

IT'S WHAT YOU DO, NOT WHO YOU ARE

Jennie Bloch

[Assignment: Narrate a work experience that led to a significant insight about how work shapes our lives.]

(1) I walked nervously through the enormous colonial house that looked like no one had ever lived in it. My boss informed me that my first catering job would be working a country club party. During the month of February, the club is closed and members who are not lucky enough to jet to a summer home in Florida frequently invite one another over for cocktails to keep up all their incredibly important social contacts. My grandfather was the president of the club and I had met some very interesting people there. I envisioned myself dancing through clusters of people and smiling charmingly at them with a big tray of hors d'oeuvres in my hands. I thought I could make eight bucks an hour and be the life of the party at the same time. I couldn't have been more wrong. That first evening of catering I realized that a person's work almost completely dictates how she is treated by others.

(2) The first guests were arriving. My boss tied a white apron around my black uniform, shoved a silver tray into my hands, and pushed me through the swinging kitchen door. I was delighted to see that Mrs. Kirk, a fascinating woman with whom I had once sat at a party, was to be the first person I would serve. I could tell by the look on her face as I approached her that she didn't recognize me. I was slightly disappointed but I understood. She was seeing me now in a completely different context. My hair was pulled back, I was in a uniform, and I was not on the arm of my grandfather. The real surprise came when I offered her my tray. I smiled and asked her if she would care for a bacon-wrapped kumquat. She first looked at me as if I had infringed on her personal space, then smiled condescendingly, and finally said no in a very rude tone. For a moment I thought this insolent woman was not Mrs. Kirk, but when she turned to continue conversing with the woman next to her she became the animated, charming, witty woman I had thought she was. I was confused and went back to the kitchen, happy to be welcomed by the smiles of my fellow workers.

(3) About fifteen minutes later, my boss shoved a tray in my hand and once again pushed me into that curious, strange, and confusing phenomenon known as the cocktail party. By this time the small gathering had become a mob. The fashionably late crowd had just arrived. Carrying my tray of pickle pinwheels, I pushed my way through the masses of bright colored smiles and vodka glasses. My polite offerings were continually greeted with harsh snaps or grabs and criticism. Anxious to get out of the crowd, I scooted into a side room. There I found the new pastor at my church speaking with

several ladies. He, being new, didn't recognize me, but I finally felt that I had found someone who would treat me like a human being. I offered him an hors d'oeuvre and he curtly waved me off with his hand, not feeling the need to even acknowledge my presence or efforts. I began to realize that my evening was to be spent universally being treated like rot. I once again retreated squeamishly back to the kitchen to be with my equals. .

(4) With my chin up, I entered the lipstick-covered masses for the third time, stoically ready to face whatever treatment was offered me. This time I recognized a change occurring in me. I began feeling like rot and believing that these people were above me. The sounds of the talking and laughing peaked. Occasionally someone calling, "Doctor," could be heard over the crowd. I had never before realized the extent to which people's jobs dictate how they are treated. I also realized that I had adjusted my self-concept to fit the conception of the party guests. After my initial feelings of degradation and anger, I began to enjoy the company of the kitchen help much more than I believed I could have enjoyed that of the guests.

(5) The bright colors slowly retreated into the cold night and the house was filled with half-full plastic glasses and tooth picks. As I cleaned, I wondered how I usually treated hired help. I couldn't remember, but I was pretty sure that I had probably fallen into the common trap of being rude. I realized that I had not only changed my clothes to come to work, but my social status and self-concept as well. I also knew that next time I was asked what I did for a living, I would say I was a student rather than a cateress. My expectations for the evening had proven to be far from the reality. I collected my pay, which seemed meager compensation for my toil, and went into the cold night. I had a party to go to the next night and was hoping to buy a pretty bright dress.