THE THREE-INCH MIRROR

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You can hear the chanting Friday afternoons during lunch hour. Curiously Gregorian in tone and inflection, the voice of the Muezzin pierces Utica's downtown section with the call to prayer, the *Adhan*. "Praise Be To Allah." Amplified from the rooftop, the bullhorn beckons solemnly. Looking up, I am reminded at once of the air raid drills of my youth and the shattering vibration of the B-52s circling Griffiss Air Force Base. I would cover my ears and run inside. It was that loud.

Beneath the mosque's white stucco facade stands the brick-and-mortar structure of the Central United Methodist Church. Its parishioners long dispersed to the suburbs, the church remained vacant for years, a relic of the city's heyday. Placed on the county dole and slated for demolition, it was purchased at the eleventh hour by the Bosnian Islamic Association. Now, minarets peek from the roof and the crescent moon and star welcomes Muslims. A singular comfort, I imagine, for them as well as for me. They worship as one, and I recognize faith, repurposed in a holy place.

Changes come at us in rapid-fire succession, dizzying on the heels of a decline which consumed a generation of workers, and culminating with the Great Recession. In that monumental avalanche of loss, entire industries evaporated and, with them, livelihoods were extinguished. For those of us in the field of workforce development, it was an eternity of hand-wringing helplessness. We witnessed the

vast number of 40- and 50-somethings who banked on retiring from Oneida Limited, ConMed, Rite Aid, Covidien, Daimler Bus Industries, and other companies, a*d nauseam*. Dismissed by corporate America and minimized in contemporary culture, this is one population anxious for redemption and intrigued by the potential. They navigate the world of online job applications carefully, incredulously. "Why wouldn't I deliver my résumé in person?" I'm asked. "How else is the employer going to recognize me?"

We forge ahead now, re-energized, our grace period steadily ticking away. Tasked with realigning the strengths of a region etched in industrial manufacturing, we pledge to fulfill the promise of the New World Order. To Utica's north rises the Computer Chip Commercialization Center, or Quad-C, the long-awaited savior, its go-ahead stalled for over a decade in a bureaucratic stalemate reaching all the way to the office of the Commander in Chief. Construction of the Quad-C, currently in the second of three phases on the SUNY Poly campus, has harnessed the region in a whirlwind of anticipation. The excitement is palpable to bystanders, students, and building trades workers alike. Those of us whose knowledge of nanoscale science lies on the periphery nevertheless recognize it as essential to the technology hierarchy, particularly as an increasing number of occupational sectors rely on high-performance electronic and transistor devices.

One such venture is being championed at the Griffiss Business and Technology Park, 15 miles to the west, where the FAA has approved testing to determine how best to integrate commercial and civil unmanned aerial systems (UAS) into the national airspace system. Wildly innovative and futuristic, the positioning of civilian drones at Griffiss International is causing a ruckus of both controversy and glee. Looming large is the absence of any regulatory provisions which would enforce the protection of civil liberties, particularly those dealing with privacy rights. The FAA claims it possesses no jurisdiction over the matter but mandates that each of the six selected U.S. trial sites develop individual standards to better formulate such policy going forward. Opponents, however, cite the need for such legislation prior to testing, and one can hardly dismiss their concerns.

The reality of data-collecting surveillance, transmitted via small airborne cameras to civilian computer feeds, fuels a culture already hopped-up on healthy doses of paranoia. Big Brother ascends.

Meanwhile, armed with strategic vigor, UAS proponents advocate for drone use in the private sector. They refer to specific industries where access is often problematic and costly. Aerial imaging and processed data, utilized to monitor crop growth and weather trends in remote areas, could better inform the environmental and agricultural sectors. Response time in natural disaster occurrences would be maximized, expediting search and rescue efforts in ravaged communities. These and other benefits to health and human welfare seem undeniable, yet they could realistically be overshadowed by the escalation of for-profit drone use. As intriguing as the technology itself, the assortment of potential business applications becomes more mesmerizing with each new iteration. The debate will likely rage on, the implications not fully articulated or understood. But whether one is pro or con, there's no denying the capacity of UAS to alter the dynamics of the workplace as we know it. That the science is being tested locally speaks to the definitiveness of our economic resurrection.

As we begin our courtship of the millennials, we understand that only through the collaborative efforts of many will we attract and retain this cohort. At ease with technology and privy to an all-encompassing worldview, the emergent workforce possesses an unparalleled sophistication. How we meet this level of finesse, particularly as members of an aging community, will ultimately define our success. Economic development professionals' promise of well-paying jobs must be couched in a pulse-reviving social and business culture, a conduit of peer-to-peer communication acting on its own behalf as the best possible information and referral service. We understand the urgency of making this network a reality, and as the community rallies to put on its best renaissance face, we broadcast the desirability factor in hopes of elevating the region's visibility and encouraging the buy-in of the global generation.

