Opinion

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'I want you' for the US service industry

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My first job was as a host at Chili's. More specifically, I found employment at one of the chain's many strip mall locations, found between a froyo shop and a trampoline park. It was a dank, dismal place and one that held a lingering air of week-old vomit and stale cigarettes. I say with full confidence that, with the exception of one poem from award-winning poet Jameson Fitzpatrick, nothing good has ever come out of that restaurant. On my first day, I was met with a lawyer from corporate interviewing employees after (yet another) sex scandal. During my brief tenure at this multi-national institution, I faced down drunken hordes of veterans during our Memorial Day free-margaritas-for-servicemen sales promotion. I was offered private rides on yachts by women nearly four times my age. On the daily, I negotiated with waiting staff over tabling: an experience which, if you haven't had the pleasure of partaking in, is similar in spirit to negotiating with terrorists. In short, I hated my job. Despite this, I would strongly encourage anyone to take a job in the service industry.

As UConn's summer break begins, many of us are searching desperately for quick employment. Why not take the chance to try the service industry? In a market still recovering from pandemic-era job losses, many restaurants remain desperate to boost staff numbers. Whether hosting, waiting, or working in the kitchen, work is sure to be found. While these titles are not the most glamorous to be found on a resume, the skills and experiences they offer are necessary in learning the need to identify with the common worker.

Service jobs breed empathy: an ability that many of us can at times lack. In a nation facing a widening empathy gap, service industries offer a bridge towards understanding our peers. Restaurant work can often be incredibly demanding — even the simple task of standing with a cheery smile can quickly become herculean in spirit after hours on end. Understanding the strain behind these smiles is incredibly important when remembering to show grace. As of last year, over 75% of service workers reported facing severe workplace violence from customer abuse. Learning how you can put yourself in the shoes of these individuals is crucial to bringing this number down.

Furthermore, working in service can bestow a healthy understanding of the many politics that face our workers — from unions to tipping. Although I was lucky enough to be paid full wages as a host, many of my coworkers were forced to rely on tips for their income. Too often, I saw those around me forced to make incredible sacrifices in their daily lives because that week's customers took no pity upon them. I saw conflicts between management and staff left unresolved and unsatisfied because of the lack of collective bargaining power. I saw a thinly veiled injustice, that too much of our society does not realize exists at all. In part because of my experiences in these roles, I can relate to others stuck in worse conditions, and why I will always throw my support behind unions and server-friendly policies.

In this regard, entering service is necessary in order to gain a full understanding of the lives that exist behind the curtains of society. Many face severe instability as a result of our nation's heightened political partisanship. When the Trump administration began to crack down on immigration, it unleashed ICE raids across the country — raids that quickly tore entire families apart. In the face of the continued onslaught of these deportations, many of our nation's workers — including several of my coworkers — feared for their livelihood. They faced a choice: go to work and risk deportation or be unable to provide for their families back home. Both were and still are incredibly inhumane options. Despite this, our nation's politics forced these workers to choose. If more had been aware of the instability that these workers face, and had learned to sympathize with them, would such horrific tragedies have been allowed to occur?

Too often, we allow ourselves to forget the lives of those who work in the service industry. We back policies that at best ignore the needs of this invisible industry and at worst directly harm it. We allow ourselves to be lost in an illusion of happy smiles, choirs of "thank you for visiting," "have a nice day" and corporate bribes of free chips and salsa. What we need is a reminder of what really happens behind the scenes, and why we should work to better these environments. We need a reminder that the people serving us are just that: people. In such divided times as these, we need a little more of that basic human empathy: because at the end of the day, we all live for the same reasons. So please, if you're looking for a quick buck this summer: turn towards your local restaurants. You may regret it, but I promise you: that's for the better.

The American Spirit: Watch as WE soar!

