Painter

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She gave up a job with social status for an entry-level position as a painter trainee. Why?

I don't remember ever being given any direct guidance by my parents or teachers about what I should do with my life. I decided to become a nurse because my parents would pay for two years at a junior college if I lived at home. I think they were somewhat proud—most parents like the idea of their daughter becoming a nurse. It has social status. Besides, nursing was one of the few things at that time that you could put in two years and have something for it.

After I got my associate in arts degree in nursing I went to work on the surgical floor as a staff nurse in a small Seattle hospital. I was twenty years old and extremely green. I wasn't on top of things. I remember one patient, an old lady, who had surgery, went home, and then came back in with complications. I knew she was going to die, and there was nothing being done. It was my first experience with death, and I kind of knew her, because she had been in before. She actually did die on my shift. It was very gradual, and it would have been beautiful if her daughter had been able to sit there with her. But she died with no one there, except for me popping in and out whenever I could. Her daughter couldn't stand the emotional trauma of being with her. So I remember going in and out and holding her hand, which gradually got colder and colder. I really thought it was a sacred moment and somebody should be with her. Anyhow, while I
was doing all this, I neglected my other duties and received complaints that I wasn’t responding in a timely enough fashion to the other patients. The gist of it was that I got fired from that very first job.

After that, I got married and went to work at a hospital in Tacoma. I worked in their psychiatric unit from nineteen sixty-seven to nineteen seventy-five. When I first went to work there I really liked the job. You shared charge duty with someone else. Each of you had equal standing and responsibility. Our job was first of all to make sure the patient was all right and ascertain their level of mental health for the day. We did a lot of one-to-one counseling. That all changed as it became more and more medical as opposed to psychologically oriented. What can I say? Nurses don’t make these decisions. I think the most exhausting thing about psych nursing was some of the doctors. I didn’t agree with their medical treatments and felt some weren’t very beneficial to their patients. They’d send people back into the same home situation, and then they’d come back in a year or two, not really changed. I quit there in nineteen seventy-five, tried selling real estate, and finally went to work in the other Tacoma hospital, which had a mental health unit. But I really couldn’t do it. I didn’t feel medically qualified, and there was a lot of lab work that I was supposed to be knowledgeable about that I really wasn’t. I don’t know. I really liked the unit, and the way they ran things, but I just felt increasingly stressed. At work I covered the stress as best I could. Yet I didn’t feel I was doing the job as well as I wanted to.

I promised myself that I wouldn’t leave there without a job and flounder around, so on my day off, I went down to see if they were hiring at the aircraft plant. I was determined to get a non-responsible job. In nursing you are responsible all of the time. I wanted to not have to take care of anybody, but I was also afraid. I wondered if I could function in that type of environ-
ment. I’ve always been good at theoretical things, but not good at just logical, ordinary, everyday situations, so I questioned if I had enough horse sense to handle it.

I filled out an application card that I would take an hourly job. At that time, after filling out the application, you were called to a window to talk with someone. Now, no one ever gets to talk with anybody. All of these people were going to the window and coming away without papers. And I told myself that I was not leaving until the person at the window gave me some papers. So I happened to get this man who had warm, brown eyes, and I think that’s the only reason I got the job. He had apparently heard something from headquarters about hiring women painters. I believe I got the job because I’m a woman. They had to meet their quota. I told him I would do anything, even clean the toilet, but he told me I couldn’t do that because you had to have two years’ experience. Still I wouldn’t leave, so finally he went to check with his supervisor about giving me a painting job. The supervisor said, “Well, maybe she got tired of emptying bedpans.” After that he gave me the papers for an interview, but that was just a formality.

I started work in July of nineteen seventy-seven, making eight dollars an hour. I was really nervous the first couple months, but then I liked it. At first I worked in tooling, painting large fixtures that held big parts in an airplane. I painted these with a brush. My arms got tired, and more often than not my hands would get cramped. Tooling is very cut and dried and boring. After about two months they decided to put a woman on the construction crew. Construction painters get to mud and paint and do all kinds of things. It was kind of like an honor when I got chosen for that crew. But I wasn’t allowed to do as much as I could have, because the supervisor didn’t supply me with the taping and mudding tools—a mudpan for doing drywall and knives. Without the tools on a mud job, there’s not a whole lot you can do.
We were supposed to be given those tools, but the supervisor didn't want me to learn. The attitude was that women can't really do this.

Along about this time I got a transfer that I wanted from swing shift to days. At one point I got a below-average evaluation, and I was quite upset and asked to have a copy of it. They didn't want me making waves, so the next day I was taken off the construction crew. There appears to be a lot of favoritism as far as the people who get the good jobs and bad jobs. I've been getting bad jobs for several years now.

They hire painters as learner-progressors. They hire people off the street without any background and train them on the job. It's a way of not paying much. You also don't get the training unless you happen to be favored. If you're favored then you get the training that you should get. At the end of two years, you're at the target level, which means you should be able to perform a certain job description. And they have not been allowing people to learn the different areas that are included in the job description. I talked to the supervisors about the problem and very little was done so I went to the union. One of the business reps told me that the company could sit me in a chair for the whole time. As long as they paid me, they didn't have to let me do anything.

