

PRIDE AND A PAYCHECK

Women's Guide
to Blue Collar Jobs
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Stella Cheng, Mason. Rodes, France

The Mason

By Stella Cheng

In 1989, after 10 years in as a bricklayer in the Bay Area/San Francisco, I won a fellowship from my union to learn traditional masonry techniques used on the restoration of the Reims cathedral, in the champagne region of France. Once there, I found an old typewriter and wrote down my first impressions, hence lost over the decades. But the memories remain. I lived in heart of a guild with 59 young men aged from 15 years old to 24. I'm still not sure who was more in a state of shock, them or me. When my union contacted them, somewhere across the ocean, someone forgot to mention that I was a woman. It made for great drama, funny scenes and memories to last a lifetime. Women were officially admitted into the guild in 2002 (but still live apart). At the time, guild members were strongly encouraged to cut all ties with women until they attained mastery. If a liaison was suspected, they often got sent to the other side of the country.

90% of the workers quit before mastery, due to love. The program can last up to ten years...a long time to remain celibate. Plop a woman into that group and total chaos can

ensue. It didn't. I was very respectful and discreet. The boys were more like monks than any other group of males I had met. They had NOTHING in common with the American construction world that I came from. After my fellowship ended, I begged the guild to allow me to continue my training, despite being a woman...despite being an American. They made me jump through a hundred hoops, each with a different degree of difficulty. After my training, things fell into place with surprising ease. I found a great company to work for, an interesting lover, a gorgeous house, etc. I still work on a gothic cathedral, but this one is further south, in Rodes. When I make friends with young women "stonies", I find I cannot verbalize my experiences. I wonder if they would even believe what I had lived through before most were even born. Yet those moments have etched my very being. It was a time of discovery, of another world, of me, of human capacity.

THE PLUMBER

It was between the tock and the thud, but it was rhythmic, like an African version of a death knell. A deep tone but not as long as a sad church bell ringing over and over to announce loss. I parked my bike in the cellar, to keep it out of the rain, and used the sound to lead me to its maker. A young muscular man had a wooden stick in the form of a mini-baseball bat and was thumping a gray material that was slowly spreading.

His concentration was too intense to ask what he was doing, no one else spoke. I was told that he had started with a ball, the size of one used for basketball, and he had beaten it with that bat, until he had a sheet of lead, as thin as pizza crust and the size of a decent garden table. His goal was to form it into a fountain lining.

All night, we would hear his "drumming" as he worked 'til exhaustion. Before the sun would rise, he'd get up and begin his day as teacher, group leader and plumber...this was his trade. The French word for lead is "plomb". Pipes, before machines were created, were made by hand, out of lead, by "plombiers".

The nights, he spent working on his "oeuvre" (work) that would prove that he had the capacity to be a "chef" (master). This was the end of his journey, of many places lasting many years. The journeyman would finally be judged by submitting his "chef d-oeuvre" (masterwork) to reach the next level of Master.

it was the progressively lighter pressure that he applied that erased the marks of his beating...again and again until a deep fountain base, perfectly formed, and smooth from the softer hits removing the deeper impressions.

Orgullo y Paga
Pride and a Paycheck

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THE MASON continued next page...

LEAD



On the higher reaches of the cathedrals of France, the elements whip and pummel the stones from all sides. In American masonry, we restore buildings in bad repair by chiseling out the old joints and replacing them with fresh, this is called tuck-pointing. This operation on a French cathedral would require rebuilding scaffolding on a building that was anything but rectangular or flat. I don't know if the ancients, the original builders thought of this or even considered that their buildings would last seven or eight hundred years.

They did, however, use lead joints instead of mortar, on the higher, more exposed pinnacles and balusters of their edifices.

I spent my lunch hours (like most workers, we had two hours to eat our midday meal) roaming the Reims cathedral, drinking up the history like a thirsty deer by the edge of a clear pool at the base of a magnificent waterfall. I'd invite my coworkers to join me and they explained its wonders. At the very top we would climb and dance on the parapets...trying to imagine the elation that the builders before us felt when they laid the last stones.

The boys would hang onto the pinnacles and do a pretty good imitation of King Kong on the empire state building. They especially had fun when I would gasp in horror as the pinnacle MOVED. They would rock with laughter as the pyramidal stone would rock back and forth with the weight of a silly French boy swinging by one arm. I wondered if the boy and the pinnacle would fall the 260 feet to the ground and kill the tourists looking up at us. They would then explain that the joints were out of lead and in fact, most of the more ornamental pieces were cored and filled with liquid lead (in the middle which was an iron bar) allowing movement when dried. Lead joints don't break but remain supple throughout the centuries.

EXPERIMENTS

Years later, when an audacious façade was designed by the master cutter for our new workshop, architects in town made bets as to whether it would fall down or hold up. The master decided to use lead joints to ensure its longevity and resistance. He found an old cooking pot, set it upon the camping stove and melted the hunk of lead that a plumber friend had given him. He asked me to stir it so that hot spots wouldn't scorch the soup. I wondered if he was pulling my leg.

I protested loudly that I needed a safety mask with heavy-metal cartridge filters to do such a dangerous operation, for we could see the fumes rising by the sun casting shadows through them. Everyone laughed. I was serious. I had been bled enough times on the seismic retrofitting of the San Francisco city hall, to see if I had too much lead in my system from breathing the dust laden air. I mentioned the dangers of lead and again, they LAUGHED. I used my standard line, used whenever men laugh at the silliness of safety conscious women, "well, **I** don't want to have two-headed babies with three arms, no toes and defective hearts..." They quickly poured the molten lead into the joints carved out for this purpose forming the shapes of "goose feet".