A look at revitalization trends in other upscale locales serves

as useful examples. One noteworthy indicator is the accessibility to modern housing combining both residential and commercial spaces. Several private investors, in conjunction with the federal Housing and Urban Development Department (HUD), have acted on this knowledge. Three former downtown businesses are currently being converted to contemporary mixed-use space, the most conspicuous being the HSBC Bank, an iconic urban landmark set apart by its Carrarra marble facade and gracefully arched windows scaling from ground level to the third floor. Soon to be home of the Landmarc (hashtag UticaRisesFromHere), the building boasts commercial space at street level (recently leased) with luxury studio and balconied one- and two-bedroom loft apartments occupying the upper floors. Structural steel has been erected on the roof and will support construction of a new dining establishment and after-hours lounge. Mixed-use development, including some loft apartments, is capturing both interest and commitment, and infusing a dose of cosmopolitan living into Utica's inner-city limits.

Oneida County's centuries-old tradition of farming and agriculture also makes us worthy of a second look, particularly as issues regarding food production and safety continue to draw attention. The challenges associated with feeding the world, while also ensuring earth's sustainability, are all part of the ongoing conversation in a global economy. Mired in environmental stewardship, agricultural innovation and new methods of farming have exploded into mainstream consciousness and are at the forefront of the "grow local, eat local" movement. The sale and consummation of fresh, locally raised food products coincide with the reduction of synthetic fertilizers and other potential carcinogens used to preserve exported goods. Advocated by many as the best possible solution for the planet, and wholly embraced by the millennial locavores, the promise and popularity of this movement is evidenced locally by the development of several community-based gardens. They appear as a series of strikingly long, rectangular raised beds in vacant lots spaced throughout the city's older residential district, in neighborhoods known for questionable activity.

The gardens came into existence initially as a pilot program offered through the Oneida County Department of Health, which sought to provide an alternative to traditional planting in soil contaminated with lead-based paint. The program was soon embraced by several non-profit organizations and a few generous small-business owners, who donated both manpower and building materials. Met with curiosity and support from civic-minded onlookers, the gardens have been remarkably well-received. Food, it appears, serves as the most legitimate of common denominators, starting conversations and transcending both socioeconomic class and social status. The presence of the gardens, cultivating both fresh vegetables and new relationships, is urban renewal at its finest; the unification of labor and capital for the betterment of the community.

Nontraditional agriculture has also provided an avenue of workforce development for one of our most difficult-to-place populations: Limited English Proficient (LEP) adult refugees. Many of these individuals were employed in warehouse and assembly positions where no English was required, and lost their jobs during the financial crisis. Since then, collaborative and prolonged efforts to assist them in overcoming language and literacy barriers have been frustrating and mostly unsuccessful. The implementation of the community gardens is helping to change that, as we learn to maximize the strengths of this significant and valuable cohort.

Formal training in contemporary horticultural practices (a 10-week pilot program, facilitated in English and interpreted in a variety of languages) has been particularly beneficial to the Somali, Bantu, Burmese, and other agrarian-based groups. The wide-ranging curriculum, presented in both classrooms and field settings, covers specific food systems and three-season maximization of plant and plant-type yields in Upstate New York. Modern farming techniques and fresh food sale regulations are taught, as well as basic marketing and interpersonal communication skills. For the capstone event, program graduates are assisted in setting up and staffing a "food sale stall" at the Oneida County Public Market, as well as other local fresh food venues. Utilized in conjunction with the 155 raised-bed

Unity Garden project, the horticulture certificate initiative increases self sustainability and promotes microenterprise in a population categorically marginalized and considered one of the least likely to gain economic independence. One step forward, one small measure of success.

Our region's rich tradition of production is emphasized by a generational scope of work covering the agricultural, manufacturing, and building trades sectors. The value of working with one's hands, minimized for decades in American culture, has enjoyed resurgence due, in no small part, to the artisans, craftsmen, and creators who embody the do-it-yourself spirit. Entrepreneurship, the transformation of an idea into a value-added enterprise, is the perfect vehicle for resourceful individuals (and like-minded collaborators) who put their talents to work with the goal of effecting economic, social, and intellectual progress. The discovery and application of entrepreneurial solutions to pressing societal issues is a fundamental challenge posed to local college students and supported through Mohawk Valley Community College and SUNY Poly. With the establishment of the Community Entrepreneurship thINCubator and Innovation Challenge New York, these higher-education institutions have created an innovation platform which will launch the best hands-on ideas of our youth and be instrumental in the pursuit of an ever-improving quality of life for all.

It's a long-standing joke in our family: the son, a serial class cut-up, barely makes it out of high school and is steered, in parental desperation, to join the military. He enlists in the U.S. Navy and moves up and out of the ranks to become a nuclear engineer. The daughter, a seriously introverted "A" student and college shoe-in, chooses instead to pursue a career in the building construction trades, mystifying many but ultimately ensuring a third generation of skilled union labor. Not exactly the prescribed course, yet, seldom have I regretted the decision. Most of my career choice requirements were fulfilled by strenuous and pure work that was production-oriented and constantly in flux. The trades soothed an inherent craving for the outdoors, a fix I need to satisfy to this day. As a member of the Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA #35), I

engaged in nearly every aspect of commercial building construction, from the excavation and pouring of foundation footings to the final "punch list," a series of finish work tasks completed prior to new owner(s) taking possession of a building.

