

Power, corruption and lies: fighting the class war to widen participation in higher education

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Abstract

Education is, or should be, a gateway to a better life, a better understanding of ourselves in a complex and hierarchical social world. As a political scientist from a working class mature-student background I have been fortunate enough to build a career that not only celebrates and embodies the possibilities provided by educational access, but that also aims to highlight the staggering lengths the socially advantaged go to in their denial of educational opportunity for the vast majority of people from my background. Like all autoethnographies, I guess this contribution may seem an idiosyncratic take on working class life and academia; it is at once a primal scream against ingrained classism we have to confront every day, but also a recognition of the intellectual pluralism and tolerance of academia that allows and rewards even members of the 'awkward squad' like me if we stick it out long enough. It is a rage against the machine, but hopefully, also a small step towards changing the definition of academia.

I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square *Lady Bracknell, in The Importance of being Earnest, Oscar Wilde 1895*

1. Background - early life and schooling

I was born at the very end of the 1950s in Luton, Bedfordshire. My father was a Scottish apprenticed engineer and my mother a 'housewife' from a Scottish-Irish background, although born in Kent. They had met in South East London in the 1950s and moved out to Luton (then an expanding London satellite town) in 1957 after the birth of my elder brother. A younger brother was born in 1964. We lived in a council house, one of thousands built to accommodate the new influx of migrant workers, especially after the opening of the first phase of M1 motorway and the new Vauxhall Motors plant where my father was employed as a maintenance fitter, keeping the assembly line or 'track' running. He was also the branch secretary for the AEU, the engineering workers' union, and a Labour Party activist.

Holidays were almost always to Scotland where we stayed with relatives on my fathers' side in Coatbridge and Airdrie, small industrial towns in the coal and steel belt of Lanarkshire (to the east of Glasgow) with days trips to the Ayrshire coast, lochs, and Edinburgh (where my mother had lived during the war), with boat trips to some of the inner islands. Although my father was a skilled worker who worked all the overtime he could and we were never especially poor, we did qualify for 'meal tickets' (FSM as it would be known today) when attending the local Comprehensive school, Ickniel High, and were definitely aware of our relative financial position because the school served both our small council estate - Runfold - and private housing, including large detached houses in the affluent Bedford Road area. While I was clearly aware that our family and those of most of the estate kids were financially worse off than some of our peers, friendship groups didn't usually form along class lines; it was more about football, music, TV and movie tastes and personality. I had mates whose parents were lawyers and Doctors as well as builders and factory operatives and we all hung out in eachothers houses (ours was on the school cross-country route and groups of us would routinely dive-in there to dry off while mum made us sandwiches). Living in a council house in the 1960s and 70s didn't attract the opprobrium it did in later decades - we weren't considered 'chavs' and 'pram-faces' living as a bovine underclass in 'sink-estates' until '*Shameless*' and '*Benefits Street*' came along to tell the middle-classes just how *thoroughly* underserving we were. Cheers, Channel 4, a Tory invention to promote diversity but which cemented the trope that the only skills the WC have are the ability to 'fiddle the benefits system'.

At school I was only ever good at English, History, Art and Geography and won prizes for 'composition' and art at Junior School. I was rubbish at maths and the sciences and was routinely in the top sets for the subjects I liked and the bottom sets for those I didn't. I was always a bit of a 'class clown' (and was caned for larking about too much, a genuine badge of honour) and was quite popular, having mates either side of the 'clever/funny' v 'tough-guys' divide. I was smart enough to talk myself into, and out of, trouble on a regular basis, a trait I seem not to have fully shaken off. I left school in 1976 with two GCE O levels (English language and History) and took up a job with WH Smith as a floor walker, though within months relegated to the store room for having hair judged to be too long, flares too wide and platform soles way too high.

2. What class means to me and my upbringing

While nobody I knew talked about class, even in a political household where I used to help my dad with his branch secretary paperwork, we all knew where we sat on the workers v bosses scale. The 1970s were politically tumultuous: strikes that brought down a Tory government; coal shortages that led to national power outages and homework by candlelight (luckily we had a coal-fired central heating system and a gas-cooker); the Yom Kippur war that led to a quadrupling of oil prices in the West and consequent food and petrol shortages; after 1975, with the Labour government

reliant on minority support from the Liberals and the Ulster Unionists, the Tories with a strident new female leader who everyone just knew were going to win the next election. In 1979 they put duly Labour out of office, determined to destroy union power and go for high unemployment as the 'acceptable price to pay to tackle inflation' as Geoffrey Howe, the Tory Chancellor, noted at the time.

