

## SOULCRAFT IN THE WORKPLACE

### Lessons from My Father

This is a very difficult time for many people in the nation's workforce. Widespread unemployment—perhaps the highest rate of unemployment since the Great Depression—affects not only individuals and their families, but also cities, states and the country as a whole. And though the rate of unemployment may have slowed somewhat in the last few months, it appears that it will continue to get worse before it gets better.

I suspect that there are few of us here who do not have a friend or family member who is unemployed or is worried about losing their job. Many of us have been unemployed for some period of time ourselves, or forced to work jobs, part-time or otherwise, that we didn't like merely to make ends meet.

What we do for a living has a great deal to do with who we think we are—with our sense of identity and self-worth as a person. Freud famously said there are two major areas of life: love and work. Both are fraught with problems great and small. But both are essential to human life and happiness. As we head towards Labor Day, I would like to reflect this morning on work and, in particular, the spirituality of work.

For many people this might seem like a contradiction in terms — that work and spirituality occupy different realms. Our culture is virtually predicated on observing a day of worship that is separated from the typical workweek. And many people seem to feel that they need to work in order to have the leisure to engage in spiritual pursuits, whether we're talking about meditation, back-packing or writing poetry. I'm sure this is especially true of people for whom their work is drudgery.

Note: The title of this sermon, and several key ideas, were suggested by *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work*, by Matthew B. Crawford.

But there are traditions other than ours that view work—even menial labor—to be a form of spirituality. Take Hinduism, for instance. There are four major kinds of yoga, or spiritual discipline. The yoga that is commonly practiced in this country is but one of these. As I understand it, the idea is that there is a form of yoga that is especially suited to each individual. This varies according to one's station and stage of life. The one that is most widely practiced in India itself is Karma Yoga, the yoga of work.

According to Hinduism, we don't work merely to survive, to put food on the table. Work has—or should have—a spiritual dimension. One doesn't need to join an ashram in order to find God. You can find God in the world of everyday affairs—in the workplace as readily as in a temple. Devote yourself to your work in such a way that will bring you satisfaction, not just monetary reward. When it is done in the proper spirit, without attachment to the ego and selfish aims, work can bring us toward God.

None of this would have meant much to my father. He was not a very spiritual person by anyone's measure. He was a blue-collar worker—a carpenter by trade. I never knew him to go to church or say a prayer. Although he would have been puzzled to hear me say so, I believe that in performing his work he demonstrated some important virtues or spiritual principles that took me a long time to fully appreciate.

For many years I felt that I didn't have much in common with my father. He had only a fifth grade education. I have a couple of graduate degrees. He worked primarily with his hands. I work mostly with my head. When I was young, the last thing I wanted to do was to follow in my father's footsteps. It's not that I didn't approve of his profession. I just felt that being a carpenter wasn't for me. It was hard work, it didn't pay very well and, judging from the few times he paid me to help him on the job, I wasn't particularly good at it.

It wasn't until Linda and I bought our first house in Spokane, that my father and I got closer. He came over to help me remodel the kitchen and work on several other projects. He showed me how to use his table saw and lent me his tools. He went with me to the

hardware store and the lumberyard. I developed a new appreciation for his skills as a carpenter, and I came to realize that I had learned some important life-lessons from him as a craftsman.

Many people disparage or fail to appreciate the value of skilled labor. The trades are difficult to begin with, and they take a long time to learn. Typically, one starts out as an apprentice and eventually becomes a journeyman, as did my father. For a carpenter it means working out-of-doors in every kind of weather, and in a dangerous environment, too. On one occasion, my father broke an ankle and was out of work for several months. Another time a piece of wood jammed as he was running it through a table saw and he lost a finger to the blade. Many of his friends had similar experiences.

It's no wonder, then, that most people today avoid this kind of work, preferring, as I did, to use their minds rather than their hands. And yet it seems to me that the virtues associated with skilled manual labor — and this applies not only to carpenters, but also to electricians, mechanics, plumbers, and many others — are virtues essential to the cultivation of the soul. It took me a long time to appreciate this, and these virtues do not readily transfer from one type of work to another. Some kinds of labor, I fear, are inherently more alienating than others. But I value these virtues and I have tried to cultivate them myself, in my own way.

I think the first virtue of craftsmanship is the sense of *agency* that it instills. The primary satisfaction of such work is intrinsic, in the desire to do something well. My father was proud of his work and cherished it even when the quality of his work was not readily apparent to others. Most doors that are installed in homes today are pre-hung, but my father hung all of his by hand. It is difficult for us to appreciate how tricky it is to hang a door but my father could hang a dozen of them a day.

There's a sense of agency and competence that comes from doing a job well. For those of us who deal in abstractions or whose work consists of piecemeal parts of an nebulous whole, there is something reassuring about working with the t-square, the

level and the plumb line. Your criteria are objective and concrete. You know your job is finished when it is done right. The special appeal of the trades is that they rely on the exercise of one's own judgment and skill, and therefore the craftsman is not alienated from his labor in the way that so many people are today.

