

Economic Justice Study Resource for Ethical Societies

Book: *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* by Barbara Ehrenreich. 2001, 2002, 2008.

Understanding the reality of the lives and challenges of the working poor in America.

Discussion Guide available online:

- http://www.barbaraehrenreich.com/nickel_and_dimed_reading_group_guide.htm

Some additional discussion questions:

- In the Introduction, Ehrenreich lists her limits in selecting jobs – whether she would need a vehicle, whether she would go hungry, for example. What choices are available for people who are working at or below minimum wage level?
- Where do you interact with low-wage workers in your day-to-day life? What services and goods in your life are provided with the work of low-wage workers? Have you ever worked in a low-wage job?
- Consider times when *you* may have worked for an “unreasonable boss” or found your liberties restricted on a job beyond your comfort level. What choices were available to you in deciding what to do? What choices did you make in each such case?
- How might the major economic downturn after the date of this book affected the working poor who are Ehrenreich’s focus in this book?
- Did you get more in touch with the reality of work life for the “working poor” by reading Ehrenreich’s account? Did this approach motivate you to action in some way? Or did it add to a sense of hopelessness and helplessness? Did it add to your sense of anger and blame? Did it increase your compassion or understanding? Is a book like this more a help or hindrance to you in deciding where to put your social justice energy?
- Do you agree with the sentiment that “the poor are always with us”? Do you see poverty as a “sustainable condition” or a “state of emergency” and why?

Additional more recent articles by Barbara Ehrenreich, available online:

- Barbara Ehrenreich, “The Boom Was a Bust For Ordinary People.” The Washington Post, February 3, 2008. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/02/01/AR2008020102828.html>
- Barbara Ehrenreich, “Too Poor to Make the News.” The New York Times, June 14, 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/14/opinion/14ehrenreich.html> (and subsequent articles in the series)

Suggested documentaries which may add to the discussion experience:

- “Waging a Living” <http://www.pbs.org/pov/wagingaliving/>
- “Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price” <http://www.walmartmovie.com>
- “Holly Sklar on Wages and Work,” Bill Moyers Journal (online video): <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/06132008/profile3.html>

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