I continued in a series of low/no skilled jobs from the age of 16 to 31, with two periods of unemployment in the early 1980s, my only brush with educational self-improvement a Sociology A level at night school in 1983/84; my first child, a son, was born between the two parts of the exam and I still (half-jokingly) blame him for only getting a D Grade. I enrolled on A level courses in Politics and Economics over the next couple of years but each time I had to drop out due to changing shift-patterns at work (night-shifts paid better and by 1986 we - married since 1978 - had two children and a mortgage to service); by this time I had seriously begun to regret leaving education at 16 and taking on ever more boring jobs with no intellectual stimulation and never enough money to do anything about it. In total I had 31 jobs over 15 years, my most valuable qualification a Fork Truck Driving Licence. None of those jobs, should they still exist, would be at the level of the minimum wage today.

Years later, as an academic I am not 'in the research' in the same way that a sociologist focussing on class or cultural identity might be, so class is not central to my work - however as political scientist focussing on HE policy, I know social class is absolutely central to the educational life-chances of the poor and otherwise marginalised communities. Looking back, I suffered from the lack of such opportunities, what I now see as the systematic denial of educational opportunity by, and on behalf of, the middle and upper classes desperate to restrict wider entry to the professions they wanted to reserve for their own offspring.

Accessing HE was never on the radar for people like me (when I was 18 only about 10% of young people attended any kind of higher education), but that is more about working class values back in the 1970s and my own family's relationship with the world of work. My father hoped I would end up working, maybe in an office rather than out in the cold, for a decent firm or one of the public utilities, but none of that was assumed to depend on education, and at 16 I had had enough of education anyway. Quite a few of my peers went on to FE college to 'learn a trade' (which you could access with two O levels), or even 6th Form College to take A levels (entry was 3 O levels or above) and thus get an office job; still others entered the Armed Services, all of which had excellent trade training, and one strange, quiet lad I was at school with was clearly destined for University (his dad was a stockbroker, whatever that meant) but I was happy just working for a living and having a bit of money and independence. I was envious of no-one. It was a tough world with casual violence, drug taking and petty-crime close to the surface, political and financial turmoil on every new bulletin, but it was 'our normal' and nobody I knew thought about it as class war until the 'punk rock' entered our consciousness around 1977, and even

then that seemed to be more about individual self-expression and anarchic rage against adulthood and conformity than about challenging economic inequality.

I didn't 'feel' particularly working class even as I raged against the Thatcher era and how it increased exploitation of people in low paid, low skill work like us. I knew people from my council estate that had gone on to work in the City and I knew old school mates from bigger houses and posher families that were working 'on the track' at Vauxhall or doing other low-status work, given the volatility of the labour market: in 1978-79 I worked on the track alongside an airline pilot with a cut-glass accent who couldn't find work as oil-price inflation and the consequent recession devastated the tourism industry. I always knew, however, that in general the rich exploit the poor/ the powerful exploit the weak and the rationing of educational opportunity for those that 'deserve it', disguised as meritocracy, was central to the entrenchment of elites. During the Thatcher years the poor and minority ethnic groups were increasingly demonised, blamed for their own failure to succeed in this meritocracy, this 'class-less society' as John Major portrayed it. The Victorian morality concepts of 'deserving' and 'undeserving poor' re-entered the discourse along with the return of charities and voluntary societies to the public feeding troughs. It was like Beveridge was never a thing, and Michael Young's *The Rise of the Meritocracy* wasn't a scathing satire.

I guess Lady Bracknell was right, education in England had no effect and it clearly suited the elites that we were so dis-educated that we were no threat to the toffs of Grosvenor Square.

