

# The Company Man

by Ellen Goodman

*Ellen Goodman was born in Newton Massachusetts in 1941. She took a B.A. from Radcliffe College in 1963 and attended Harvard University on a Nieman Fellowship. Goodman began her journalistic career with Newsweek, where she was a researcher and reporter.*



*She then moved to the Detroit Free Press as a feature writer. In 1967, she joined the Boston Globe as a feature writer and columnist. Her syndicated column, "At Large," appears in more than 200 newspapers across the country. Her first book, Turning Points (1979) was based on interviews she conducted about current changes in society. She has won several awards for her commentary, including a Pulitzer Prize in 1980. Many of her columns have been collected in Close to Home (1979), in which "The Company Man" appeared. Other collections include At Large (1981) Keeping in Touch (1985) Making Sense (1989), and Value Judgments (1993). Her most recent book is I Know Just What You Mean: The Power of Friendship in Women's Lives (2000).*

*"The Company Man" indicts corporate American for fostering the development of individuals who, apparently, have little in the way of souls: Goodman paints a bleak and pronounced portrait of people who have lost touch with their families with their values, and even with themselves.*

He worked himself to death, finally and precisely, at 3:00 A.M. Sunday morning,

The obituary didn't say that, of course. It said that he died of a coronary thrombosis--I think that was it--but everyone among his friends and acquaintances knew it instantly. He was a perfect Type A, a workaholic, a classic, they said to each other and shook their heads--and thought for five or ten minutes about the way they lived.

This man who worked himself to death finally and precisely at 3:00 A.M. Sunday morning--on his day off--was fifty-one years old and a vice-president. He was, however, one of six vice-presidents, and one of three who might conceivably--if the president died or retired soon enough--have moved to the top spot. Phil knew that.

He worked six days a week, five of them until eight or nine at night, during a time when his own company had begun the four-day week for everyone but the executives. He worked like the Important People. He had no outside "extracurricular interests," unless, of course, you think about a monthly golf game that way. To Phil, it was work. He always ate egg salad sandwiches at his desk. He was, of course, overweight, by 20 or 25 pounds. He thought it was okay, though, because he didn't smoke.

On Saturdays, Phil wore a sports-jacket to the office instead of a suit, because it was the weekend.

He had a lot of people working for him, maybe sixty, and most of them liked him most of the time. Three of them will be seriously considered for his job. The obituary didn't mention that.

But it did list his "survivors" quite accurately. He is survived by his wife, Helen, forty-eight years old, a good woman of no particular marketable skills, who worked in an office before marrying and mothering. She had, according to her daughter, given up trying to compete with his work years ago, when the children were small. A company friend said, "I know how much you will miss him." And she answered, "I already have."

"Missing him all these years," she must have given up part of herself which had cared too much for the man. She would be "well taken care of."

His "dearly beloved" eldest of the "dearly beloved" children is a hard-working executive in a manufacturing firm down South. In the day and a half before the funeral, he went around the neighborhood researching his father, asking the neighbors what he was like. They were embarrassed.

His second child is a girl, who is twenty-four and newly married. She lives near her mother and they are close, but whenever she was alone with her father, in a car driving somewhere, they had nothing to say to each other.

The youngest is twenty, a boy, a high-school graduate who has spent the last couple of years, like a lot of his friends, doing enough odd jobs to stay in grass and food. He was the one who tried to grab at his father, and

"tried to mean' enough to him to keep the man at home. He was his father's favorite. Over the last two years, Phil stayed up nights worrying about the boy.

The boy once said, "My father and I only board here."

At the funeral, the sixty-year-old company president told the forty-eight-year-old widow that the fifty-one-year-old deceased had meant much to the company and would be missed and would be hard to replace. The widow didn't look him in the eye. She was afraid he would read her bitterness and, after all, she would need him to straighten out the finances--the stock options and all that.

Phil was overweight and nervous and worked too hard. If he wasn't at the office he was worried about it. Phil was a Type A, heart-attack natural. You could have picked him out in a minute from a lineup.

So when he finally worked himself to death, at precisely 3:00 A.M. Sunday morning, no one was really surprised.

By 5:00 P.M. the afternoon of the funeral, the company president had begun, discreetly of course, with care and taste, to make inquiries about his replacement. One of three men. He asked around: "Who's been working the hardest?"

## Questions for Discussion CONTENT

1. One of the characteristics of the "company man" is that he is a "workaholic." What are the others?
2. Explain the relationship of Phil and his younger son. How did this relationship differ from his relationship with his other children? Why does Goodman bother to make the distinction?
3. What does Goodman's telling us about Phil's wife and children add to the definition of the "company man"?
4. What ways is this essay an indictment of corporate America?
5. "What is the irony in Goodman's saying that "You could have picked [Phil) out in a minute from a lineup" (paragraph 14)?
6. What do you infer from the author's telling us that her subject "worked like the 'Important People"?
7. Why does Goodman emphasize the fact that Phil died at 3 A.M. on Sunday?

## Strategy and Style

1. Discuss Goodman's voice in this essay. Is it ironic, acerbic, sarcastic, neutral?
2. What does the author think of Phil? Is her tone appropriate?
3. There are several players in this short drama, Does Goodman develop each of them in enough detail?
4. How has the author prepared us for the conclusion to this piece? Does her preparation make it more effective, more biting?

Imagine a short dialogue in which Phil's older son interviews a neighbor to find out more about his father.

Using what Goodman has told you about the company man, write a list of characteristics that might define the contemporary company woman.

5.