

RJB-23
A Single Parent

846 Broadway-Lot #49
Saugus, Mass. 01906
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:



Richard Balzer is an Institute Fellow exploring the effects of social and economic change on lower-middle-class America

1969 was Western Electric's centennial year. It was the year that Carol Leavitt was selected in a plant-wide election as Miss WE Valley. Until the day of the election, the then 29 year old divorced mother was unsure if she wanted the title. But standing on the stage, in the plant auditorium, waiting with nine other finalists, all doubts disappeared-- she wanted to win.

What followed was a very busy year for Carol. In the year that she reigned as the Work's hostess and representative, she traveled as far north as Mt. Washington, New Hampshire, and as far south as Boston. While in Boston, several state senators took her into the empty council chambers. She was allowed to stand at the podium and rap the gavel. She still has the souvenir gavel which she was presented.



All the occasions took up a lot of time. A day hardly went by when there wasn't an event to go to. It wasn't unusual for Carol to punch in at seven, primp up in the bathroom, be called off her job by eight, and not come back before 4 o'clock's punching out.

Carol Leavitt got to meet many people, including Senator Edward Kennedy, that year. She went to many functions she would not otherwise have gotten to. Often she was in the company of the plant manager, Harry Snook, whom she remembers as a man who had class. He was the first big wheel with whom she had come in contact.

It was a good year but Carol was ready for it to end. She felt the subtle pressure of needing to be constantly up on current affairs, in order to give a good impression. She felt a tremendous responsibility to the company.

However, it wasn't easy going back to her normal schedule. She felt a confinement in her work routine that she hadn't previously felt. It was as if she had taken a step forward and now needed to step back. It took a lot of self-discipline to get back into the routine.

Carol Leavitt was one of the first people pointed out to me when I started work. I remember noticing that she was always well dressed. She looked as though she could go to a fancy restaurant after work. I didn't speak to her for a long time, but I noticed that men were always dropping by. Occasionally, I'd hear her talk about going to New York, about drinking at the Saint Moritz or the Pierre. I thought of her as an attractive woman with expensive tastes.

Once I told her my image of her. She laughed, and said, "You know, that must be the image I project, but I don't think that's me. I don't know how people get their ideas of what I'm like."

Outside the plant, away from social evenings, Carol Leavitt is a single parent with two children, a daughter, 16, and a son, 14.

"It's taken me a long time to come to accept that I'm a single parent and can't be everything to my children. For a long time I felt, 'Hey, I'm doing a real good job.' But then when my son started having disciplinary problems in school, I had to face the fact I'm a single parent, my son doesn't have a father to depend on. I can't be a father because I'm not a man. So he has to face it and I have to face it.

"It got worse and worse. My son pushed me and pushed me and I was really frantic. One day, I couldn't take it anymore. I was screaming and hollering and I said, 'I'm sick of taking your bullshit, you either act right or I'm going to hit you', and I did. I really hit him. After that it seemed like I was much calmer inside because I knew I couldn't do it all.

"I've been luckier than most single working parents, however. The kids have had a little more stability because we've lived in my mother's house. After my divorce I moved in with her, and I have not had the everyday money worries that I would have had if I were by myself. I don't have to concern myself with the running of the household. It's my mother's house and she takes care of it, she likes to.

"Also I've worried about the kids less, living in her house. I think the biggest worry of a working mother is where her children are, and what they're doing. My mother works the day shift, and I worked nights for many years. That way I could be with my children during the day, when they were young, and she was here at night. My mother has taken a lot off my shoulders; she's the most unselfish person I think I've ever known. We disagree about how to bring up the kids, but she doesn't interfere.

"But, as much help as she is, being a single parent is still very lonely. You constantly realize there is no husband around to talk to when the children misbehave. And when the children do something and you're very proud, there's nobody to share it with. You're all alone all the time. When the children are in bed you're still all by yourself. Sure you may go out. I go out in the evening, maybe for a few drinks and dinner, but then I go home and I'm still all alone.

"I think for a long time I was too tough on myself. I was too aware of the image I was trying to present. I wanted to present a strong image, an image of someone who could always cope. Now I can see that was silly. I would try not to get mad at my kids. I can remember times when they would get me so mad. At times I thought I could kill them. At times I wanted to say, but I never did, 'Well, I didn't choose for you to be upset now, or for you to do this'. But no, I thought, they have precious little egos. They can tell you if they're upset but you can't tell them how upset they can make you, because you're not supposed to hurt their little egos. I had to get away from that. I had to realize I was hurting them by not showing them how I felt.

"For a long time, I was all the way to one side of the pendulum. I was the whole mother thing. Then I said the hell with this, I'm going to go out and have a good time, which I did. My children suffered and they started

having problems. So I said I can't do this either, let me see if I can get in the middle, strike some kind of balance.

"That's really the big problem, trying to draw the line. How much should I take for my own needs? How much should I give to them? Where do I stand in my own life? One of the things I have to decide is how involved do I want to get with someone romantically. Right now I tend to stick with people who have a full life of their own, like I have. After I get home from work and take care of my kids I don't have a lot to give. I don't want any pressures from a man. I don't want anybody pushing me. I want to go out, have a good time, and relax.