3. Meanings of working class-ness

For me the working classes were people who worked in the private sector of the economy for (not much) money - and that, to my consciousness, included routine office workers and those in retail, however smart they dressed, however warm, clean and comfortable their working environment compared those I worked in. This kind of work context led to an awareness that if whatever your company made didn't sell enough units, or you weren't good at your job, you would be out of work regardless of what your 'permanent contract' said. The working classes, in this reading, are defined by their relationship to the supply-demand nexus within capitalism - as Marx and Engel realised - and I think that sometimes gets forgotten in sociological analyses that focus on WC culture. For me and my peers, working on the track at (US owned) Vauxhall Motors in the late 1970s or (Swedish owned) Electrolux making fridges and freezers in the early 1980s, it would be absurd to be calling for the overthrow of capitalism; we needed our employers to be better at the global economic rate-race of capitalism so that we could (in theory) command higher, or at least more secure, wages.

Decisions made in Detroit and Stockholm determined our standard of living and state of the clothes our kids wore to school, and it wasn't uncommon for us to know of and

comment about relative share prices in the works canteen. Of course, this was in those halcyon days when rising share prices accompanied the opening of more factories and the employment of more workers; from about the mid-1980s, improved share prices began to be linked to factory closures and the replacement of workers with automated manufacturing processes; often production was off-shored to places where labour was cheaper.

So we, the 'actual working classes' were necessarily very attuned to the changing basis of demand for labour in a way rarely acknowledged by middle-class academic sociologists (at least since Goldthorpe's Black Coated Workers studies, Goldthorpe 1980). Consequently, the unwillingness of the working classes to call for the overthrow of capitalism was often branded as 'false consciousness' by the commentariat and academic sociologists. The longer I exist in the middle-class world of academia, the more ingrained I realise these beliefs are among my peers, even today. It is why I fight daily for higher education opportunities for all; I want to *change the definition of academics*, not just tritely theorise why the working classes are really better off getting 'back in they box'.

Mainly because of the auto-association between capital and labour in my mind, I would never, during those decades of factory/warehouse employment, have considered public sector workers as 'working class' in the same way as those that worked in the productive private sector. Even the lowest-paid council employees were protected from the vicissitudes of supply and demand: society would always need bin-men and park-keepers, (council) house painters and rent-collectors; equally, well-respected professions made up of teachers, nurses, social workers and careers advisers were protected from the harsh realities of the business cycle. They may not have earned much more than us, but they were (in those days at least) relatively protected from the precarity of life on the capitalist front line.

4. Class and my HE journey

Entering the world of higher education at 31 in 1991 I had the same values I had as a teenager and was still poor, but I had long left the council estate I grew up in. The dislocation from old school friends had already happened, we all grow physically apart (though often stay friends) as we age and enter other relationship through the normal processes, unless we stay in the same community (and that would likely apply to 'stay-homers' of any social class). Eventually going to a Polytechnic at the age of 31 didn't feel like any kind of class-departure to me, but I knew studying was different from (and a lot more rewarding than) working for a living, and given the level of pay in the kind of jobs I was giving up for a student grant, it wasn't even a financial sacrifice. My wife, who hadn't returned to full time work after our children were born, also became a student at the same time, taking a four-year B.Ed. degree; two grants plus some part-time work during the holidays brought our income up to what we had to live on when I worked 40 hours as a fork truck driver. Both graduating in 1994, we were pretty much instantly transferred into a much higher income bracket, even with

my wife's primary teachers' entry-level salary (about £16,000) supporting my postgrad studies (funded by ESRC at £6,000 per year for both the MA and PhD).

On enrolment at Huddersfield back in in October 1991 I found a supportive environment where around 40 out of 150 on our BA degree (Historical and Political Studies) were mature students. Therefore I didn't feel the sense of class outsider-ness that many WC academics feel (e.g. Byrne 2019; McKenzie 2015), certainly not the sense of being the only 18 year old council-house kid from a Comprehensive at an elite university, surrounded by posh Grammar school kids. Being a mature student is also unusual in the literature - what coming from a working class background means to someone like me with my work history (factories, warehouses, cold-stores, security guard, aircraft-cleaner, parcel delivery driver) is different to the deracination often noted by 18 year-old working class school leavers when they progress to HE (any HE but especially selective HE). The confusion of going 'back home' at holidays and struggling to adjust with their former peers that never entered HE - the kind of social dislocation often reported by sociologists - never happened for me (for one thing, like most mature and most working class students I was a commuter student and never lived in halls). Before I went back into education I had left home, married, was on the 'property ladder' (i.e. mortgaged to the hilt), had two young children and had relocated to the north of England in 1989 to avoid financial penury. Cashing in on the huge difference between southern and northern house prices at that time, we sold our three bedroom terraced house in Luton, paid off the mortgage and thousands more in credit card and other debts and bought a former council house in a West Yorkshire pit village for cash - and banked £15,000 on the deal. All of this long before even thinking of studying for a degree. By moving to Yorkshire we had bought ourselves options and a better lifestyle for our kids (aged two and four in 1989), even if I had remained a fork truck driver the rest of my working life.

