

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RJB-#25  
Day and Night

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

"How was your day?"

"OK, how are the kids?"

"Fine. I started the wash. Will you finish it?"

"Sure. What's for supper?"

"Boiled dinner."

A typical conversation when a husband returns from work? Maybe, but these are the first few sentences of a 10 minute daily conversation between Bob and Rachael Couture as they sit in Western Electric's cafeteria. Bob, who has worked the first shift, is about to go home, and Rachael, who works the second shift, is about to start work. The ten minutes they share together between shifts is often the only time they spend with each other during the working week.

Bob, who is 28, and Rachael, who is 27, were high school sweethearts in Madawaska, Maine, where they grew up. Both are children of French-Canadian parents, and although they speak English with everyone else, they still speak French when they are alone.

"We met in high school," Rachael says. "We were pretty serious. We didn't talk about marriage until Bob went into the service after high school. I went to work at the Jade East factory (\$1.40 an hour) and began saving. We got married after Bob got back."

"I was accepted at college," Bob says, "but my parents couldn't afford it. My father was a millwright at the paper mill. He had a second job and he still was bringing home maybe \$100 a week, just enough to make ends meet with five kids. He couldn't swing putting me through college. I knew I had to get some school so me and my buddy went downtown, saw an army recruiter, and the army let me sign up to become a technician.

"I signed up two weeks after I got out of school in June and I left in August. I spent most of my time over in Germany. It was ok. I got to learn a trade, I matured a lot, and I saw most of Europe on government time.

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Richard Balzer is an institute fellow exploring the effects of social and economic change on lower and middle class America.





When I returned from the service I knew I'd have to leave town--there was no work. I moved down to my aunt's. I looked for a job in electronics but I couldn't find anything. I took a job at Western; it was the only place that had any openings at all. I took the first job I could get my hands on and then four months after I got in there I got a job as a technician, so I was all set.

"I was at Western for about two months when I went home to get married. I had to borrow money to even drive up and get married. At the time (1967) I was a 34 grade making \$2.19 an hour.

"You know what our honeymoon was? We took four days coming home, and that was it. We started with nothing and now we're about to leave on a five day vacation for Bermuda. Right now we're doing real well, we're making more than \$22,000 a year between us. It makes a lot of things possible."

The extra money is to a large extent due to Rachael's returning to work. Rachael made the decision to start working a little more than two years ago.

"I wanted to get away from the everyday routine--regular housework, and I knew the extra income would help a lot. I enjoy getting out, being with different people. I went over to Western because Bob works there and it pays well. It's one of the best paying places around.

"I really like it. Sometimes I look forward to going into work. The people are very nice to work with, and the job isn't one where you get dirty. You can wear clean clothes and you come home and you're not all dirty from the job."

"I didn't really want her to back to work," Bob says. "We talked about it quite a bit. She wanted to start working again. She had worked before. When Andy was young she worked all over the place. She bounced round from one job to another, but after she got pregnant with the twins I kept her home for close to two years. It was tight. I had to start working part-time again. I started my own little business nights, but that didn't pay anything. I didn't have the time to put into it. I thought about starting a second job again. I had worked for nearly three years on a second job doing regular factory work. I'd get out of Western, go home, have my supper, and then I'd go to work at Malden Mills at 5:00 and get home about midnight."

"I've got to give Bob a lot of credit," Rachael says. "I don't know if I could have done it (taken a job) without him because he really helps me with the kids and the housework. When I was going to start back to work we talked about what he'd do. He told me that he was going to help me. I didn't really think he would do that much. I figured he would help out for a week, do the things I'd do, and then he would say forget it. But no, he really has kept it up. He's a big help.

"He gives the kids their baths every night, which he didn't do before. He's real good as far as keeping up the house. If I haven't done something, I don't even have to tell him, he'll just go ahead and do it. He washes the dishes at night. He even helps me with the laundry and vacuums the rug if I haven't had the time to do it during the day. I get the supper ready before I leave. He feeds the kids. He's good with them. You have to take into consideration getting stuck with three kids is no easy thing. He's got more patience than I do with them, really. I guess what it is is that he understands that I'm helping him, so he's got to help me too."

