

UNEMPLOYMENT

I still feel uncomfortable when I think of the day, 20 years ago now, when asking someone what he did he replied "I am afraid I'm unemployed." **He** was apologising to **me** because **he** was unemployed. I cannot forget my shame and pity - and anger - that he felt it necessary to apologise for not having a job. I know why he did it of course. Which of us has not heard or seen people without jobs being described as workshy scroungers.

Most of us identify ourselves by our jobs, they give us status. We are farmers; we are builders; we work for the Council - one person I know describes himself as 'a Senior Civil Servant', his emphasis shows how important that extra word is to him. On the other hand I think that most of us who are retired don't describe ourselves as 'retired'. There are things we can do now which we find much more important or interesting than our work used to be. We talk about the things we like doing:

I've a garden; I like walking - or - music

I like DIY - cooking - sewing - painting

I'm a member of a Political Party or of a Church

These are the things we can talk about and which give others a way to approach us as individuals.

I think we should think seriously about making it our practice to ask questions of people that do not carry the unspoken assumption that they are 'employed'. It is cruel to expect people to abase themselves before strangers. A job, if we have one, is and will remain terribly important to our self esteem while we are of working age. I hope I shall never again put someone in a position to apologise for having no paid job - and I hope also that I shall see the day when people with no paid employment can be properly recognised for the contribution they make to the community. The Charity for the homeless I work for in Exeter couldn't run without volunteers.

So let us make a resolution to try and see people for what they are inside, not for who pays their wages.

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