Even among the mature student cohort at the Poly a couple of years later my 'actual working class' background was unusual - many of my peers had worked at respectable levels in office jobs and/or come from more comfortable backgrounds than I did, and often became mature students to try something different, do something more intellectually stimulating and worthwhile. It should be noted that between 1988 and 1992 the Conservative government encouraged growth in the system by slashing the unit of resource (funding per student) and most Polytechnics responded by expanding numbers. Participation among young people more than doubled in five years: from 15% in 1988 to 33% by 1993, as I realised later when I began to seriously research access to the HE system as part of my PhD. I and hundreds of thousands of my peers - mature students, 'women returners' (which in Huddersfield and Kirklees included many Muslims) as well as young people who would never have made it into the 40 universities that existed prior to 1992 - inadvertently benefitted from this early Conservative move to encourage competition and create a HE market (Further and Higher Education Act, 1992).

As noted above, much of my published policy analysis work across the last two decades has focussed on how system expansion necessarily *widened* participation and diversified the student body, how the ideas of expansion (in the name of human capital) and diversity (in the name of social justice) would not have been possible if left to the autonomous universities. These, in-turn, accepted successive Conservative and Labour government's marketisation of the system which allowed them to remain at the apex of the hierarchy of newly unified system which had expanded to around 133 institutions in England alone by 1993 (McCaig 2018). This institutional schism (pre-1992 vs post-1992 institutions) in many ways reflects social class divisions and plays out daily in the ways that these very different types of institutions aim to widen participation, indeed much of my academic work has explored the way that widening participation policy plays into our understanding of the differentiated HE marketplace (Bowl, McCaig and Hughes 2018; McCaig and Taylor 2017).

So, back in 1991, for me progressing to HE wasn't about class-consciousness and that is in part because I wasn't surrounded by braying, self-confident children of the elite. Many of the 18 year olds I came across over 5 years at Huddersfield's School of Music and Humanities (I taught Modern European History modules as an associate lecturer for two years after graduating) were only there because they had done less well in their A levels than they expected. Some of the young working class students had chosen Huddersfield because it was local and allowed them to stay in the family home, because they had little money to waste on rent and/or they had family responsibilities. It was their stories that formed my initial awareness of the differential experience of WC students, in particular the way that the WC (of any age, gender or ethnicity) embraced HE as pretty much the only route out of minimum wage and low-skill futures. Their life experiences were a million miles away from the 'rite-of-passage' procession of typical middle-class students at more prestigious institutions - for one thing, it seemed we were much more likely to actually enjoy the opportunity and - crucially, given the state of debate about access to HE today - to benefit from upward social mobility as a result.

That widening HE participation to people from our backgrounds has been a good thing and essential to the longer term aim of creating a more socially just society is axiomatic for me, and I have always championed the concept in everything I do as an academic. This often involves wading through the weight of middle class resistance to the expansion of the system that enabled (a tiny few) people like me to break into the system. Unfortunately, even post-1992 universities employ a large amount of academics that think **a)** there are too many people in the system; **b)** too many people in their classrooms; and **c)** too many of them don't have the necessary educational credentials. Some of them have drunk the meritocratic kool-aid and apparently wish their own jobs and two-thirds of the HE sector away....