It isn't fair because men don't stay in tooling. Usually men who take the time to talk to the supervisor and get into the in group move right into construction. And even if they start in tooling, they don't stay there long. Most women stay in tooling.

It is hard constantly being in the inferior position and having to ask all the time to be able to do things. Sometimes I get the feeling that maybe I can't do the trade. If you want to learn a trade well, you have to put yourself out all the time. Whenever I'm in a situation that requires more than what I know how to do, I have to go and ask, plead with them, you know, I wanna do this. You have to continually do that, but if you allow yourself
to believe that you can't do it, then it's hard to go and do anything. It's very frustrating. Sometimes when I'm wearing steel-toed shoes, I go and kick something; garbage cans are great.

The union, in theory, treats women equally with men. At most positions, even shop steward, you'll find women, but when you get to the thirteen business reps, they're all men. Women in the union recently formed a women's committee to help women with work problems. We are having a workshop next week to get women's input on priorities to be working on. We think that day care and job training will probably emerge as priorities. Most women are in the lower-paid grades and don't know about any upper-level jobs or what training they might take.

I've been a shop steward for two or three years. My job is very boring and gives me little except the money. The union allows me to be involved in another level. It gives me an opportunity to be active and hopefully work toward justice.

It is hard, though, because a supervisor can come in and make all kinds of mistakes, do wrong things to people, even go against the contract, but it seems like that's all forgiven. When the shop steward makes one small, little error, everyone's talking about getting rid of him, all behind his back.

I've had some difficulties the past few months because I didn't handle a situation right in my capacity as shop steward. I was technically correct, but didn't handle it in my best interest. In the morning you take down paint buckets, cut rings out of them, and put handles in them. One woman decided that some of the rest of us were taking her buckets and made a few scenes about it. The next day before the shift started, I was trying to read the paper and heard all this clattering and banging of jamming buckets down. I was disturbed and told the woman doing the stuff with the bucket that she shouldn't do that until the shift started because she'd have to be paid for it. Any time a
person works before or after a shift, he is to be paid for it. The woman didn’t seem to know what I was talking about, which kind of made me mad. Anyway, as it came down, I talked to the supervisor about paying the person overtime, which I shouldn’t have done, but I did just because I got upset and angry. A couple days later the woman came to me and demanded to see the business rep. I can’t materialize a business rep on demand, but did finally reach him on the phone. He said to have the woman stop by the office because he would be in. Well, that was totally unsatisfactory according to the person, because it was too late in the day. And there was another person who more or less said that, if I couldn’t get a business rep within an hour, then I wasn’t any good. Anyhow there has been a lot of flak flying around about what a lousy shop steward I am.

I definitely wouldn’t want my daughter to be a painter. Painting is a lot harder than it seems. In thinking about it, people say, well, I painted this bathroom or this living room, which is very easy compared to most painting that I experience. In regular painting you don’t have to do much prep work, for one thing. And really, the painting is the easy part. On most all our jobs, painting is not the problem. Like right now I’m doing a lot of scraping. I scraped all morning with a putty knife and hammer in an area where they sprayed part of the airplane. What I’m scraping off is essentially an overspray that got stuck and hardened. It’s hot, uncomfortable, and damn tedious work. The scraping makes a dust that is hazardous to your health.

Believe me, painting is not the safest job to have. I don’t know if I have done anything out of the ordinary that other painters don’t do, but working on ladders all the time, up and down. I’ve been in some really high areas. Sometimes, if there’s not a ladder that’s tall enough, you have to use one that’s a little short, and that’s hard to handle. If you’re aware of it, you’re usually okay. If you’re not, or sloppy, or don’t think about it, then you could get in trouble.
I think spraying is hazardous, particularly lately, because we've been spraying ceilings on these jigs. We spray with an airless sprayer, and it's really hard to use any eye protection, so we have paint all over our eyes. Now I stop and put on eye protection. It takes me longer to get set up, but I won't do it without goggles any more.

Often I work in areas under construction and have to wear a hard hat. You have to be very aware of things at all times. Once I was injured on the job because I stepped back into a hole that I didn't know was there and broke a bone in my foot. They're supposed to put up barricades around holes but don't always do it.

When I worked part time as a nurse, I had more time for my family. This job is hard because, when I'm tired, I'd like somebody to take care of me and there is no one. I get behind on my housework and have been working on different methods to get my daughter to help more. This last weekend I got really upset. I go to school every other weekend, so I got home at six o'clock Sunday night and the house was a mess. The dishes were still stacked up from Friday night. I cleaned up the kitchen and then put up a sign saying, "This kitchen will no longer be serviced." The sign was a little harsh, but I had to do something. It's helping, too. My husband was kind of mad, but sometimes he'll make dinner, sometimes the laundry. Sometimes he cleans out the shower, but it's not structured. His response is, "Are you going to change the oil in the cars?" He maintains the two cars, truck, Jeep, camper, and boat. We both have too much to do. But when I finish school in June, I hope to leave there for a better job.