It was a terrific education. The nature of the industry places workers in a revolving door of jobsites, with each location being unique in its particular size and scope of work. Constructing additions and/or completing renovations to existing facilities positioned us in the daily operations of a specific business, corporate, or industrial culture. We were privy to a wealth of inside information, and met interesting groups of employees from all walks of life. Many individuals I met were long-term employees, "lifers," who possessed few options to upgrade their skills or access career-advancement opportunities. Plugged in to one or two job tasks, the majority seemed resigned, content even, with their status. They existed in a seemingly satisfying plateau of inertia, which always made me want to ask questions. I was curious to hear their stories. They were often equally curious to hear mine. In retrospect, I understand how those personal exchanges, years of them, broadened my conceptualization of work, and laid bare both the complexities and complacencies of human nature. Although the work I was doing was often merciless, I considered myself fortunate. I knew I would be moving on to another job at a new location, with an entirely different cast of characters. Working in the trades had its distinct advantages.

I don't recall making a conscious decision to pursue a formal education. It was, rather, a gradual realization of the years going by, the physical demands of my occupation, and a quiet, persistent, and personal dissatisfaction that I couldn't name. A friend encouraged me to test the waters by registering for Utica College's 10-month Paralegal Certificate Program. It was good advice. The following year, I returned to UC and enrolled in my first two credit-bearing courses.

It seemed inconceivable to me that I would ever attend Hamilton College. The school was prestigious and selective, and its tuition took my breath away. But the moment I heard about Hamilton's program for "returning" students, I knew I wanted in. Admitted on a

trial basis for two semesters, I attended classes as a non-matriculated, part-time student. Shortly thereafter, I was accepted as a second-semester sophomore. In that instant, I realized I was going to gamble my life's savings, but it hardly mattered. I thought of Karl Wallenda, the great German-American high-wire artist, and a quote that resonated with me: "Life is on the wire, everything else is just waiting."

The best education, I believe, is the one that changes the way you think. The six years I spent "on the hill" were among the most illuminating of my life. As a Women's Studies major, I learned how history and culture perpetuate traditional gender roles, and why my experiences in the building trades were reflective of a larger social movement to dismantle the patriarchal stronghold. It makes sense to me now that occupations most closely associated with masculinity are the ones facing the longest and loudest denial from the general populous. I wish I had known that going in, but I know it now, and the understanding makes all the difference.

My family flew in from all points to attend Hamilton College's commencement. Through laughter and tears, we agreed that the phrase "better late than never" had never held so much meaning. I remember the pomp and circumstance, the sound of the bagpipes, the look on my father's face. I knew something good was coming, and it did, in the shape of a second career, which gave me the freedom to utilize my knowledge in service to others.

Recently, a coworker presented me with a miniature hand-held silver-plated mirror. On the back of it is an engraving: John A. Roberts & Co. Utica, New York 1911. I later learned that Roberts & Co. was a downtown department store renowned for both its selection of fine textiles and its elegant fifth-floor Tea Room. According to a September 1911 edition of the *Syracuse Herald Journal*, Roberts & Co. was "The Store of a Thousand Wonders, Utica's Foremost Showplace Outside of New York City—the Greatest Department Store in the State." The mirror was given to shoppers during the Christmas rush that year as a token of appreciation. I forwarded the information to my colleague. "What are the chances," she laughed, "of finding something like that in a Vermont flea market the size of

two football fields?"

I did some further research on the store's namesake. A Remsen native and lifelong resident of the Mohawk Valley, Roberts was a successful entrepreneur who possessed a deep interest in community welfare. He invested his energies directly into the city, where he was a charter member of the Utica Chamber of Commerce and Oneida Historical Society. According to A History of the *Mohawk Valley: Gateway to the West* reference collection at Schenectady County Public Library, Roberts's career was closely intertwined with the early growth and development of the city in the early 20th century: "The achievements of John A. Roberts carried with them an impetus to the advancement of Utica as a center of business for Central New York. He built for the future. His faith in Utica was strong, and today, the great business of John A. Roberts & Company stands as a monument to his vision and faith." Indeed, Roberts was one of many forward-thinking individuals at the cusp of the great economic boom which would define the Mohawk Valley. I have to believe he would be pleased with his department store's legacy: a thriving senior housing complex still serving a purpose in the community he so valued.

United by generations of workers who sought the right to a living wage and enjoyed the privilege of upward mobility, our history remains a source of regional pride and ownership. How we distinguish ourselves going forward will likely be measured in much the same way: by the contributions of our incumbent, foreign-born, and newly entered workforce taking precedence in the emerging occupational landscape. Innovation will change them and they will alter the meaning of the word. It is a vortex of promise, enriched by the past, fluid in the present, inseparable from the future. In the exhilarating midst I'm caught; one foot in, the other one ready. I reach for the mirror, tucked away in my pocket, as I climb the steps to the State Office Building and go back to work.