"I do a good portion of the housework," Bob says. "Like I helped her with the wash tonight. I'll vacuum and clean up the house for her. I told Rachael from the beginning that I'd help her out. I don't know, I don't think she really thought I would. She had been doing most of the housework, but with her working I figured I should pitch in. It really wasn't that hard for me, being the oldest in a family of five, I was used to it. Plus being in the service I learned to wash my own clothes, do my own ironing, clean my own room. I don't really mind. I know I have to do it because if I left it all on her it would be ridiculous. She'd go nuts. I just have to help her out, that's the way I feel. If I didn't help her out I wouldn't be holding up my end of the bargain. I think most men whose wives work feel that way."

"Working is something I like to do," says Rachael. "I do wish Bob and I could work the same shift, but with small children it isn't right. I took a job on the second shift because I wanted to be home with the children. When they're so young they need their parents. Also if I had to have a babysitter for three kids it probably wouldn't be worth my while at all. We've worked out a pretty good system. I'm with the kids during the day and Bob takes care of them at night."

"I take the kids to the day care center on my way to work. Bob picks them up on the way home, so they're only there for an hour a day. That school is good for them too, because they get to play with other kids. They teach them the alphabet. The twins, they're not even three years old and they come home with their papers and they really like it."

"I do have to make some adjustments at home, so does Bob. He gets up at a quarter of six and goes to work. The kids and I get up around 7:30. Since I don't usually go to sleep until 12:30 or 1:00 it doesn't give me that much time. By the time I give the kids their breakfast and get them dressed and do my daily cleaning routine it's time to make dinner for the night and feed them lunch. A couple of hours later I've got to get ready to take them to the day care center and get ready for work."

"I've also had to change some of my housework routine around. Whenever possible I try to do the laundry and the ironing on Sunday nights now. I have to do the grocery shopping for the week on Saturday when I used to do it on Thursday or Friday. The only other thing is bigger jobs, like doing the floors; I have to do them on the weekends."

"The real disadvantage of it is that it cuts down on the time I get to spend with Bob. I see him at work for about ten or fifteen minutes and we have coffee together before he leaves. He calls me up three times a day and at night I call him up. Really, we have weekends--that's about all.

"The only other time I get to see him during the week is late at night. I usually get home about a quarter to 12. Sometimes Bob will have dozed off and when I get home he wakes up and we chat for a while."

"I don't wait up for her every night," Bob says, "but quite a few nights I do. Sometimes I'm not that talkative. When she comes in, she's still wound up from the night, and she expects me to be wide awake and sit there and talk to her, and I can't do that, and she doesn't understand that. I try to talk but my eyes start closing. She's getting used to it now, it used to bug her. She'd be talking to me and I'd be falling asleep."

"I'd say," Rachael says, "with all the disadvantages, the advantages still outweigh the disadvantages. It's made it much better in terms of money. We could have gotten by if I didn't get a job, but we wouldn't have anything extra. This way now we're really living. Like we're going to Bermuda on vacation. We're going for five days during vacation. This woman who works with Bob is going to come over and babysit for the kids. Never mind that it's my first trip to Bermuda, it's my first flight ever. I've never been on a plane before. I know darn well if I hadn't been working we couldn't have a lot of extras. We just put up this fence, it cost us \$2,000. We got two brand new cars. We are living very well."

Bob says, "If there was just my pay we wouldn't be able to go out weekends. We wouldn't be able to buy lunches. I'd probably have to get rid of one car. Little things like that. We wouldn't be able to go away as often as we do. Like now, once a month we go down to Connecticut to see my parents. We'd have to cut that out with the price of gas. We wouldn't be able to go up to the beach whenever we wanted to. We wouldn't be able to go clubbing. We would just be basically home folks--stay in the house all the time. We wouldn't be able to do anything.

"You know though, if I could make an extra \$5,000 on a part time second job, I'd still like Rachael to be at home, even though we wouldn't have so many extras. I say this, but one of the problems is I can't keep her home. She's not a homebody. When we came down from Maine we were only down two days when she got a job. I come home from work and she told me she got a job. You just can't keep her tied down. She's worked hard all her life so she'll always want to go to work, but I still haven't changed my mind. I still hold the same ideas about women working. She really should stay home with the kids, but the way it cost to live today we couldn't enjoy a decent life style if she didn't work.

