fighting back, I refused to treat my friends, the actor in Eastenders or our neighbours next door with anything other than humanity. Totally by accident, my first three boyfriends turned out to be Asian, which really pushed the point home at the time.

I feel grateful for this insider's perspective of those who harbour negativity towards anyone whose labels don't match their own. I've used this knowledge as a

power, feeling more confident communicating directly with them and with some level of empathy. I loved my Dad despite how little love he was capable of showing to others.

I am happy to share my list of labels with you so we can laugh, debate and share stories that bring us closer together. The trick is remaining open to finding those connections when I share something with you that you might not understand.

We all have the potential for weakness and the possibility for strength, and just as my labels will change over time, so too can yours. Nothing is forever, and everything *will* change.

When I think about self-worth, I think about value.

The cost of someone's work in relation to another's.

The self as servitude. The class system.

My Dad worked as a waiter in fancy hotels and banquet halls. The last one he worked at was on Park Lane, one of the most expensive places on the Monopoly board. The Great Hall was where my Dad served people who grew their considerable wealth or were born into it. He even served the Queen Mother once, and a grainy candid photo of HRH and my Dad carrying her heavy jug of water on a silver platter was framed and hung on our living room wall. My Dad had gained access to the same airspace as those who were far superior to us. It was a photo that was supposed to bring us pride, to remind us of how far we'd come. But really, it was a reminder of how far we had to go.

Now and then, he'd bring me home autographs from celebrities we'd watch on TV, and he found it hilarious bringing me home an autograph that read: "To Vanessa... From Vanessa."

It was from Vanessa Feltz, and I wasn't impressed.

Obviously, my Dad had opinions about everyone he served, and he brought them home daily. I'm pretty sure the people that he served only had a couple of thoughts about him. First, he was a waiter who could bring them more wine; second, he was a foreign and working class. Some people were nicer than others to ensure their glasses remained filled all night or to appease their own working-class guilt for being served themselves.

Once a year, the hotel would partner with charities and hold a big event for disabled and less fortunate kids. There were royal marching bands, entertainers and D list celebrities who would say hello and sign autographs. This was the only time we were allowed to come to work with my Dad, as staff could bring their families (as volunteers) to help set tables and get the place ready for the event's real beneficiaries. It was a pretty big deal for our family as the scale, glamour, and entertainment would never be matched in anything we would be able to afford otherwise. A pricey West End show wasn't in reach for families like ours who had to

rent their TV for a few quid a week.

After setting hundreds of places for kids & their carers in the Great Hall, we got to eat something in the staff canteen, travelling down miles of stark secret corridors, passing laundry baskets and aircon units. None of this bothered me though, all I cared about was getting a photo and signature from somebody I'd seen off our Radio Rentals telly. This was when me and my family could merge with the masses and pretend for a moment that we had been invited and deserved to be there.

We were all dressed in our Sunday best, and I'd fight my way to the front of the queue past the wheelchairs and carers so that I could look straight up at a real-life Gladiator in full spandex leotards and stick out my autograph book. I still have those signatures now, symbols of a time when my family infiltrated a space that people like us could only enter if it were in exchange for labour. I could touch the brass and the crystal and the gilded objects, walk on the expensive carpets and touch a celebrity.

We always left the events through the staff exit by the rubbish bins and trades car park. My Dad would have to sign out and get his bag checked. No red carpet for us.

I experienced 1st hand that some people live with crystal chandeliers and antique paintings, who drink expensive wines and are asked for their autographs. And then, there were people like us, who hardly saw our Dad because he was always working nights, serving those people the wine that they drank too much of. We lived in silence when Dad was home as he'd often fall asleep watching very early morning TV on the sofa and we couldn't wake him up before his next evening shift began. Our family was here to serve. Our self-worth was found in the hard work of my parents. We often didn't get what we desired, but we never starved and sometimes we had to hide from the doorbell.

When I think about self-worth, I think about my past lives.

Those whose traumas I carry.

The establishment of expectations.

My Dad didn't talk much about his past, but what I do know gives me some insight into why he'd express such disappointment in me when I gave up too easily on things and chose to be an artist. Only now, in my 39th year, can I see the impact of the inherited pressure to stay in paid employment and the conflict this causes when your creative passions oppose a life of stability and perceived progress. My father came from a working-class fireman's family in Lisbon, and after some time in national service and vocational training, he accidentally landed a graphic design job when applying for an administrative role. The boss needed a draughtsman and asked if my Dad could draw, he drew something there and then and got the job on the spot.

He was very creative and also sang Fado music (a traditional Portuguese style) across the country. Somewhere along the way, though, perhaps somewhat scarred by his national service in Angola, his creative career was halted, and he began working in hospitality, waiting in bars, restaurants and hotels, which he continued until he was in his 60s.

In the late 70s, he left behind his job, his 18-year-old daughter and his home country, coming to London for a fresh start and the hope for better opportunities. His experience allowed him to continue as a waiter, but his lack of English skills stunted any growth options for him. His only creative output was the odd painting or DIY he did at home, and he never again sang in public.

When it came to the time when I could apply for a government-funded (means-tested) University place, my family, and particularly my father, was confused at why I would choose a subject that would produce no value for the impending jobs market that followed for me. Art was a hobby at best, not a career, and the only time I felt I was 'doing the right thing' in that period was when I fell for the trap and got a full-time retail job whilst doing my full-time degree in Fine Art. My Mother could breathe a sigh of relief, and my father could be proud of how hard I worked to survive. The fact that I was the first woman to get a degree in my family was never raised, I could now be respected as somebody with her place in the big machine, an active working-class member of society.

This full-time job turned into a 9-year career, as I worked my way from the retail shop floor to the corporate office, with shares and healthcare. Everyone told me to be proud to have climbed out of my council estate fate, but I never felt animosity about my family home and I pined for the freedom of the art studio. The job's lack of creativity and the never-ending workload was killing me, and just before my 10 year anniversary, I quit to work in the creative sector. I've never quite been able to allow myself a solely creative life, though, and even though I have a successful career, I have never gotten rid of that built-in response to serve the master.

When I think about self-worth, I think about change.

The voluntary choice to make it happen.

It's inevitable arrival.

The expectations placed on a working-class woman can weigh down and push up all at once. Our labels continue to give others some context to our motivations and our potential but fail to empower by their very definition.

I've found self-worth in knowing that I have a choice to serve others if I want, that this can be 'good', and that I can also choose to serve myself without guilt or shame or fear of ego. That my value is not defined by what label conveniently fits me at the time or by the quality of the light fitting above my head.

I hope to find self-worth in becoming somebody who is not defined by the thing that makes them money and that I can end the multi-generational search for

self-worth through hard labour. Finally, I hope that I can one day be released from the fear of starvation and self-loathing should I chose to live the life of an artist fully and at the very least be able to choose art as work in its own right.