
American Nightmares

DAVID PATTERSON was a practical man. All his life—from his youth in a run-down working-class district of Philadelphia to his adulthood in the affluent suburbs of New York—he had made rational decisions about the future. David had a talent for music, but he studied business. He had a flare for advertising, but he pursued a job in the computer industry. He wore his rationality proudly. Having steered clear of personal indulgence, he had a lot to show for his efforts: a beautiful home, two luxury cars, a country club membership, a rewarding executive job, and a comfortable, stable family. The Philadelphia slums seemed a million miles away and a million years ago.

When David's boss left frantic messages with the secretary, asking him to stay late one Friday afternoon, his stomach began to flutter. Only the previous week David had pored over the company's financial statements. Things weren't looking too good, but it never occurred to him that the crisis would reach his level. He was, after all, the director of an entire division, a position he had been promoted to only two years before. But when David

saw the pained look on the boss's face, he knew his head had found its way to the chopping block.

He was given four weeks of severance pay, the use of the company telephone credit card, and a desk in a remote part of the building for the month. Despite these assurances, the credit card was canceled a week later. The company made good on the severance pay agreement, but David was made to feel increasingly uncomfortable about the desk. So he cleared out and went home.

Wasting no time, he set to work on the want ads every morning. He called all his friends in the business to let them know he was looking, and he sent his resume out to the "headhunters"—the executive search firms that match openings to people. David was sure, in the beginning, that it wouldn't be long before a new position opened up. He had some savings put aside to cushion the family in the meanwhile. He was not worried. By the third month of looking, he was a bit nervous. Six fruitless months down the line he was in a full-fledged panic. Nothing was coming through. The message machine he had bought the day after losing his job was perpetually blank.

After nine months, David and his wife Julia were at a crossroads. Their savings eroded, they could not keep up the mortgage payments on their four-bedroom neocolonial house. Julia had gone back to work after a two-year hiatus, but her earnings were a fraction of what David's had been. His unemployment compensation together with her paycheck never amounted to more than 25 percent of the income they had had in the old days. The house, their pride and joy and the repository of virtually all their savings, went up for sale. They reasoned that if the house sold, at least they could salvage some cash to support the family while David continued to look for a job. But their asking price was too high to attract many qualified buyers. Finally it was sold for a song.

Broke and distressed beyond imagining, the family found a small apartment in a modest section of a nearby town. David continued to look for an executive job, but the massive downturn of the mid-1980s in the computer industry virtually ensured that his search would bear no fruit. From Silicon Valley to Boston's Route 128, the shakeout in his field was stranding hundreds of equally well-qualified men. David could not get past the personnel offices of firms in other industries. He was not given the chance to show how flexible he could be, how transferable his managerial experience was to firms outside the computer field.

After a while David stopped calling his friends, and they ceased trying to contact him. Having always been sociable people, David and Julia found it hard to cope with the isolation. But with no good news to share, they didn't really feel like seeing old acquaintances. Friendship in their social circles revolved around outings to fancy restaurants, dances at the country club, and the occasional Broadway show or symphony in New York City. The Pattersons' budget simply could not sustain these luxuries anymore. For a time their friends were understanding, inviting them to dinner parties in their homes instead of excursions to places the Pattersons could not afford. But eventually the unspoken rules of reciprocity put an end to that. The Pattersons couldn't issue return invitations, and the potluck dinners of their youth were not a viable alternative.

David and Julia were almost relieved by the ensuing isolation. It had been a strain to put on a calm countenance when, in fact, they felt that life was falling apart. At the same time, however, they interpreted the sounds of silence as abandonment. When friends ceased to call, David was convinced this meant that they no longer cared what happened to him. At least they should try to help him, he thought.

Like many other executive families, they were newcomers to suburban New York. Only two years before, David's firm had transferred him from its California branch to its New York headquarters. The move east held the promise of a more important executive job for David and a taste of real affluence. The transition had not been easy, since the social barriers of suburban society were hard to penetrate. Making new friends was no small accomplishment, and after two years there were only a few they could count as close. But they weren't the kind of old friends one could lean on in a crisis, and this surely was a crisis.