"My salary has gone up from when I started with Western at \$2.19 an



hour to \$6.17, but as much as we keep making, everything else has gone up. This last raise, three years ago, we got about 71¢ an hour. That 71¢ got eaten up (he snaps his fingers) like that.

"Everything just keeps getting more expensive, taxes on the house, everything is skyrocketing. I can't believe it, our grocery bill has almost doubled in the past two years. Of course the twins are growing up, but that's no reason for them to double. Rachael uses her paycheck, which is about \$59 a week after savings and taxes for groceries and gas for her car and she hasn't got any money left.

"I'm not complaining, we do save. Rachael puts \$30 away a week and I put away \$75 and we live on the rest. I like it being taken out of my pay. I'm the type of person when I have the money, and there's something I want, I'll go out and buy it. Whereas, if it's taken out of my pay each week, I won't notice it. Then when we want to do something it's there. We used that money in the credit union to go to Bermuda, we used it to buy the second car, we used it to buy the fence, plus we used the credit union to finance the other car.

"Economically, we are doing real well. However, I'm not saying there aren't any problems to us working two shifts. It's hard on both Rachael and me, and it's hard on the kids. They miss having her home. For example, quite a few times they've asked me when's Mommy going to come home. They want to stay up and see her. Now they're starting to understand that she's working nights and they can only see us together on weekends when both of us aren't working. A few times it's been especially hard, but we've worked it out. My son especially missed her when she started working because he was older and the twins were young enough so it really didn't make a difference. My son, he's attached to both of us, and he was spoiled rotten, and he missed Rachael quite a bit when she started working. Now, maybe once every two weeks, he'll ask me when she's coming home.

"On the other hand, since Rachael's begun working he sees a heck of a lot more of me. Andy enjoys that because I take him to softball games. I do more things with him than before. There isn't a doubt that Rachael's working has made life easier for me. I'm more relaxed now that I don't have to work two shifts. I have a chance to play softball. I have a chance to go to school in the Fall.

"I don't think it's hurt our relationship. Actually I think it's helped it. When I was the only one working Rachael was cooped up in the house all day with the kids and the housework, and sometimes she'd get irritable. We argued much more then. Rachael's not the kind of person you can coop up in a house.

"Since she started working we argue less, it's 500 percent better. As a married couple you see each other every day, and tend to argue. We hardly see each other and we rarely argue now. We might once in a while, but not often. We really don't see each other until the weekends and we have a wonderful time together.

"I'd like Rachael to go back on days eventually. Not right now because the kids are still too young. She has to get them ready for school in the morning. When they're about 10, yeah. Then they're old enough to get dressed by themselves and go to school. When you start work at 6:30 it means you'd be out of the house too early and they'd be alone for too long a period."

"I'd like to keep working," Rachael says. "I almost quit last November. The kids needed me at home, but then when I started thinking about the good job I have and all the money that's coming in the house, I decided to stay on. Now that I'm used to working I think I'd find the evenings boring. Not that I find my husband boring, but I can't get interested in TV anymore because I'm so used to not watching it. Even on the weekends, Sunday nights, I can't watch it. I used to watch a lot of TV. I'd do my housework during the day, but at night I'd almost automatically turn the TV on.

"This way Bob can go to school too. He goes to school three nights a week. He's studying for his BA. He's only gone two years. He's got to go about, I don't know, 5 or 6 years before he'll get his degree."

"I've decided to try to get a BA," Bob says. "If I were to get an associates degree in electronics, I wouldn't make any more money than I'm making now. I know two fellows, one of them left Western six years ago, he went into engineering and just this year he got a raise and he's making the same money I am. All these years, he's been making less. When we get our raise at the end of this month, he'll be making less money again. He's got more responsibility than we do; he's answerable to more people and he's making less money. So there's no incentive there. Right now I'm taking Data Processing and Business Administration. If nothing pans out at Western after I have my BA I'm just going to go looking somewhere else.

"I'll probably find something somewhere else faster than I'll move up at Western because of the way they operate. That's the bad part about it. If you don't have a godfather it's really tough to go from the shop to supervision, especially now when they're giving preference to women.

"I'd say we're doing pretty good. We have a good life style, we're able to afford the things we want."

Standing on the Couture's ranch house porch, Rachael watches the children playing in the large backyard below, feeling secure that they won't get lost because the new wood fence is up. "We really like it here," she says. "We like this house--it reminds us of our hometown."

