

Three Cheers for the Blue-Collar Crowd

Somerset County, Pennsylvania. Wednesday evening: nine miners trapped. Sunday morning: nine miners saved. "Praise the Lord," the governor said; throughout America, all the people said, "Amen."

It was a marvel, we all agree, if not an outright miracle; it fed the soul of a nation in desperate need of good news. On Monday, the stock market signaled its response with a surge of 447 points.

It may have been the final act in the only show worth watching this year: unplanned and unrehearsed, the grand finale in an 11-month performance of courage, consistency and sacrifice. We have uncovered a great host of once-hidden heroes.

It actually began in western Pennsylvania, when an ordinary father on an ordinary flight responded to extraordinary danger with a grass-roots concoction of common sense and uncommon valor. His name was Todd Beamer. The plane was hijacked; his fate was sealed.

Armed only with a cell phone, he hatched a plan of action. He left a message for his wife, prayed with the operator, and then uttered the words that have entered the American lexicon of inspiration: "Let's roll!" In a sequence of events to be forever unknown, he and his fellow travelers gave their own lives in order to save others.

Since that day, a wide and wondrous company of laboring people has thrilled an American audience with one noble deed after another.

In New York City, firefighters, police officers and construction workers served the common good while being served by a million volunteers dishing food and cleaning rooms. In Afghanistan, soldiers, sailors and pilots fought the terrorists and befriended the tribes while being supplied by an incredible network of military and civilian staff.

In Arizona, Colorado and a half dozen other states, professionals and volunteers

cut down the trees and hosed down the hills trying to stop the fire and save the homes. In Pennsylvania, miners bored through the night—through 40 feet of dirt and 200 feet of solid rock—to make an escape for the nine men trapped below.

It has been a blue-collar show, displaying the guts and glory of those who labor with hands, backs and physical brawn. It has brought dignity to the very workers whose contribution is often discounted and dismissed.

But it has not been the only act under the big top of the American workplace.

In another ring, a white-collar troupe of accountants, stockbrokers and corporate executives have put on a show of deceit, greed and outlandish doublespeak. The crowd, in stunned disbelief, loudly boos these “barons of bankruptcy” and finally walks away in disgust.

In yet a third ring, a host of black-collar men stand; their heads are bowed and hearts broken as the spotlight of revelation finally sheds its beams on their deeds of sexual aggression. They also have brought disrepute to their profession, and silent waves of shame cannot muffle the years of secret sobbing now turned into angry accusations.

But here, on center stage, in the year of our Lord 2002, we gather to cheer the solid, steady attitudes of people who live and work among us. We invoke the words of poet Carl Sandburg in extolling the “half naked, sweating, proud to be hog butcher, tool maker, stacker of wheat, player with railroads, and freight handler to the nation.”

In this Labor Day season, we brush off an old blessing: “May your children grow up to wear blue.”

Somebody says, “For the Glory of God and the Common Good.”

And all the people say, “Amen.”

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