Their two teenage children were equally disoriented. Like most kids, they had opposed moving away from the place where they had grown up. They made no secret of their fury at being disrupted in the middle of high school, exiled to a new state where they knew no one. The girl had become rather withdrawn. The boy had worked hard to make new friends, leaning on his father's prestige as a company executive as an avenue into the status-conscious cliques of the local high school. When the son first arrived, as David put it, "No one would even talk to him. He was looked upon as a transient. Everyone else in his school had been in the same area since grammar school." The son's efforts to break into the networks met with only mild success, and even

then, it took nearly the entire two years before he felt on solid social ground. He had finally reached a comfortable plateau when David lost his job. The whole family was thrown into turmoil, and the prospect of moving surfaced once again.

This was too much. David's teenagers unleashed their fury: How could he do this to them? The whole move to New York had been his idea in the first place. Now he was going to drag them through another upheaval! How dare he interfere with their lives so drastically once again? How were they supposed to explain to their friends that their father-the-executive was unemployed? Conformity was the watchword in their friendship circles. Not only did they have to look right and act right, they had to come from acceptable backgrounds. An unemployed father hardly fit the bill. In fact, it threatened their standing altogether because it made it impossible for them to buy the clothes and cars that were commonplace in their social set.

David was accustomed to the normal tensions of life with teenagers. But in his shaken condition, he felt guilty. In retrospect, he agreed with his kids that the move to New York had been ill advised. But it wasn't as if he had had any warning of the debacle when they left the familiar comforts of California. He was simply doing what any intelligent man in his position would do: pursue every opportunity for upward mobility, even if the family is disrupted in the process.

Harder to contend with was the strain on his wife. Julia had long dabbled as a receptionist in art galleries, but her work had been more of a hobby and occasional supplement to the family budget than a mainstay. It had not been easy for her to pick up where she left off when the family moved to New York. Eventually, she found a part-time receptionist position, but her wages could not begin to cover the family's expenses. The move had bequeathed the Pattersons a staggering mortgage for a house twice as expensive as their old one. They could manage the bills as long as David was employed. But with his job gone, Julia's earnings could not stretch far enough. In one fell swoop, Julia found herself the major breadwinner in the family. Though she tried to find a job that would pay more, she had never thought of her work as a "career." She lacked the experience and stable employment history needed to land a better position.

It was the uncertainty of the situation that Julia found hardest to bear. She just could not tell when it would end or where they

might land. It was difficult enough to batten down the hatches, cut purchases, and figure out a way to keep the credit cards from sliding too far into arrears. The family did not venture into the shopping malls any more, although this had once been a major form of weekend recreation. If she could figure out when things were going to bottom out, at least she would know what standard of living they had to adapt to. But, lacking any concrete sense of destination, Julia did not know how to begin the adjustment. Adjust to what?

Little help was forthcoming from the suburban matrons in the neighborhood, who—it appears—had never faced anything even remotely resembling this crisis. Where Julia expected to find sympathy and even offers of assistance, she found disbelief and not a little finger pointing. David could sense the damage this was doing:

Since becoming unemployed there's really nothing, especially for my wife—no place where a woman can talk about things. There are no real relationships. She's hurt. People say to her, "With all the companies on Long Island, your husband can't find a job? Is he really trying? Maybe he likes not working." This really hurts her and it hurts me. People don't understand that you can send out 150 letters to headhunters and get 10 replies. Maybe one or two will turn into something, but there are a hundred qualified people going after each job. The computer industry is contracting all over the place and as it contracts, my wife contracts emotionally.

