

Solange De Santis

Dr. John R. Coleman, Restless Spirit

By Solange De Santis
Chester, Vt.

As I drove toward Chester's village green in the fall of 1999 to have lunch with Dr. John R. Coleman, I felt a tension headache dragging at my temples. Outwardly, there seemed to be no reason for it. In the back seat, my 2 ½-year-old daughter, Florence, was behaving perfectly; the day was sunny and warm. Dr. Coleman's directions were accurate. My nerves were reacting to the intense anticipation of something extremely pleasurable – meeting someone I'd admired for 25 years – and achy fears that the encounter would be a disappointment or that Florence would decide to juggle the wine glasses.

Dr. Coleman, who is 78, wears the following hats in Chester: newspaper publisher, justice of the peace, Board of Civil Authority chairman, chairman of a Windsor County prisoner probation program, vice-chairman of Green Mountain Union High Schools, vice-chairman of the United Way, president and founder of a local theater group and author of a couple of its plays.

However, my regard for him didn't stem from the fact that he is extremely active at an age when some might prefer an intimate relationship with a Barcalounger. In 1973, I noticed a story on the front page of the New York Times, headlined "This Garbage Man Is A College President." At the time, Dr. Coleman was president of Haverford College, a small men's college in Pennsylvania. He took an academic sabbatical and instead of going off to attend seminars at Harvard or the Sorbonne, he took a series of blue-collar jobs: ditchdigger, sandwich maker, garbage man. His field was labor economics and he was exploring all facets of the word "labor." He was also blessed – or afflicted – with an unquenchable restlessness of spirit, a great curiosity about working lives so unlike that of a comfortable college president.

I, too, lived in a white-collar environment and wondered about the world of manual labor. I tucked the clipping away and never forgot the name of John R. Coleman. A year ago, I had a reason to contact him. I had written a book, "Life On The Line: One Woman's Tale Of Work, Sweat And Survival," which told the story of the 18 months I left my office life to work on an assembly line in a van plant that General Motors planned to close. There were parallels with Dr. Coleman's experience and I thought he might be interested. He was indeed and a lunch invitation ensued.

"Solange, please come in," said our host. He greeted Florence warmly (he has four living children – a son died several years ago -- and six grandchildren. He lives in the center of Chester next to the Fullerton Inn, which he owned for ten years under the name The Inn At Long Last. Dr. Coleman led us through a living room lined with books and records into a kitchen-dining area. He had thoughtfully made Florence some little peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches. We opened a bottle of Cotes du Rhone I'd brought and sat down to soup and chicken salad.

We talked about our shared compulsion to step off what would seem to be our normal paths in life. Dr. Coleman earned his B.A. at the University of Toronto and his M.A. and Ph. D at the University of Chicago. He has been an assistant professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a consultant with the Ford Foundation and president of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, which supports social reform, in New York. He was president of Haverford for ten years. In 1977, he resigned after clashing with the college's board over admitting women students (he was for it). When he announced he would be leaving, the assembled faculty and students gave him a three-minute ovation.

He wrote about his manual labor experience in a book called "Blue-Collar Journal," which was made into a TV-movie starring Ralph Waite. He didn't stop with that one sabbatical experience, however. The Clark Foundation supported prison reform, so Dr. Coleman spent time in prison – voluntarily – as an inmate and as a guard. He was a trashman in New York for a story in the New York Times Sunday Magazine and spent ten days on the streets as a homeless person for an article in New York magazine.

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Over lunch and in a phone conversation later, he described those cold, hungry ten days as the most important experience of his life. "It was so revealing – the loneliness of these people – to not have anybody give one damn about you," he said. He also noticed again, as he has in all of his forays, how differently we treat people according to dress, class and manner. "Four different people I knew looked at me and didn't even see me," he recalled.

Changing one's "station" in life is a classic theme in the arts, from Mark Twain's "Prince and the Pauper" to the Eddie Murphy film "Trading Places," but very few people actually do it. George Plimpton famously got into the ring and the stadium to find out what it's like to play big-time professional sports and Wall Street Journal reporter Tony Horwitz won a Pulitzer Prize when he took jobs in a chicken-processing plant and a recycling plant. But going through the whole thing – the self-doubt, the discomfort and possible danger, the physical trial – is rare.

Not everyone approved of his journeys to see how the other half lives. The Quakers who ran Haverford College thought the attention attending his efforts a bit unseemly, he said. One article wondered if he was a bit of a flake with a lust for publicity. Others reminded him, "Jack, they can't trade places with you."

He arrived in Vermont 13 years ago after a dinner in New York when he described some "vague dreams" to a woman friend and she said, "Jack, you are talking about being an innkeeper in Vermont." As a strict business proposition, the Inn At Long Last was a failure (he never made a profit on it), but, for Dr. Coleman, meeting the challenge of renovating and running an inn was a great success. "You can't make a difference in the world unless you lie to yourself (about risk). You'll get talked out of it," he said.

Now, he said, he's just as busy as he wants to be and happy with his life, though that happiness has come as a result of hard self-knowledge. He is twice-divorced and admitted, "I look at myself and say, 'Jack, you are not going to be a good husband. I cannot give the time to make a good marriage.' In my life now, I know what I can do and what I can't do." He said his relationship with three of his children is excellent, but relations with the fourth are "very, very strained," a painful subject with him.

Our lunch ended with no vases broken and we stopped by the bookshelves on the way out. He urged me to read George Orwell's "Down and Out in Paris and London." He was enthusiastic about the Reparative Probation Program he heads, which helps offenders in the Springfield area make restitution through community service. The Chester Players' Guild is rehearsing its Christmas show, "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever." He is working on a memoir, tentatively titled "Passing This Way."

Florence's attention was caught by a glass dish that Dr. Coleman had filled with small red Christmas tree balls and he explained, "The dishes get lonely if they aren't filled with decorations. Here, I'm putting one over here in an empty dish. You know, sometimes when I come downstairs, the empty dishes are crying."

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