5. Social class and the confounding of the mythology of meritocratic social mobility

So where did we get the ridiculous idea that higher education - a publically funded service, remember - should be rationed in this way? As opportunities expanded to fill the human-capital demands of the changing economy, it became important to social elites to differentiate the widening world of higher education. The first response to the Robbins Report (1963) was to establish a set of Polytechnics without the ability to award their own degrees, and under the control of Local Education Authorities - with the effect that necessary expansion of higher skills provision would leave the autonomous universities unmolested and unreformed (to be fair, Robbins himself never intended to see a 'second division' of higher education created. It took an Oxford educated Labour Secretary of State, advised by Oxbridge-educated civil servants to do that!). The public sector of HE - and the new Open University after 1970 - could do the widening participation work while the children of the aspirant middle classes finished their education - and developed their personalities (Gellert 1991) - in residential universities based on the public school model. Meritocracy - the social 'sorting of the wheat from the chaff' - had to be maintained at all costs, and there was plenty of intellectual justification to draw on.

Mallock in his *Aristocracy and Evolution* (1898) employed social Darwinist arguments to suggest that the 'intentional few' (rather than random opportunity) showed an evolutionary survival of the fittest: Mallock "yoked animal evolution as applied to society with Christian providentialism, in which the part of God was replaced by the 'superchargeable few'" (Fawcett 2020, 209). Here we see how easily the social control of organised religion (based on the acceptance of a rigid social order) was replaced in a more secular epoch by the social control of assumed meritocracy, in which the rich quite rightly rule the roost: William Graham Sumner was another influential social thinker who promoted the benefits of laissez-faire competition which sorted people into the 'fit' and 'non-fit', the 'more capable' (with attendant 'personal and social value') and the (valueless) 'non-capable'. Needless to say it fell to the more capable to lead: "Only the elite of any society, in any age, think" (*Folkways*, Sumner, 1906, cited in Fawcett 2020, 212). Oh, let us weep for the rich man's burden.

Schumpeter, in his hugely influential *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942), similarly believed that capitalism (the natural order of things in competitive societies) could only survive the democratic pressure if led by 'an authoritative upper class ... and institutional breakwaters against majority pressures' (Fawcett 2020, 216). Order - the rule of the deserving rich over the undeserving poor - was essential to stable social functioning, and the hegemonic discourse of merit and meritocracy was essential to the subjugation of both the weak (who could be persuaded they were merit-less) and the aspirant middle-classes, who were encouraged to become socially mobile by accumulating merit in the form of (rationed) educational opportunities.

Historian Selina Todd has recently produced a scathing demolition of the '*The Great British Social Mobility Myth*' in her painstakingly detailed social history *Snakes and*

Ladders (Todd 2021). Todd reserves especial ire for the charities and other lobby groups that consist the social mobility industry that disseminates the "message that personal aspiration and ambition can overcome 'disadvantage'" (Todd 2021, 339). Anybody actually working in the field knows that the working classes don't lack aspiration (Rainford & Harrison 2020), but we certainly recognise a deficit discourse when we see one. It's the same 'blame the poor' game we have been reading for a 150 years, yet we see it trotted out in supposedly critical sociology (much of it based on the theoretical works of Bourdieu and Sen's 'capability theory') that, somehow, transfers seamlessly into Conservative government policies aimed at diverting the working classes away from HE access in successive White Papers (DBIS 2011; 2016) and the most recent HE Act (HMSO 2017).

Hardly surprising, given the focus of the social mobility industry is merely access to the most restrictive elite institutions, those that use the social class proxy of high A level entry grades to maintain the position of Russell Group institutions at the apex of league tables. These organisation have no intention of actually 'widening participation'; protected by legal autonomy over entry requirements, they only have to worry that they are not accused of contravening the anti-discriminatory clauses of the Equality Act (2010) which, notably, doesn't feature social class background among its protected characteristics.

The social mobility industry - much of it in the form of entrepreneurial voluntary 'third sector organisations' (TSOs) mainly reliant on state funding - merely services a charade that reinforces inequality of access. Dorling notes that 'there is no evidence than any initiatives run by social mobility charities and lobby groups has increased upward mobility or even working class people's entry into higher education' (cited in Todd 2021, 340). Not only do the elites of the Russell Group fail to widen participation, they and their acolytes actively prop-up the system that systematically drives further access inequality:

"The social mobility industry claimed - in the words of the Speakers for Schools website - 'to shake up the current system to change the status quo. But in the 2000s and 2010s, none of those in this industry sought to remove the obstacles that prevent children from realising their ambitions. They offered no criticism of the ways that the Russell Group or private schools hoarded resources. They did not campaign against the preservation of wealth by the country's richest people..' (Todd 2021, 339)

Long before coming into the world of higher education as a student and then an academic, I had read enough history to know that restricted access to education is central to the deliberate entrenchment of social inequality, where only the achievements of the comfortable middle classes are valorised as meritorious. As a researcher and scholar of the relationship between power and ideas I remain convinced that only a relentless critical focus on the venal mechanisms of

policymaking in the neoliberal HE market can cut through the hegemonic cultural mythology surrounding the notion of social mobility based on 'merit'.

