

Opinion Piece: Would You Like Another Bomb? *Anne Emerson, (February 2023, as the War in Ukraine gets going)*

The people who run the world do not seem to know how it feels to be the underdog. The title of this piece explains how it may feel right now. This essay is my attempt to explain it more peacefully than do President Putin; the world's mass shooters; and anyone else who wants to rebel, as global overlords carry on regardless.

In the world of low-paid, part-time workers, at least in Annie's experience, the following are just a few examples of the kinds of unpleasant behaviors one might expect as part of everyday life. One, the boss yells at you for a minor infraction. Two, the customer yells at you, or complains about you to your boss, for something that is not your fault. Three, a co-worker is envious of you for one reason or another, perhaps because you do a good job and the boss likes you, and spreads malicious gossip about you behind your back. Four, co-workers conspire to sabotage the boss's attempts to get the work done better. They think they are entitled not only to their wage, but also to get back at the boss for being the boss. And what can you do about it? Many times, if you speak up, you lose your job. Here are some things that happened.

One, when the boss bawled me out for forgetting to turn off the night message on the phone system, so that it remained on, one day, I started looking for another job. The first employer with whom I spoke understood that "something had happened," and would not take a risk with me. There was no further exploration of my qualifications and no sympathetic ear to what might have happened. And, when the first-mentioned boss yelled way more than was necessary at another employee, no-one stood up for the other employee. I did not think to take the victim aside; to say that was uncalled-for, but don't take it personally; he does it to everyone.

(Aside – more on this boss – he was ten years younger than I; he successfully started up and sold at least two, probably three, businesses, something not so easy to do. My new boss invited him to my retirement party, long after our working ways had parted. I recently learned that the bad-tempered boss had passed away suddenly - no explanation given. I said, "I would have been his friend," and that was true, because he had hired me when few others would – I owed him something. So, why was I not, in fact, his friend? Because when I reached out to him, on more than one occasion, he advised me that his wife was responsible for making social arrangements, and she did not follow up. And the new boss? The wonderful, charismatic, new boss, who bought the bad-tempered boss's business when the charismatic boss's first business went belly-up? He fired his hand-picked CFO, probably for giving advice the boss didn't want to hear, which sent shock-waves through the company, and in my opinion that was the beginning of the end; that once-solid company eventually went belly-up too.)

Two, a customer complained about me for trying to sell more photos than she wanted to buy (part of what I was expected to do, while I did my job taking portraits of her children). When the boss realized which of her employees had been complained about, she devised a plan. The customer came in to buy the photos, started looking at the lovely photos and admiring this one or that one, but my boss closed them all down and gave her the "package" – the few basic photos which were promised, in order to get customers into the store – only. "Here is your package," said the manager, took the money for the package, and whisked the customer out of the studio. I don't suppose the corporate overlord would have appreciated the money lost by my boss's behavior, but I did. However, I did not have the brains to thank her, at the time. I was a bit shocked.

Three, it is in the nature of malicious gossip behind your back that you do not know what is being said or who is saying it. On several occasions, I have received the impression that I have been treated unkindly because an authority figure liked me too much. Or, perhaps, because I threatened an authority figure with my competence. This is not something I have ever learned to handle. If I try to find out what is going on, the guilty parties tell lies. So, I have adopted the behavior, "Ask no questions; get told no lies." In my opinion, the only way for this behavior to stop is for decent people who see it going on, to put a stop to it. For the victim to protect or defend him- or her-self is well-nigh impossible.

Four, when I was working a dishwasher job, the boss told us that a better way to get the dishes clean and dry is to use really, really hot water. I started to fill the sink with really, really hot water and my companion on the shift behaved as though cooperating with the boss was the last thing any self-respecting employee should do. He was not a stupid man, merely one who hailed from a different social class from mine. We became friends, and I learned that his friends, working behind bars, fleeced the tourists who didn't know any better what the price of a drink should be.

