Opinion

News



(Unsplash/Chris Li)



by Mariam Williams

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @missmariamw

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

December 28, 2017

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Tis the season for lists. Now that gifts have been exchanged, critics, editors and the like are making their superlatives lists: best of, worst of, funniest, top 10, etc. of 2017. I don't normally keep a list as I reflect on the year gone by — I don't have a reason for this; it's just not a custom I follow — but this year, I want to recognize a story that stood out to me and has, for various reasons, stayed with me.

I read, "Becoming a Steelworker Liberated Her. Then Her Job Moved to Mexico," soon after the New York Times app pinged my phone to alert me the story was available. In it, Farah Stockman reports on Shannon Mulcahy, a 43-year-old white Indiana woman laid off from her job at the Rexnord Corporation's bearings factory after nearly 18 years of employment.

The story was devastating and enraging. A woman who, as Stockman describes in another story, "escaped domestic violence by becoming a steelworker," who persevered as a single mom, and held her own against the sexism on the factory floor was tossed aside for cheaper labor, higher profits and happier shareholders. Rexnord Corporation offered her a bonus in exchange for training two Mexican men who would replace her. Thinking of her granddaughter with special needs and her daughter on her way to college, Mulcahy agreed. And then Rexnord exceeded its training budget, canceled Mulcahy's bonus and moved her job to Mexico earlier than expected. Meanwhile, Rexnord's CEO remained a millionaire.

The layoffs, the broken promises, the income inequality — all of it is so unfair. But that's not why the story has stayed with me. I think of it occasionally because of its irony. Near the end of the article, Stockman takes us to an awards ceremony at Mulcahy's daughter's school. Nicole, the younger Mulcahy, received more than $30,000 in scholarships to cover the cost of attending Purdue University for four years. From the audience, Shannon Mulcahy "watched her daughter hug the wealthy people who were helping her overcome her difficult life situation."

I read that and thought about how wealthy people get wealthy.

> I know the problem's name is capitalism, and I wonder sometimes if and how I could extract myself from it completely.
>
> Tweet this

It's hard to get the point where you (or a foundation you established) can give away four years' tuition — annually, to strangers — without running distribution of illicit drugs, getting incredibly lucky in real estate, or investing in the stock market. And if you invest in the stock market, you are a shareholder. If you are a shareholder, you make more money when the companies you invest in make a bigger profit. Companies make bigger profits when they can spend less money on labor, and they can spend less on labor by dropping people like Shannon Mulcahy.

When I've received funds from charitable foundations or endowments, I haven't thought about the layers, the way the money may connect me to a company's workers, to the people they work to provide for. I don't want to. It's like a depressing game of six degrees of separation. How many connections before you find yourself to be part of the problem?

I know the problem's name is capitalism, and I wonder sometimes if and how I could extract myself from it completely. I could pledge personal austerity, downsize from a one-bedroom to a studio, move to the cheapest neighborhood I could find in the cheapest city — assuming I had money to do that, because moving requires cash for a security deposit and first and last month's rent, and a moving van since I don't know anyone with a truck — and never purchase anything but ingredients for food I prepare myself.

Advertisement

I could. But I won't, unless I have to. I would be unhappy with this life, and I don't wish to live unhappily. Many people live on an income that meets their needs. Many

more people don't have enough to meet their needs. I don't know if any of these people are happy or unhappy, and I don't know if it's American culture, my personality, or even pieces of shrapnel from the prosperity gospel explosion in the early 2000s that make me relentlessly want the lifestyle I want, but I like things, sights and experiences. Fine fabrics against my skin. Looking stylish. The extra space in business class on an international flight. The blues and greens of the Caribbean Sea. Portuguese sangria. Theater. Live music. Floor space. Internet access. I post lifestyle examples to my vision board sometimes because I want to believe these things are possible for me, and sometimes, because I both want and expect them as a result of working hard, praying, writing the vision and making it plain.

When I think about my life and the items, sights and experiences I don't have or wish I had more of, I wonder sometimes if I would seem crazy in a culture or religion that was less bootstrappy, less obsessed with possessions, less focused on rewards, blessings, and curses. I wonder who the Shannon Mulcahys would be in these other places. I wonder what would connect and separate us.

[Mariam Williams is a Kentucky writer living in Philadelphia. She holds a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing and certificate in public history from Rutgers University-Camden. She is a contributor to the anthology *Faithfully Feminist* and blogs at MariamWilliams.com.]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Mariam Williams' column, At the Intersection, is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert **sign-up**.