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Peggy Drexler

Sorry -- I Didn't Catch the Last Name

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The world now knows Joe the Plumber -- at this point, a bit more than Joe might have liked. As the Daily Show's John Stewart put it: "Everyone has their 15 minutes of fame. What they don't tell you is, the first seven minutes of it is a rectal exam."

But the one thing few people know about Joe The Plumber is that he has a last name. For the record: it's Wurzelbacher. You would not have picked that up from the debates. By my count, it was only mentioned once. Joe the Plumber; 20 times.

Maybe Wurzelbacher is hard to pronounce. More likely, it's another symptom of how badly out of touch politicians are with the lives of those who elect them. The media later filled in the details on Joe Wurzelbacher, whose first name is actually Sam, who isn't licensed, and who is a single father with some tax issues. For the candidates, details don't matter. Symbols do. What if Joe had been a pharmacist, or an electrician, or a machinist? My guess is he would be living happily and quietly beyond the media vortex.

Part of that social cluelessness is where you find yourself in life. John McCain doesn't know how many houses he has, keeps a fleet of cars on the road and believes you have to have \$5 million to be rich. As we used to say, he "married well."

There is nothing wrong with that. Cindy McCain's dad worked a lot of years for that money. If it finances his daughter's and son-in-law's lifestyle, so be it. But it does create a bit of a divide between McCain and the average voter.

Crossing that divide can even be tough for the candidate who is "just one of us." Sarah Palin says she represents "Joe Six Pack." Who, exactly, is that? Is he carpenter, steel worker, small business owner? Is he a teacher? Is he a cop? All we seem to know about him is that he has enough beer in his hand to put you over the legal limit.

It seems to me that most of us would rather have a demographic profile based on something other than how much we drink.

By working so hard to prove their connection to the lives of the so-called "common man," candidates are really showing how easily they can slip from concern to caricature.

Sure they've learned their lines a little better. At least Hillary Clinton knew enough to order a shot and a beer in her obligatory outing to a working man's bar in Pennsylvania. In 1972, campaigning in Ohio, Dem candidate and Kennedy blue blood Sergeant Shriver bought a round of beers for local steelworkers - and famously shouted "Make mine a Courvoisier."

You don't order cognac at a shot and a beer bar. You don't try to capture the hopes and fears of average Americans in a stupid nick name. And you don't categorize a swath of America by what and how much they drink.

McCain, Obama and any other candidate must understand that pandering might work in a three-network world -- where it was a one and done. In a 24-7 media world, words and actions are patched into an endless loop of repetition. And with each repetition it becomes more obvious that you have no idea who you talking about.

Tuning people into punch lines is no way to connect.