Secretly David worried whether Julia didn't share just a bit of her friends' attitudes. He could see the despair on her face when he would come home with no news to report. But on too many occasions, it seemed that her rage over the unfairness of his plight was mixed with doubt. She would bombard him with questions: Did you follow up on this lead? Did you call your cousin Harry about another? What did the headhunter tell you about that job downtown? David had few satisfying answers and after a while he began to resent the questions. Couldn't Julia see he was doing his best? It got to the point where he preferred taking a train into the city to look for work to riding with her in the car. Two hours together in the car with nothing but a bleak future to talk about was sometimes more than he could face.

The whole situation left David at a loss. No one was playing by the rules. He had credentials; he had experience; he was in a

high-tech field that was touted as the wave of the future. Every time he turned on the news he would hear commentators lament the closing of the steel plants, the auto plants, and the coal mines. This was to be expected in an era when the United States no longer seemed able to compete in the world of heavy industry. But computers? They were supposed to be our salvation, and as a man who always kept one eye on the future, David had aggressively and successfully pursued a career in the field. How could he have gotten into such a quagmire?

The truth is, the computer industry was taking a bath in the mid-1980s. Thousands of employees had been turned out from Atari, Honeywell, Apple. Even IBM, the giant of the industry, had had to tighten its belt. David's entire division had been closed down: fifty people axed in one stroke. The industry shakeout was headline news in the *Wall Street Journal* and on the business pages of the major dailies. But it was only slowly seeping into general public consciousness, where computers still hold a special place as the glamour industry for the twenty-first century. The news had clearly failed to reach the Pattersons' friends. They were dumbfounded by David's disaster. High tech was the answer to the country's economic ills; computers were booming. How could David be having so much trouble finding a job? And what was the *real* reason he had lost his old one?

David could recite the litany of problems in the computer business so familiar to insiders. He could understand completely why his division, located at the market research end of the company, had been targeted as "nonessential" to its survival. In the beginning he told himself that his personal situation could be explained logically. Market forces had put pressure on the company, and it responded, as any rational actor in a competitive capitalist economy would, by cost cutting, aiming first at those activities that were most remote from the nuts and bolts of production and sales. Indeed, had David been at the helm, he argued, he would have made the same decision. For David Patterson is no rebel. He is a true believer in the American way of doing business. Up until now, it had satisfied his every ambition. Hence there was no reason to question its fundamental premise: In economics, as in life, the strong survive and the weak fall by the wayside.

But after months of insecurity, depression, and shaking fear, the economic causes of his personal problems began to fade from view. All David could think about was, What is wrong with me?

Why doesn't anyone call me? What have I done wrong? He would spend hours bent over his desk, rubbing his forehead, puffing on his pipe, examining his innermost character, wondering whether this or that personality flaw was holding him back. Could people tell that he was anxious? Were people avoiding him on the street because they couldn't stand to come face to face with desperation? Was he offending potential employers, coming on too strong? With failure closing in from all directions the answer came back "It must be me." The ups and downs of the computer industry and the national economy were forgotten. David's character took center stage as the villain in his own downfall.

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David Patterson has joined the ranks of a little-known group in America, a lost tribe: the downwardly mobile. They are men and women who once had secure jobs, comfortable homes, and reason to believe that the future would be one of continued prosperity for themselves and their children. Longtime members of the American middle class, they suddenly find everything they have worked to achieve—careers, life-styles, and peace of mind—slipping through their fingers. And despite sustained efforts to reverse the slide, many discover there is little they can do to block their descent.

The lack of attention downward mobility receives—from policy-makers, scholars, and the public—has little to do with its actual incidence. Its low visibility is hardly a product of size: About one in five American men skid down the occupational hierarchy in their working lives.¹ In recessions and depressions, their numbers grow at a particularly rapid rate. But downward mobility is not simply an episodic or unusual phenomenon in this country. It is a regular feature of the economic landscape that has been with us for many years.