Now, I dare say that catty, obnoxious, and selfish behavior goes on among all social classes. The difference is that, if you are in the lowest echelons, losing a lousy job is life-threatening (you need a job that pays money, to buy things like food and drink and pay rent), so you swallow your anger and carry on regardless. You smile at the boss and don't tell how you really feel. I understand that a recent shooting in California had something to do with a workplace dispute worth \$100. I doubt very much that that was the first indignity.

So, here is my personal example of why good people don't take low-status jobs. I was once a bank teller. We were trained in most of the basic duties of a bank teller, but there were some things that came up rarely and we were not trained in those. Nevertheless, when a customer came in asking for one of those, we were supposed to step up. I am fearless in that regard, and I was the go-to teller in those situations. The others wouldn't touch something they didn't know how to do.

So, a customer comes in with a check in a foreign currency, I think it was German marks. I ask the manager for assistance. The manager doesn't know, so I search the instruction book for how to process foreign checks. I do the best I can and the check leaves our branch at the end of the day. Sometime later, it transpires that the check has gone missing and I am the last one known to have handled it. It was a large check, worth perhaps \$6,000, and I am to be held responsible for its loss. I am treated as though it is entirely plausible that I am a thief (of a check payable to someone else, in German marks?). The idea that the whole organization is responsible when something goes wrong does not figure. I do not protest this injustice; I don't think anyone cares. Within a short while, I have found another job, and my new boss says that, if he had believed my references, he would not have hired me.

(He was the bad-tempered boss of prior mention. He was of South Asian descent, more appreciative of my resume than other U.S. employers appeared to be. And what was on my resume? Qualifications way too good for the job, including two degrees in Arabic studies from a world-renowned English University and two advanced degrees in economics from the University of Maryland here in the U.S.A. His wife had been a practicing physician in India when she agreed to marry him and move to the U.S. Here, she is not qualified to practice medicine. The same complex man also stood up for me against an intermediate manager who wanted me replaced, probably for having asked him awkward questions at his job interview. Message to bosses: don't ask your employees, whom the new hire will supervise, to sit in on the hiring interview. This support for me was unknown to me until later. Judging by their behavior toward me, I would have thought the intermediate manager liked me better.)

More recently, I received a list of aphorisms from the Farmers' Almanac in my email inbox. (I signed up for these because, as an outdoors-photographer and gardener, I am interested in long-range weather forecasts.) My friend who grew up in Appalachia says those witty aphorisms were common in her world. A few of the words of wisdom were, "Do not pick a fight with an old man; if he is too old to fight, he will kill you."

President Putin is an old man. Injustice is everywhere, and some people have nothing left to lose by letting you know they are tired of it. Any questions? Would you like another bomb tomorrow? Would you like another shooting tomorrow? Would you like more lies tomorrow? Why did an out-of-control six-year-old shoot his teacher, when several people knew he was a troubled child and that he had a gun on school property that day?

Oh, I almost forgot, why does the irredeemable President Putin have any friends at all? (English sarcasm follows, in case you haven't encountered it much:) We Westerners have brought the whole world out of poverty! Well, not quite all, but on average the whole world is better off. Guns, gangs, bombs, drugs, desperate migrants, pollution, climate change, habitat loss, overpopulation, no big deal! Those poor countries that couldn't control themselves in the first place need to deal with their problems. We'll set things right for ourselves and our allies; it will all trickle down – our way, our rules, and it WILL work – eventually.

Oh, and by the way, I, Annie, can give folks an analysis that offers a chance at turning some of this around. But I am just a batty old lady with a world-class education and an immigrant's life, what do I know? (Yes, there is much good in our rich-people world; many of us are pretty good at getting things done; many of us know what goes on behind closed doors in the halls of power, and it is "awesome"; most of us are even pretty good at being nice. Why do you think am I writing this essay? Wake up, friends, family, and neighbors, before circumstances overtake us, PLEASE!)