

Hierarchy of Work?

By Gaylord Z. Thomas, 32°

Let me begin to answer this question with a little background because my response here is based on my own set of unique, and even recent, experiences. Before I retired as an Air Force officer, I had the opportunity for a tour of duty in Europe, more specifically in The Netherlands, where I observed a completely different attitude toward this particular topic. My neighbor was a banker, for example, and his best friend was the garbage man. They respected each other and did not look down or up at each other for what they did. They had grown up together and knew each other well, obviously, and there was absolutely no class distinction based on what they did. And that attitude was not merely next door – I could tell that it permeated their society. People were people, and it was refreshing.

Now, fast forward to present day and the United States and all of us know that you would not normally find the garbage man and the banker going to the game and having a beer together. There IS a class distinction in our society and yet, we are the ones who agree that “all men are created equal.”

In my own experience, having ceased my military career a little early (I was on a very likely track to continue to be promoted), primarily for my family to have a place they could live and call “home” for a change instead of moving every 2 years or less, my expectations were that my own experiences (and education) would be highly sought after. That was, after all, the impression we were all given – that our service to the country was valuable and that our penchant for self-discipline, at the very least, would be something that major corporations would want...they would be clamoring for military academy graduates. So we were told.

In reality, I’ve come to learn that in spite of my education and broad experiences, there is a very real hierarchy in our society regarding our “work” or professions. It matters not what is in my mind regarding such a hierarchy – it exists in the minds of others (in our society) and therefore exists and is real. But the “profession” of the military is NOT as welcomed as many would have us believe nor as welcomed as many would say that it is...they may say it, but their actions speak louder volumes. There seems to be several stereotypes of what kind of people all of us “military” people are, and nothing could be further from the truth. We are all very different and unique. We’re not all going to have that drill sergeant attitude and be pushy (you find those people among those who’ve never served as well) – most of us actually have much better “people skills” than that and can “lead” people to do things rather than pushing them into it. And many of us have some very deep understanding of how to run a budget and so forth as well, but if we are looking for something “business” related, our experience is often rather overlooked as “military” rather than business, regardless of how many millions of dollars we may have managed in our previous life. And we’re not, as some clearly seem to believe, “parasites” of some sort who are sucking a pension out of the government. I can tell you that we truly earned anything we may be receiving (most of us could have gone into other professions but chose this one out of a true “calling” to serve) and it truly is a profession and not just anybody can do it. There are many different views of military “types” and most of them, outside the military, are not terribly positive, unfortunately, and I was not aware of that until I stepped away from it and

am now experiencing being judged by these standards as I seek to begin a second career. My search has been frustrating, to say the least, as have been my experiences with “people” and even brothers where my expectations of integrity have been concerned – I do believe the military standard is considerably higher in regard to true integrity, unfortunately, as the mighty dollar beckons people to do things they know are wrong and “power” (or the illusion of having it) even more clearly corrupts.

And now, as I begin to re-create myself essentially and get a new “brand” of sorts by working toward getting a new licensure (long term care administration), I notice that even within this career field, there is a hierarchy. You have your nurses...but there are Registered Nurses and there are Licensed Practical Nurses. They are not equal. You also have your nurses aids and your medical aids (CNAs and CMAs). Most of the latter two have very little education – most are fairly fresh out of high school and have just enough training to do what they need to do. Yet, I’ve observed (already) that there is a real “mix” of people here. Some of the CNAs may never do anything else, but some of them have aspirations of rising to become a nurse of one level or the other – and they will do it. They are merely a CNA, perhaps because of a bad decision early in life (perhaps they got pregnant and are merely working to feed their children --- this is the reality of what is going on here). Are these people any less noble because they change out bedpans for the elderly as opposed to the nurse who does a lot more paperwork, documenting the care? I would personally say not, though the hierarchy in place would lead you to believe that. And this is merely a microcosm of an industry which is yet another microcosm of our total society and work force. This same sort of thing is present in and across all industries, I’m certain of it.

Why do we view things this way? My answer can be summed up short and sweet. Money. To expand on that a bit, we do “value” certain things more than others, and it’s not always the actual “work” that gets rewarded the most. The boss gets paid more...and probably should. He’s coordinating all of the “lower” tasks and is responsible for them, to include training or getting people trained to do those tasks and so on. The supervisor’s skills are different. Some skills earn more money simply because they are valued more. I value my doctor and pay him accordingly but he’s not a better person nor more noble than the guy who puts his heart into caring for a facility – a janitor, perhaps. One profession or another does not make you a better person.

And I will regress to the American idea, previously mentioned, that “all men are created equal” and point out that indeed we were “created” equal (as an infant, each of us has the equal possibility of rising to become the President of the United States, for example), but our lives’ experiences, to include our education, does not keep us equal, naturally. It’s a distortion to think otherwise (perhaps similar to the distortion and confusion of “freedom of religion” confused for freedom FROM religion which has put a recent stamp on our society...). But all of us do have the equal chance, in theory, at birth or our creation, of rising to essentially no limit. Yet, reality rears its head and if you don’t get the education and experiences you need, you will not rise to the top of any hierarchy – and this is not a bad thing either.