Yet we hear very little about the downwardly mobile. Magazine covers and television programs focus attention on upward mobility, the emergence of the Yuppies, the exploits of the rich and famous, and in less dramatic terms, the expectation of ordinary Americans that from one year to the next, their lives will keep getting better. But many middle-class families are headed in the opposite direction—falling on hard times—and relatively little systematic attention is paid to their experience.

In the public mind, downward mobility is easily confused with

poverty, and the downwardly mobile are mistaken for those who live below the poverty line. But the two groups are quite different. Nearly eight million American families are officially classified as poor, and they have been the subject of countless studies.² The poor *can* experience downward mobility—they can lose their hold on a meager, but stable existence and become homeless, for example—but many are at the bottom of the class hierarchy and some have been there for generations.³

The experience of the downwardly mobile middle class is quite different. They once “had it made” in American society, filling slots from affluent blue-collar jobs to professional and managerial occupations. They have job skills, education, and decades of steady work experience. Many are, or were, homeowners. Their marriages were (at least initially) intact. As a group they savored the American dream. They found a place higher up the ladder in this society and then, inexplicably, found their grip loosening and their status sliding.

Some downwardly mobile middle-class families end up in poverty, but many do not. Usually they come to rest at a standard of living above the poverty level but far below the affluence they enjoyed in the past. They must therefore contend not only with financial hardship but with the psychological, social, and practical consequences of “falling from grace,” of losing their “proper place” in the world.

Besides confusing the downwardly mobile with the poor, Americans tend to overlook these refugees from the middle class because their experience flies in the face of everything American culture stands for. From our earliest beginnings, we have cultivated a national faith in progress and achievement. The emphasis on success has always made it difficult for Americans to acknowledge defeat: No one ever talks about the Pilgrims who gave up and headed back to England.⁴ Our optimistic heritage stands in the way of recognizing how frequently economic failure occurs.

When academics study occupational mobility, most of the energy goes into trying to account for upward mobility. It is true that the majority of adults enjoy an upward trajectory in income and occupational status over the course of their working lives. Yet, despite the fact that a large number have the opposite experience, downward mobility is relegated to footnotes or to a few lines in statistical tables. Rarely is it treated as a topic in its own right.

When the media, in times of economic hardship, do touch on

the problem, they show sympathy for the victims but express bewilderment at their fate. The downwardly mobile are often portrayed as the exceptions that prove the rule. Occasional reminders of what can go wrong seem to strengthen the nation's assumptions about what constitutes the normal and positive course of events. Downward mobility appears, therefore, as an aberration.

What is worse, America's Puritan heritage, as embodied in the work ethic, sustains a steadfast belief in the ability of individuals to control the circumstances of their lives. When life does not proceed according to plan, Americans tend to assume that the fault lies within. We are far more likely to "blame the victim" than to assume that systemic economic conditions beyond the influence of any individual are responsible. This tendency is so pervasive that at times even the victims blame the victims, searching within to find the character flaw that has visited downward mobility upon them. Even they assume that occupational dislocation is somehow uniquely their problem. But the fact is, downward mobility has always been with us and exists in larger numbers than most of us realize.

American culture is rich in rituals and symbols that celebrate worldly success. The extravagant bar mitzvah, the debutante ball, the society wedding, and the lavish golden anniversary celebration all signal the value that Americans attach to economic achievement. Our symbolic vocabulary for failure is, by comparison, stunted. Downward mobility has virtually no ritual face. It is not captured in myths or ceremonies that might help individuals in its grip to make the transition from a higher to a lower social status—there is no equivalent to Horatio Alger stories for the downwardly mobile.

The fact that downward mobility happens so often, yet has not been institutionalized through social convention or public ritual, points to something very significant about the problem. Downward mobility is a hidden dimension of our society's experience because it simply does not fit into our cultural universe. The downwardly mobile therefore become an invisible minority—their presence among us unacknowledged.

