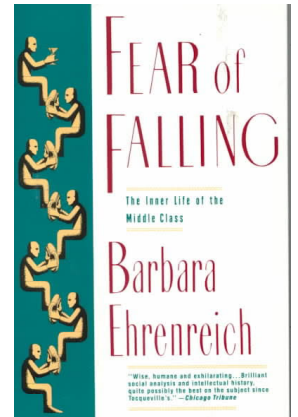


Review: Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class

The reality that there was a man of God, Jesus, who lived, died, rose again, and is spiritually at work in the world, is good news. We can theorise about it this way and that, but the longer I live the more I realise that the prayer that Jesus taught us: “Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” pierces the insulation of human societal subsistence and touches the live wires of our feeblest condition together with our most optimistic hopes. Jesus Christ, Saviour and King above all powers and winds and waves of human cunning, must be proclaimed not just for the transformation of individual lives, but of communities, societies, entire cultures. What else might his *commission* to disciple and baptise *nations* mean, if not to seek to teach and immerse them in the ways of divine life?



For better or worse, Gill and I have found ourselves embedded near the “Middle” of Western society. This is not to say that our immediate context is monochrome. But it is “Middle England” and the prevalent communal mode and manner is professional and middle class. It is not something to be disparaged, even by a farm-boy like myself from out the back of Deloraine, but it something for us to come to *understand* and, in the sense described above, to learn to *evangelise*.

How, then, could I go past a book that spruiks to speak of the *Inner Life of the Middle Class*? And how could I not seize upon the title: *The Fear of Falling*. Because if there was one characteristic we have observed time and time again in our Western world wanderings it is the prevalance of fear: fear of

slipping down the scale, of falling off the class edge; fear of life-defining *numbers*, from bank balances, and returns on investment, to school results and performance indicators.

Gill and I have a comparator: In Australia these numbers matter, but on something of a sliding scale; in the UK's herd-management mentality, they define *thresholds* and binary ups and downs. It is *starker* here, and more indicative of the broader western world I think. And it's life-sapping. Even the literature from my children's school cautioned against student's having an after-school job by appealing to numbers: please consider if £20 extra per week now is worth losing £200 extra per week in one's career down the track. It contains some wisdom I guess, but it's such a flaccidly fearful form of assessing life's experiences.

So would Ehrenreich's book help me understand? It *is* American. It *is* a bit old. It was written in the very late '80s and basically provides sociological commentary for the baby boomers into their middle age. But if, as they say, the currently middle-aged Generation X, is an amorphous bridging generation, here are the cracked foundations upon which one end of the bridge rests. Our children define the other end, and will learn to speak of it, in time.

And so the book is helpful. Ehrenreich's argument is a *journey*, from a post-war class that presumed ubiquity and had little self-consciousness, and then "an emerging middle-class awareness of being a class among others and, ultimately, of being an elite *above* others." (p11). She tells her story using not only categories of wealth and capital, but also of freedoms and control, and the ability to find life's purpose.

The common denominators throughout are of a class that can never rest in itself, which requires exertion to maintain capital and prestige from generation to generation, in which life's place, being neither secure at the top, nor can't-fall-any-further at the bottom, are always *tenuous*.

If this is an elite, then, it is an insecure and deeply

anxious one. It is afraid, like any class below the most securely wealthy, of misfortunes that might lead to a downward slide. But in the middle class there is another anxiety: a fear of inner weakness, of growing soft, of failing to strive, of losing discipline and will. Even the affluence that is so often the goal of all this striving becomes a threat, for it holds out the possibility of hedonism and self-indulgence. Whether the middle class looks down toward the realm of less, or up toward the realm of more, there is the fear, always, of falling. (p15)

There is much in this book's journey that raises some of my hackles at the state of the western world. Ehrenreich progresses from the 1950's aversion to affluence, to the psychology of student uprisings in the 1960's, and a growing self-awareness of elitism with respect to the working class of the 1970's. Throughout it all the well-worn paths of western endeavour: academic, professional and financial endeavour, are shown to be based on artificialities. Why, for instance, do we expect our children to go through the time and often unreachable expense of obtaining a degree? "So that they can have a decent career" is an insipid, and self-defined answer that speaks nothing about the value of education and free thought, let alone true merit, and fulfilling success.

As Ehrenreich's journey continued I began to sense my resentment at the pseudo-sacred game that is foisted on us. Anything that makes not only women's liberation, but decent work-life balance, and the seizing of life's deeper purposes, compete with housing (and sometimes food!) affordability is simply a mug's game: a cacophony of stressors with diminishing returns. My parent's generation either dropped out of the game, or played to win and turned into yuppies. That misses the missiological trick: to be in it, but not of it, if that is at all possible.

It is Ehrenreich's sixth chapter, on one half of that

generational response, the rise of the yuppies in the '80s, that had the most resonance for me. Here there is a picture that has not only refused to fade, but has become even more amplified by the tech and financial bubbles and busts that came later. Here we read of a growing gap between rich and poor as the economics failed to trickle-down, and as the status (and remuneration) of the traditional professions waned before the rise of a corporate elite (p200). The tension between mid-level income and mid-level lifestyle (p206) bolstered the anxiety. And the determinators of class, just like now, came down to accidents of fortune (e.g. the timing of the purchase of one's first home, parental wealth), or the impact of basic human realities such as having children, or investing in or forgoing a vocation (p210).

Many of the college students I talked to in the mid-eighties were suffering from what might be called "premature pragmatism." They were putting aside, at far too early an age, their idealism and intellectual curiosity in favor of economic security, which was increasingly defined as wealth.

A young woman interviewed by Newsweek had switched from social work to sales because "I realized that I would have to make a commitment to being poor to be a social worker." (p209-210)

The result was a deadening: a pervasive busyness (p232) and an un-intellectual pragmatism (p241). Consumerism took its place in a vicious guilt-reward cycle (p232). In my own words, one could summarise it, echoed in today's world as a **non-thinking generation trying to assuage its regret.**

At the end, Ehrenreich longs for an expansion of the middle class, an egalitarian "welcoming of everyone" (p263) until there is no other class. This is pure unrealistic idealism, although I am sympathetic. Venture capitalist Nick Hanauer famously made a similar, and more applicable point in 2014 as he ably argued for middle class investment (based on high

income taxes) as *shrewd*.

But our project is of a different kind. Journeys like Ehrenreich's can leave us resentful and frustrated, and *stressed* as the pressures of this world are distilled and unpacked. We have touched on our fears. Now wherein lies our hope?

The Sunday School answer, of course, is "Jesus is our hope."

It's in the application that it gets more grown-up. To move against the spirit of this age and work in the opposite direction of the abounding fear involves many things. Against consumerism we embrace *holiness*. But that means facing our fears of losing out; it means repenting of self-satisfaction.

Against dehumanising pragmatism, we embrace *vocation* in the priorities for how we use our wealth and time, and how we count the cost. But that means facing the fears of invalidation and inferiority, it means repenting of our protectionism. Against self-referential self-actualising individualism, we seek to *worship*, which brings us unmade before God, to hear his word, recognise our brothers and sisters, and receive forgiveness. But that means facing the fears of what we will see in God's light, it means confessing our sins, daring to heed divine truth, and turning from our passivity and infantilism. In short, it means faith and repentance.

It's this hope for which the new monasticism embraces the threefold mode and manner of life: **purity, simplicity, and accountability**. I can think of few better antidotes to the middle class malaise.

In the end there is no hope in Ehrenreich's book. But there is hope in Jesus, because, if nothing else, for our society to face it's fear of falling, it will take a miracle.