

village view

by Andrea Leonard

In a recent New York City newspaper a letter to the editor struck me as being particularly pertinent to problems of the great middle class of our country.

The letter was from a young secretary in that city, supporting herself adequately on her salary and enjoying her job.

While living and working in New York she had, until recently, taken advantage of the opportunity to attend classes, free of tuition charges, at City University of New York. She had hoped to obtain a degree within six years.

Her complaint — and she was very angry about it — was that since tuition is now charged, she could afford to take only half as many courses as before. It seemed unfair to her that she was required to pay for her education, and even more unfair that some other students, who weren't working at all but did collect unemployment or welfare, could continue their educations without charge.

She said she felt strongly tempted to get herself fired so she could collect unemployment and enroll, full-time, at CUNY, and complete her education even sooner.

This young lady has my sympathy. I admire her motivation to continue her education, can understand her budgeting difficulties, and empathize with her emotions when denied the advantages of free education.

On the other hand, someone has to pay for providing free education and, if this young continues as a member of the working middle class, she will soon discover she's expected to

pay, not only for her own, but for that of those less fortunate than she. Not only education, but almost everything.

The City of New York, on the brink of bankruptcy, has finally faced the bitter truth that money does have to come from somewhere and that the wellsprings it's found in the past have dried up. The city has not yet reached the point where it says to the indigent, "You, too, must either pay or go without", but that time may come.

The City of New York is not yet prepared to close down its educational facilities completely; it conceives that by charging some people tuition, it can continue to provide the deserving poor with a continuing opportunity for upward mobility — and school personnel with jobs.

And, although I do have sympathy for the young lady, I can't for the life of me see why she shouldn't pay for what she's getting. It is, she readily admits, valuable to her. She can, with some juggling, afford the tuition and continue her courses.

It's my personal opinion the education she obtains will be even more valuable to her because she must pay for it. I hold the old-fashioned idea that when we invest money in something it becomes dearer to us. I believe the things we get for nothing never quite acquire the same gleam and patina of true quality as things that cost us something besides our time.

If I could talk with this girl, I'd say "If you maintain your status as a member of America's middle class, resign yourself to providing advantages for those who cannot or will not provide for themselves. We middle-class Americans are required to do so, often at the expense of having these same advantages, ourselves."

The young lady might, for instance, attend a Stanley Brush Party at the home of a welfare-mother trying to help herself in this small way. And after the demonstration has been given, the orders taken, the refreshments served, she might prepare to leave.

And she might be startled to hear her hostess's somewhat patronizing tone of voice when she says, "Oh, that's right; you have to go to work in the morning, don't you?"

It comes close to making a middle class American working girl feel just a little bit as though she were some sort of an idiot. There's not that much difference between their standards of living; the only redeeming feature is the difference in their community status.

Whatever that's worth to you.

If I could talk with this young lady I'd tell her that not only is a goodly part of her pay check going to be syphoned off to provide free education (paid to school personnel), rent supplements (paid to landlords), food stamps (paid to grocers), medical care (paid to doctors, pharmacists and hospitals), for families like this one — but everything a welfare recipient gets, is tax-free.

It wouldn't make much sense to tax them, would it?

Or — would it?

Might there be some closer identification between welfare recipients and working tax-paying citizens if part of welfare payments were "withheld" to help pay expenses for other welfare families?

After all, doctors, druggists, landlords, grocers, all of whom benefit directly from the system through Medicaid and Housing Assistance programs, must pay taxes on these earnings. Why not the recipients of welfare, also?

When professionals and businessmen receive a large percentage of their incomes from services provided to welfare recipients, as many do, they pay taxes on these receipts.

The money to pay the professionals and businessmen comes from us, is collected from us, the middle class Americans who neither collect welfare or take part of their incomes from pie-in-the-sky programs.

Welfare recipients might see things a bit differently if a part of "what's coming to them" were withheld to help support other people like themselves who depend on the "taxpayer".

And the suppliers of services to the welfare recipient might hold a slightly less holier-than-thou posture, if the finger of "non-participant" couldn't be pointed at this one group of people as being totally takers, giving nothing whatsoever.

If we were ALL taxpayers, would it be quite so hard to bear?

I wonder what the young secretary in New York City would think of this suggestion, and if it has occurred to her yet how great a financial contribution she is making, and will continue to make all her middle class American life, to those whose incomes derive from the taxes she — and millions like her — is and will be paying.

The kid is only beginning to see the tip of the iceberg!