I will explain using my military background. Let’s say a man graduates from a military academy – he’s been educated to be a military professional and is commissioned a second

lieutenant. Let's imagine that this particular person has never missed a question on any exam while at the academy and maxed out all tests ever given him—ACT, SAT or whatever. He's clearly a genius, and now a military genius. Yet, he's at the bottom of the officer hierarchy. He may be clearly more intelligent than the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (sometimes we've seen that's not terribly difficult to do, though fortunately not too recently), but he still does not have the experience and has not "proven" himself. We place a rightful value, too, on experience (there's no substitute for it), and the seasoned man has earned his position. It would never be right to elevate a young person to the top in such a manner without the proper seasoning and experience. And he may never make it to that point – chances are that he won't – because someone else along the way was created equal and may have a stronger drive and be pushing to earn it, or he himself (in pursuit of happiness) may elect to retire or separate in lieu of his own ascension.

And, yet, I fear for our society, mostly because we are losing sight of the intentions of our founding fathers. Just as we are seeing their ideas of religion being distorted, even their ideas of "equality" are being distorted. We are moving (and ever so rapidly) to the socialistic end of the spectrum, artificially leveling the playing field.

Consider the fairly recent trend in children's sports where "all are winners." Everyone gets a trophy, whether they win or lose. While the intent is undoubtedly good (nobody likes to see a heartbroken child), we are depriving these children of lessons AND teaching them some bad ones all at the same time. The "losers" learn that they are "entitled" (and I greatly dislike this particular word) to a trophy...the same thing the "winners" get, so why try harder? The "winners" learn that they are not elevated in any way than if they lost, so why put forth any extra effort? Giving trophies to all is a lose-lose proposition in my view, and leads us further down the path of socialism and entitlement-mindedness as we teach our kids early on that they are entitled to the same as others regardless of their efforts or performance. We are breeding mediocrity.

We are losing sight of the fact that they were created equal, but equality really stops there for all intents and purposes. Some children are born into bad situations and truly have less chance of rising, yet we DO give them an education in our public school systems and they do have the ability to rise, and I also know this firsthand as well. Yet, again, it's not equal beyond birth, because the adults around them may not be as supportive and encouraging as perhaps others. But this is reality...and unfortunately, these same adults surrounding these kids who are not helping them to rise and become something are likely the same ones on the dole and teaching their kids the same attitude that the world owes them something more. And I believe we do not.

And it will get worse before it gets better – and already is getting worse. Our society has so confused its own "values" that when you consider how much money we contribute per capita to a prisoner in our penitentiary systems compared to what we pay for caring for our elderly, clearly we are out of balance. It is my understanding that in Oklahoma, we pay almost twice as much per year per prisoner as we do to care for our elderly...about \$174/month in prisons compared to about \$98 for caring for the elderly according to the numbers I've been exposed to in my training thus far (though I will admit that the person presenting this data to us was sort of a "lobbyist" and I have not had the opportunity to verify his "spin" of this information). However, consider that many of these prisoners will be incarcerated for crimes (rather than contributing to

society they chose to do the opposite) and we will be paying for them for decades and compare that dollar figure to what we contribute to caring for our elderly who did contribute their whole lives to society (most of them) and will usually only be in the homes for a few years at most...it doesn't take long to realize just how confused and out of balance our "values" have become. Another way to look at this would be to compare our per capita expenses on prisoners and children's education...again, it will, or should, alarm you to see these numbers!

Most people will tell you that they value caring for their parents/grandparents more than caring for a prisoner and would say the same comparing educating a child to caring for a prisoner. And if you handed them \$100 and told them they had to give it to one or the other, their difficulty would be in choosing between their elders or their children, yet, our society has somehow gotten out of balance with the reality of our values and criminals are "entitled" to have more than these other "deserving" groups.

So, is there a hierarchy? Yes – but it's not always what you think it is either! Since when did our society decide, consciously, to reward criminals more than we reward those who contributed to society their whole lives? This has sneaked in on us, clearly, and needs to be rooted out quickly and violently. Sometimes, crime actually does pay? A senior citizen may one day figure out that he/she will get better care if they commit a crime and go to jail for the last years of their lives as opposed to going to a home and also depleting their estate. Again, we've gone overboard "leveling" the playing field and it no longer reflects our true values.

And if you've never been to a socialist state (now that the wall is down...), you should go. See for yourself how socialism leads to less than mediocrity. I've seen it. There's no incentive to "be the best." And people settle for what they're entitled to...and eventually, that's what they get. Nothing – because there's nobody out there "pushing" and "driving" to make it happen. There is value in work! Without it, the infrastructure begins to fail and it's just a downward spiral. Then getting rid of the attitude becomes next to impossible. I only hope we're not too far into this spiral.

People's attitudes are key and does lead to judgments – both fair and unfair. Some will judge based on their experience of being entitled to be equal; others will judge based on their experience of being rewarded for doing more and doing it better. And when they have these perceptions, these perceptions become their reality. The hierarchy is there and it's real. I've experienced it myself repeatedly. In my view, it belongs there to a degree (as a reward for what we value) but not to the point that one person is particularly better or more noble than another. We simply cannot and do not know the circumstances of the other person and therefore should not judge them by what they do, but perhaps rather by how they do it. And having said this, I'm still quite alarmed by the unbalance I see in the hierarchy of what I believe people actually value compared to some of the programs we have in place to care for different groups of people. All of this leads me to conclude that whereas once our hierarchy may have been more fair (though perhaps not perfect), it's pretty clearly out of balance at this particular time... yet, having said that, perhaps my own values are not in accord with those of society? Afterall, look at how young people dress these days. Imitation being held as the highest form of praise, realizing that the "sagging" pants and "gangsta" look is directly from our prisons, perhaps rewarding our criminals IS inline with our true values? We certainly live in a confused time!