IS IT PLUMB?

When constructing walls whether for short garden ones or cladding 60 story steel beamed ones, the essential question is always, "is it plumb?" Nowadays, we can use laser rays to check this but before, we used the old fashioned method of hanging a lead bob on the end of a very long piece of string and seeing if the distance between it and the wall, at the bottom of the wall, and at the top of the wall is the same, proving its parallelness to something perfectly vertical. On a non-windy day. Of course, a mason's bob is now made of brass and its point is often placed in a container filled with oil to reduce the least movement or vibration.

CONCLUSION

So, there you go, the origins of the English word "plumb", coming directly from the Latin word "plumbus" meaning lead, hence the Pb in the tables of elements. And how we got our word "plumber" from when pipes were made from beaten lead.

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Thirty-seven Years. © 2013 Jane Templin...IBEW 11. (Written at the 2013 Blue Jean Pocket Writers workshop)

*Apprentice to President. A Union Journey. Milestones. Marriage. Children.
Career as Apprentice Electrician. Journeywoman. Instructor. Foreman/GF.
Son graduates college. Daughter married. Son married. Grand kids.
Union Agent. Senior Instructor. Daughter in union as Electrician. Husband retires.
Outreach Director. Vice President. Interim President.
Waiting for retirement.*

ATTENTION! **Pride and a Paycheck** is a link on Mike Rowe's website: www.mikeroweworks.com
Go to: <http://www.mikeroweworks.com/job-site/women-in-the-trades/>
Type in Pride and a Paycheck in the search spot.

Some Words of Wisdom From a Sister By Ellen Voie, President/CEO, Women in Trucking

You've probably heard the phrase "You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar." You might have heard this from your grandmother if you were overreacting to a request as a child. She actually meant that you'll have a more positive response if you're pleasant instead of cranky. Perhaps we should remind ourselves of Grandma's wisdom more often. How many times have you seen a co-worker treat someone with unpleasant behavior? How do you feel if your spouse or partner is unkind toward a server when you're at a nice restaurant? How do you respond when a stranger glares at you when your child misbehaves?

In the book, "The Power of Nice," the authors advise us to "exercise our niceness muscles." Start smiling at strangers, say thank you to others, and start up a conversation by complimenting someone. In other words, be nice! It doesn't take a lot of effort to change our outward attitude, but it certainly makes our environment a better place. Not only will it make your day more pleasant, but also it could help you in your career.

Rohit Bhargava, in his book, "*Likeonomics*," writes "people trust and choose to believe people they like." If you're talking to your coworker with a scowl on your face, how likable are you? People will support you and want to help you more if you are nice to be around.

Recently a professional driver backed into the dock and exited her truck. The forklift driver had been having a rough day and decided to take his lunch break instead of starting to load the trailer. She had two options: she could wait for an hour and lose valuable time, or she could smile and politely ask the dock worker if he'd load the pallets so she could be on her way. It sounds simple enough, but how many drivers assume the worst and berate the forklift driver?

How many of us blame the person behind the counter for the slow service instead of empathizing with him because he's alone and there are six people in line? Do you get frustrated with the waitress if she forgets to bring your glass of water, even though you've asked twice? Sure, but remember what Grandma said about honey.

After a frustrating situation caused by a colleague's actions that appeared to challenge my authority, I ranted to a friend. She advised me to, "assume good intent." She suggested that he had my best interests in mind and acted in a way that he felt was supportive. Wow! That was a different angle that I hadn't considered. I decided to use this as a reminder that things are not always as they appear to us.

When we assume good intent, it gives us a new perspective on other people's actions. Instead of thinking the clerk is incompetent, treat him as if he wants to sell you the items and get you on your way. Don't assume the waitress is purposely ignoring you; maybe she's distracted by work or family issues. Really, she does want you to enjoy your meal.

We can agree that we truly WANT to be liked, and that it doesn't mean we're insecure. Bhargava claims we have a fundamental human need to be liked because of our need to form relationships. Since our brains are wired this way, not being liked can have negative effects on us.

If this is true, why do some of us walk around as if we have a chip on our shoulder? Many of us have a sense of entitlement and act as if we are "owed" something from others. This doesn't promote like-ability, so if you feel entitled, get over it. You're not that special.

For others, being a victim is easier than taking control of your circumstances and presenting a positive appearance. A victim is a helpless person, so the only way to change a victim's attitude is to help them feel empowered and in control. Smiling is a great way to change the way others treat you, so turn the corners of your mouth upward and watch the effect you'll have on people you encounter.

Try being nice, at least for one day. Give compliments, smile at everyone you meet, and be approachable and friendly. See if it makes a difference in the way your friends, family, and coworkers treat you. Maybe Grandma was right about catching flies with honey!

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TRUCKERS!! YES!! Photos thanks to Women in Trucking, Inc.



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Remember that Pride and a Paycheck as a business, does not have nonprofit status, so your donations are not tax deductible. Your "thank you" will be published in Pride and a Paycheck (unless you want to be anonymous) and you will receive *Tool Woman* greeting cards. (See samples below.) Pride and a Paycheck has supported the tradeswomen movement for nearly 15 years. Please support Pride and a Paycheck by mailing your donation check today!



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This haiku below, © by Electrician/Poet Joanna Perry-Kujula, Concord CA, IBEW Local 302 is one of continuity and purpose. It reminds her of how resilient, stubborn and multidimensional women can be. Also how some people may see women on a job as a nuisance (like a dandelion) but also necessary in their own way.
...THANK YOU...JOANNA !!

SOW WHAT?
Dandelion weeds
Don't just spread their seeds...look close
Little rabbit feeds