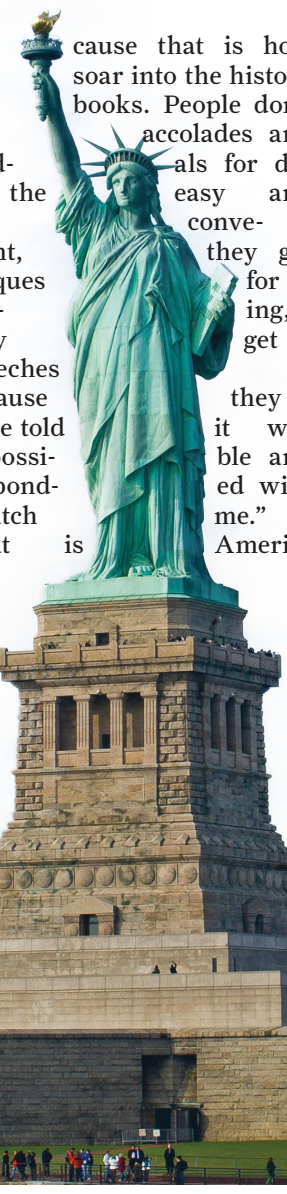
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Throughout the nation's history many have brought up the idea of the American Spirit. An attitude and thought process where the impossible becomes possible and ordinary civilians rise to be heroes. It is this attitude that has sent men to the moon and created a global superpower that rivals the greats. Throughout these stories of greatness, there is one idea that stands out, the idea of 'we' not me. The idea that 'we' as Americans outweigh the me in the individual.

Look at the political quote from Former President Joe Biden, "We are Americans, second to none, and we own the finish line." Throughout this quote President Biden doesn't say I or me, he says we. This is the American Spirit: When we announce to the world that we don't care if they think we are insane or downright stupid. We are still the United States; a nation where someone can dream big and achieve big, where we have slipped the bonds of the Earth and touched the face of God.

The idea of 'we' can be seen in the document that proclaimed America. "We the people," it reads as the introduction, with the first three words in big and bold lettering. It could have said, we the representatives or we the leaders, but in we the people it makes no distinction between the founding fathers in the room and the common folk of the colonies. There was no separation in our declaration between the men who put their names on the paper and the people of the 13 colonies who were preparing to rise and fight for it.

In 1962 at Rice University, President John F. Kennedy spoke the words, "We choose to go to the moon, not because it is easy, but because it is hard." Kennedy highlighted the 'we' in his speech as a rally cry not just for those in attendance, but for America. We choose the hard over the convenient, because that is how we soar into the history books. People don't get accolades and medals for doing the easy and the convenient, they get plaques for daring, they get speeches because they were told it was impossible and responded with "watch me." That is America.



"We're coming over." These lyrics come from the WW1 song "Over There." In these few words, it also highlights the idea of 'we.' It does not say 'I' am coming over. It emphasizes that we Americans will travel across the Atlantic to stick it to the Kaiser and the central powers. This turned the war from just a European conflict into a conflict for America. Another line that keeps the idea of we is "and we won't come back till it's over, over there." This paints that we as Americans will not falter nor waver and we won't let the Reich cast dark shadows across Europe. That we as Americans have a duty to stop such countries from disrupting and destroying the free world

Through the idea of 'we,' we have led America to sorrowful times. 'We' as the defenders against communism lead to Vietnam. The idea that Americans had to spearhead the conflict to contain communism and that we as a nation of the free must be willing to stomach the losses. Though it was also the 'we' mentality that helped us recover. We rose higher after Vietnam because we learned. Eventually our conflict against communist powers ended in success, as communism fell away across the world. We stood high as the USSR fell; we were there for the new independent countries ready and willing to show them the power of we.

The American Spirit will never have the word 'I' or 'me' in it because it simply does not fit. In a nation with political polarization, we must remember that even the mighty bald eagle needs both wings to soar high. Above all, the Spirit that has defined America will always be for we the daring, we the brave, we the willing and we the people of the United States of America.



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