6. My HE journey, student to staff

Has being working class impacted my HE progression and career? Once in the system, I honestly don't think it has. From first temporary post at 39 (2 years fixed term, the first of 3 fixed term posts in 5 years), first permanent research post at 43 to Professor at 58 was quite rapid, and I am not conscious of being blocked or prejudiced against in interviews because of my class background; I am even more sure I have never been unjustly promoted as a 'token'! Focussing on politics and political economy I have been successful by most measures and I can only assume that I am good (enough) at what I do. I did well enough as an undergraduate to achieve a First Class Degree, and later secured ESRC funding for both my Masters and PhD at a Russell Group university. Since entering academia as a Research Associate (at the same RG institution where I took my PhD), I have managed to do enough important research work with influential colleagues, then later bring in enough research income and produce enough research articles/book chapters and books to satisfy the promotion criteria, hopefully without treading on anyone's toes or even being overly ambitious.

However, my progression from undergraduate to post-graduate was affected by the fact that my BA Hons. (1st Class) was from an ex-Polytechnic, and the University of Sheffield offered me a (funded) place on a Masters in Political Economy rather than take me straight onto a PhD. This only became clear to me when I started my PhD in Politics as part of a cohort including some that progressed directly from undergraduate 2:1s at pre-1992s... with no need to have achieved a First or taken a Masters. That is where class bias comes in, in the minds of RG academics and managers, who, it seems, simply couldn't accept that somebody from my background could ever be as meritorious as somebody whose family background enabled them to achieve sufficient A level grades as teenagers. As a mature working class student, you can bet this lesson was doubly noted. There never was any evidence that post-1992s were handing out Firsts more readily than pre-1992s, but they wouldn't take someone like me on a PhD on trust. Classist thinking undermines our HE system to an almost unique degree; first it denies access, then it denies progression, e.g. into postgraduate research, the gateway to academic careers; and then it reappears in the hiring practices of FTSE 500 employers who only deign to peruse applications from certain 'elite' universities (i.e. universities that only select from the elite in the first place).

Class bias is everywhere, and if you are WC you don't have to look for it, it is there in every ministerial speech (regardless of party) and every policy document, and in every patronising mission statement from the members of Todd's social mobility industry.

Working in the field of WP policymaking and employing critical policy discourse analyses (Fairclough 1993; Fairclough and Fairclough 2012) affords me the opportunity to highlight class-based rationing through the mechanism of institutional autonomy over admissions to the system. In this way my work exposes the venality of meritocracy and the mythology of social mobility discourses, prescribed as a way out of the poverty-trap but in reality just intellectual cover for the reinforcement of social hierarchies. So my class-war is based on what I have seen of the development of the HE system in my time including, the development of system differentiation as part of marketisation, and designed to restrict opportunities from the great unwashed.

Summary

For me, the benefits of being more politically than class-aware in the first 30 years of my life, and being an academic that analyses policy and policymaking rather than a sociologist focussing on culture and identity, are that I never felt I was abandoning a class identity to enter higher education. I was and am a student of politics and policy, and I'll remain a student of politics and policy so long as I am interested in them as subjects, or until get told by colleagues and employers that I am no longer any good at my job. I note Byrne's (2019) point that he only became aware of becoming working class in academia, but I never saw the transition let alone thought that becoming aspirational was in some way a rejection of working class identity. Nobody I grew up with was more aspirational than those that followed their dreams and abilities, whether that was to play football or cricket for England, be on stage or TV or make millions in the City; the fact that most of them may well have had their chances blocked by structural barriers is irrelevant to their, or their families', aspirations. If you are at the bottom looking up, what else can you do but aspire?

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