Summer job: Faith at work

by Garret Keizer in the September 12, 2001 issue

I worked my first full-time summer job at a glue factory when I was 18 years old. Most of the other guys carpooled to work from the inner city. I came from a suburb up the hill and a good ways up the socioeconomic scale. I did not know when I first punched the clock that I was enrolling in a course more important than any I would soon take in college.

It was a hellhole of a place. Glue mired the floors, and the temperature of the hot adhesive—about 425 degrees Fahrenheit—kept all of us drenched and thirsty. We tied rags around our brows to keep from being blinded by our own sweat. Within a month I had pulled a knife into my shin and burned two quarter-sized pieces of skin off my wrist and stomach. These were no more than routine injuries. A “real” injury was what happened when our foreman advanced on a glue vat that began spewing product because another worker had forgotten to shut off a valve. He lost a good deal of the skin on his right arm before managing to close the spout.

His lurid burns were accentuated by the blackness of his unburned skin. The same contrast of colors marked the three black men who worked back in “the powder room,” and who constituted a caste apart at the factory. I was never sure what the white stuff was, but it covered the men and their clothes from head to foot. The rest of us were discouraged from entering their work area for fear of setting off a flash explosion of the highly combustible chemical, but I did go in there once in a while. The powder men were all from the South. One of them told me that his job back home had consisted of carrying four-foot logs through swamp water up to his waist. He said he felt lucky to be working where he was.

Tyrone, the foreman who had burned his arm, was of a different opinion. “I wouldn’t sentence ordinary criminals to a place like this,” he would tell me. “Only murderers and rapists for this job.” This was music to my ears. Young, bookish and sheltered, I had taken the job not only to make money but as a test of my toughness. When the muscular foreman praised my exertions as we strained side-by-side to lever one of the sloshing beds of liquid adhesive across the sticky floor, when he affectionately

referred to me as “the youngblood”—I felt something in my heart akin to love.

That heady sense of camaraderie and measuring up was very nearly destroyed when “the great white father” came out of the office one day with a brilliant idea. Since I was bound for college and had taken the usual college-prep math and science courses in high school, he wanted to try me out upstairs in the lab. I was told to report there for several hours a day to record measurements and take inventory.

The “lab” was a narrow, glassed-in balcony that overlooked the main floor. It was air-conditioned and cool. The reception I got when I returned to the glue vats was rather cool, too. The stony face of Tyrone was especially unbearable. “I worked 15 years in this place,” he said, “and nobody ever asked me upstairs.”

The work I did in the lab required no skills or knowledge that Tyrone didn’t have or couldn’t have easily acquired. Every day he weighed and measured out the ingredients for each batch of adhesive; he was even teased by the other workers for his exacting conscientiousness. They would walk past his scale mimicking in frenzied falsetto voices, “I gotta get my batch out! I gotta get my batch out!” He had permanently scarred one of his arms to save one of those batches from being wasted. But apparently he wasn’t good enough to take a turn upstairs mixing smaller versions of the same batches. And though neither of us said so, we both knew why. It was a matter of color. It was also, I now realize, a matter of “training,” of that blithe and idolatrous homage we pay to credentials, whether or not they are pertinent to the task at hand.

So both of us were “cut off”—Tyrone from his rightful place in the lab, and I from the fellowship of the other workers. Years later I would recall this incident when I read the passage in Thomas Merton’s *Seven Storey Mountain*, where he and his boyhood friends keep their younger brothers away from their huts in the woods by pelting them with stones.

And there he [Merton’s younger brother] stands, not sobbing, not crying, but angry and unhappy and offended and tremendously sad. And yet he is fascinated by what we are doing. . . . His tremendous desire to be with us . . . will not allow him to go away. Many times it was like that. And in a sense, this terrible situation is the pattern and prototype of all sin: the deliberate . . . will to reject disinterested love.

It is also the prototype for many of the structures in our society, our schools and our churches.

My stint upstairs ended soon. I don’t remember now if we were shorthanded downstairs or if I turned out to be less of a chemist than hoped. In any case, I left the lab for good. Tyrone told me that I shouldn’t have let the ribbing get to me. “You got to get used to that stuff in a place like this,” he said. I tried to keep his words in mind on my last day, when some of the workers told me, “You’ll forget us after a while.” They were mistaken. To this day I recall the joy of our tentative solidarity and the pain of our compulsory estrangement—experiences that stuck to me and seared me like burning glue.