"My kids tend not to get involved with my relationships with men. It's always been that way. Years ago, when they were young, and I was younger, I always kept my social life separate from my home. We lived in my mother's house and I never felt comfortable about having boyfriends hanging around the house. I couldn't infringe upon my mother's hospitality, so I just didn't bring men around that much.

"Also my family, my brothers and sisters, and my Mom and Father, we've always been close. So on holidays, birthdays, anything, we've always been together. I've never really brought many outsiders into the family unit. So my kids were always very passive about it, they don't get involved with my boyfriends.

"What I want from a relationship is still in the future. Right now my number one concern is my children. As much as I love them, I will be glad when they grow up. Then they can make their own decisions, and I can make my own decisions. I can do what I want to do. That'll be great, a luxury.

"I used to think when they were little, 'My God, these kids are never going to grow up. I'm going to be tied up until I'm 89.' And now I'm thinking my oldest, my daughter, is going to be 16 and my son is 14. Soon they'll be making their own decisions.

"Like every other parent I had all kinds of dreams about what my kids would be. I've had to accept that I don't know how they'll turn out. I'd like my kids to grow up to be happy constructive people. That's all I'm going to ask. Before I wanted them to be something great. But now I realize they can't, their background is not conducive to them really being something.

"I grew up in a very small neighborhood, everyone went to the same church, the same school. The neighborhood was the focal point of my life. You went to school, you went to work, and you got married, that was all. So at eighteen, just after I graduated from high school, I got married, and within a couple of years I had two kids and I was tied into a bad marriage.

"Now when I look back I think if I could only spare them the headaches and the pain. This is the hopeless part of being a parent, you cannot make your children avoid mistakes.

"I was hoping, this is one of my dreams, to introduce my children, especially my daughter, to a better class of people, to a nicer life. My Mary is very special and I'd like her to get the best out of life. I wanted her to realize that there is more to life than getting a man, getting married, having kids quickly and tying yourself down.

"It's taken me a long time to learn about other things. I like having nice clothes, meeting people with something to say, having dinners at fine restaurants. I've tried to interest my children in these things, but they aren't interested. For example, we will be sitting down to dinner and I like the house nice and relaxed. I want the food on the table and everyone sitting there eating slowly and having a conversation. Well, my kids don't know how to do this. They'll sit down and hurry and rush through and rush out and that's it. I take them to a good, expensive restaurant and they don't want any part of it.

"My daughter especially resists me. No matter how hard I push she resists. I just sent her on a ten day trip to London. I had to strap myself financially to do this but I thought it might widen her view. When she came back she said, 'Well, I learned, I met other people. I saw the way other people lived'. I really don't feel she did. I think it all went over her head.

"Many times I get very angry and I'll say 'Why are you going with this person? Find somebody better.' She says, 'You just go by the way they dress. I don't fit in with those other kinds of people because I'm this way.'

"I've tried to explain to her that the way you learn is to find somebody above you to learn from, you don't go below you, you go above you, but she rejects this philosophy entirely. She doesn't want any part of it. My children are probably going to stay at the level they are now because they haven't acquired those tools, the social skills to better themselves. I just hope they can find some happiness.

"My own immediate goal, my goal for the next few years is graduating. I'm definitely going to graduate from Essex Community College. After that I don't know what I want to do. Maybe I'd like to break out, leave Western, do something else. I've never had the freedom to shop around and find out where I belong, what it is I wanted to do. When I came to Western 12 years ago I was 23 years old. I was divorced and I had two small kids. My mother and father worked for Western, and at one time so did my brother and sister. It was the simplest place for me to get a job. Really, necessity made me come here.

"I needed the security when I was younger, not just financial but personally. Even though I may exude confidence, basically I feel that I'm insecure. I was worse years ago. A little thing, a little rebuff from anybody, used to really hurt me. It bothered me when it shouldn't have. I used to let little picky things get to me. I used to want to be accepted by everybody. You can't. When I was younger I thought I could; I thought I could bend all sorts of ways. As I get older I find I can't bend as much as I used to. I can bend only in certain ways and I'm at the point where I don't care anymore.

For a long time I was insecure because I wasn't sure of what my capabilities were. As I grow older I'm finding them. Unfortunately I'm now 35 years old and I'm still searching.