This impoverishes public discourse about the problem. Even more important, it has a savage impact on the downwardly mobile themselves. Lacking social and cultural support, the downwardly mobile are stuck in a transitional state, a psychological no-man's-land. They straddle an "old" identity as members of the middle

class and a “new” identity as working poor or unemployed.⁵ They are in suspended animation. The chaotic feeling of displacement creates confusion that can only be resolved through reintegration in a new capacity. Yet the downwardly mobile are unable to find a “new place” that satisfies their expectations. Hence they are left hanging, with one foot in the world of the professions, the corporate empire, the realm of the economically secure, and another in the troubled world of the financially distressed, the dispossessed, and the realm of low-level occupations.

Hanging between two worlds is a distressing state of existence, for the downwardly mobile individual has to juggle two incompatible senses of personhood. On the one hand, he or she is a well-educated, skilled professional, accustomed to power, to deference, to middle-class norms of consumption. Yet behind the facade of the split-level executive home, the wallpaper is peeling, appliances are breaking down, clothes and shoes are wearing thin, and adults are venturing out to work at low-level white- or blue-collar jobs which afford no authority, no autonomy, no sense of self-importance.

Which self is the real and which the artificial for the downwardly mobile? Some cling to the old persona for years. When asked, they claim their previous occupations as engineers, vice presidents of marketing, or sales managers. But even after hundreds of interviews fail to rescue them from a bottom-level job, after the family home has been sold to pay off debts, after the sense of self-assurance fades to be replaced by self-recrimination, the torture of two selves endures. For the kids’ sake, for the wife’s sake, or simply for the sake of one’s own sanity, it is hard to ditch yesterday’s honored identity in order to make room for today’s poor substitute. And one never knows, perhaps tomorrow’s mail will bring news of a job interview, a passport back to the only occupational reality that makes sense.

Without any guidelines on how to shed the old self, without any instruction or training for the new, the downwardly mobile remain in a social and cultural vacuum. And society looks the other way because, frankly, it is embarrassing to see someone in such a state, and it’s disturbing to treat the situation as anything other than an aberration. Any closer scrutiny makes us squirm, for it jeopardizes our own comfort.

This is not to say that there is no template for failure in American culture. Indeed, there have been periods when images of down-

ward mobility were fresh in America's mind. The massive wave of farm foreclosures in the 1930s had a quality of collective public mourning: groups of worn and dejected faces surrounding the old homestead or the last tractor. John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* memorialized the plight of the dispossessed Dust Bowl refugees. We remember the fate of the Joad family, ejected from their land by the nameless, faceless, hated bankers.⁶ The devastation of the Great Depression lingers in our historical consciousness. When the 1980s saw the United States facing the worst rate of farm foreclosures since the depression, the specter of the 1930s was a constant subtext. The beleaguered Midwest, America's breadbasket, recalled an old calamity suffered by others in other times. The words "not since the 1930s" were repeated again and again as if to assure today's farmers that they are not the first to see their livelihoods destroyed.

Despite the cold comfort of history's example, farm foreclosures are not rituals: They do not happen regularly enough to have acquired the character of a culturally recognized transition from one status to another. They are catastrophes, extraordinary events. They remind us of the calamities that can befall the nation, but they cannot structure the experience of individuals whose descent down the status ladder takes place in ordinary times.

The absence of socially validated pathways for dealing with economic decline has important consequences for the downwardly mobile. They often mourn in isolation and fail to reach any sense of closure in their quest for a new identity. Their disorientation suggests how critical culture is in "explaining" to individuals the meaning of their fate.

To a certain extent, the experience of downward mobility in middle-class America is the same for all of its victims. Catastrophic losses create a common feeling of failure, loss of control, and social disorientation. Most people who experience downward mobility long for the "golden days" to return; some genuinely believe they will. Those who have sunk far below their original social status simply don't know where they belong in the world. This is the core of what it means to "fall from grace": to lose your place in the social landscape, to feel that you have no coherent identity, and finally to feel, if not helpless, then at least stymied about how to rectify the situation.

But beyond this the commonalities cease. Some downwardly mobile people feel alone, others are part of a group; some blame