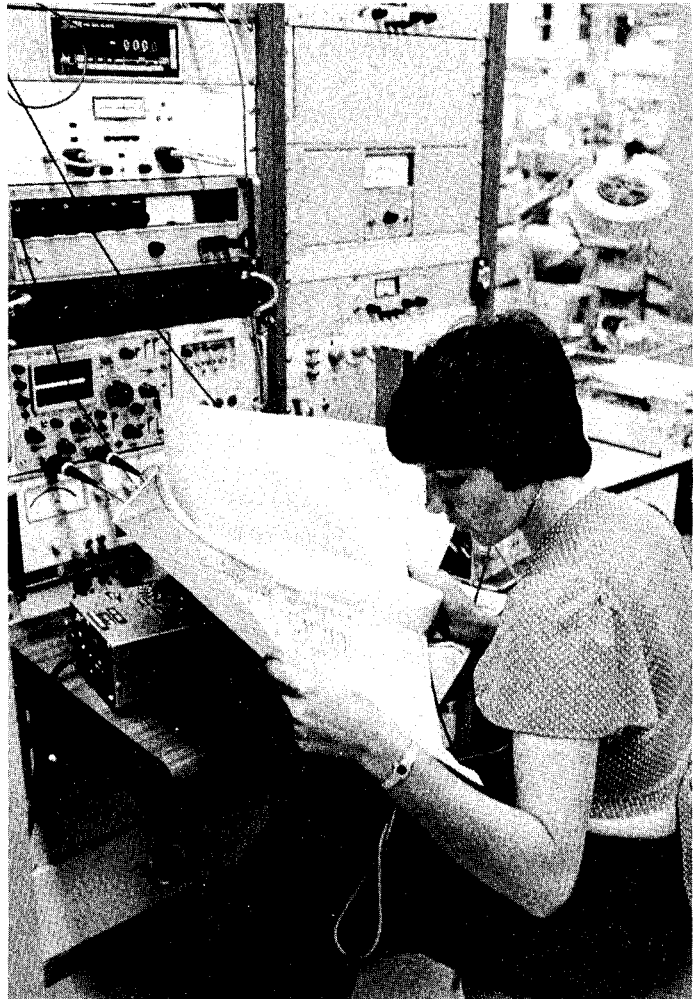
"I'm less anxious now about not knowing where I'm going. Maybe by the time I'm 40 I'll be somewhere, I don't know. I used to think I was the only one who thought like that. I thought, 'What's the matter with me? Why can't I reach a plateau and stay there and be happy?' Now I feel I'm much more sophisticated, more secure than I ever was. But I'm still searching, looking for fulfillment--what makes me happy.

"Maybe I'll get out of the factory. Do I want to stay at Western or do something else? Sometimes I think I'd like to try something else, but you have to have a financial base to really experiment. I'll tell you, I talk about leaving, I seriously consider it, but it would be hard. I probably make more working in this factory than the average woman does. This year I'll probably make around \$12,000. It would be hard to give that up.

"If I stay at Western I'd like to get ahead. For me that means getting into management. The woman's movement has helped open the way for women to get into management. This is really where the woman's movement has helped me.

"It really hasn't affected me at home. I'm too old to be really affected by it. I think my daughter is too old too. It has to start younger. I'm the type of woman, when I go out with a man, I want this man to make decisions. I want him opening the car door for me. I want to be led. I want to be told, 'Tonight we're going here,' and this or that. I'm still that way.

"I don't want to be equal at work either. I want to be treated as a feminine woman. I don't want to wear overalls to work. I don't want to lift anything up. I don't care what they pay me, I don't want to do a man's job. But, let's say a job as a tester is open, if I can do it well, why shouldn't I have the job? If I study, if I pass all the tests, why shouldn't I have the job? I think as long as women are capable, if they have the background, they should have a chance.



"Now women are encouraged to do things, to do what they want. When I came in here it was different. The possibilities were there, but you were discouraged from doing certain jobs. Like in testing, they said, 'You girls could never do this job,' but we knew we could do it and we did. Lots of times we turned in a better performance than the men did. Eleven or twelve years ago I was among the first women testers doing technically oriented jobs. In fact, at one time, I was the youngest woman 36 grade tester at Western. Most other women weren't going to take time out of their lives to study electronics. I did, because I liked it. I felt I had an aptitude for it. I used to study on my own.

"As far as the grade system goes in here, I don't think there has been much sex discrimination. Being offered a higher grade job is based on seniority. Service is what counts. If you want to go into management, now that's a different ballgame.

"You could get ahead if you were a woman, but it was awfully difficult. Now they're promoting women in here. The equal employment laws, and the company's concern for its public image, is opening up places in management. Here is where I think the woman's movement has helped to change things.

"This is the avenue open to me. The problem is, they don't operate on seniority on the management side. They have a complex system to determine if you're qualified. Qualified not only means college credits, you have to have the right temperament, an ability to make decisions, an ability to be a leader.

"You can't ever be certain that you'll be promoted. I think I have the qualifications. The only thing I needed was some college credits and I've been going to school for a couple of years now.

"I'll be honest with you, I hope I'll get promoted. My job is alright, and I think I perform it well, but I'd like to do better. I'd like to get ahead.

"I've been concerned that I haven't gotten a promotion yet. It hurts a little to see other people get moved up, while I stay where I am. I'm hoping that my chance will be coming soon. It's frustrating waiting, but there isn't anything I can do. I've gotten to the point where I try not to think about it. Instead I do my job. As I said, I think I'll get ahead, but maybe I won't. If I don't maybe I'll leave, who knows? Sometimes I wonder, do I want to spend my life working for Western Electric?"

Rolund Boff