All of us can benefit from having a sense of agency in every part of our lives, and not just in relation to the work that we do. Otherwise, we are passive participants, just along for the ride. Nor are we happy with the work that we do. Aristotle defined happiness as *eudaimonia*, which means, "flourishing." It is hard to imagine that we can flourish as human beings without a sense of agency.

Closely related to the virtue of agency is the virtue of *self-reliance*. The skilled worker is not a law unto him or her self. The work is done in service to a particular end, whether this end is the construction of a cabinet or the repair of a machine. But craftsmen know that they have the tools they need and the skill to use them. For those of you who saw Clint Eastwood's latest movie, "Grand Torino," how could you not be impressed with all the tools in his garage, so perfectly arranged and tended to?

Eastwood's tools are a metaphor for the self-reliance he is trying to instill in the character of the young Asian boy. He gives the boy some of his tools and he apprentices him to a contractor friend of his. He calls it "manning him up," but what he means, of course, is helping the boy to attain self-reliance, not only on the job, but in other areas of his life as well. It's hard to imagine how another kind of work might have conveyed this message.

For Emerson, self-reliance meant self-trust. "Trust thyself;" he said, "every heart beats to that iron string." Trusting that we have the tools for the task and the skill to use them is very empowering. Then we do not live timidly in the shadows or the reflected glory of others, but for ourselves, secure in our own sense of self and confident in our abilities. This, too, it seems to me, is an example of soulcraft in the workplace.

Another virtue that I observed in my father, and that is typical of those who engage in the trades, is *awareness*, an absorption in the work at hand. The work of craftsmen is sometimes dangerous, and so concentration is important for safety's sake. But there is more to it than that.

In *Walden*, Thoreau tells the fable of the "Artist of Kouroo," who set out to make a staff, "perfect in all respects." Since it could not be made of unsuitable material, he searched for the perfect piece of wood. Time passed. His friends aged, but "he grew not older by a moment." His concentration endowed him with perennial youth. By the time he had finished carving and polishing the staff it seemed that "cities and dynasties had passed away," and yet the lapse of time was only an illusion. That is to say, when work is done in total awareness and with a desire for perfection, the craftsman — one with his task — exists in an Eternal Now.

There may be other kinds of work that involve this sense of absorption in the present moment, but it not done by the Dilberts of the world, slaving away in their cubicles. When we are actively involved in our work, when we are required to be truly attentive, when we perform work that engages our capacities as fully as possible, then we feel like a person and not a cog in a machine. And though time passes and work gets done, we don't feel tired so much as energized. My father often came home in a sweat-stained shirt, but I don't recall ever seeing him exhausted.

The fourth virtue that I associate with craftsmen, mechanics and the like is that of *deliberateness*, of doing one thing at a time. Our society seems addicted to speed. We drive fast. We eat fast foods. We are impatient. At the same time, the demands of the workplace have increased. There is constant pressure to be more productive. We seem to take a perverse pride in multi-tasking, complicit in our own stress-ridden exhaustion.

I always admired my father's patience, which, I am sure, derived from the nature of his work. I see this in my son, the guitar-maker, too. It takes him a month or more to fashion a new guitar. The wood must be carefully selected, cut and bent into shape. The pieces

and inlays must be glued in place and left to dry. The front and back of the arch-tops must be painstakingly carved by hand. Then many coats of lacquer are applied. The process can't be rushed and each part of it must be done in sequence, one deliberate step at a time.

The virtue of craftsmanship is more akin to the slow food movement, where people are encouraged to relax and take time enjoying their meal. Slowing down, doing one thing at a time, puts things in perspective. When we're always on the go, multi-tasking through life, we may think we are accomplishing a lot, but we're actually missing out on things that matter the most — our relationships and opportunities to savor the moments as they pass.

My father had his flaws. We all do. But in rejecting his vices, for many years I also overlooked his virtues. As I've tried in my own way to craft a soul, I've discovered virtues in my father's work that I've sought to emulate in my own — though mine could hardly be more different from his.

These virtues exemplify Aristotle's notion of happiness. According to Aristotle, happiness, or flourishing, is the meaning of life. Three things contribute to a happy life: practical wisdom, excellence and pleasure. For those who ply the trades, developing a talent or skill is not only profitable, it is spiritually rewarding and a form of practical wisdom. Excellence in work consists of making a good product and of demonstrating one's expertise and high standards in the process. Pleasure, Aristotle tells us, arises only from action. Human beings are happiest when they are doing things.

More recently, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's research on happiness lends support to Aristotle's notion of work as a means to a flourishing life. Csikszentmihalyi found that, like Thoreau's Artist of Kouroo, people are happiest when they are absorbed in a task. At such times, they experience a feeling of "flow." They lose a sense of time and a sense of themselves. They are focused to the point of transcending the ego. And when they've finished the task, they feel energized, just as my father did.

I mentioned earlier that we tend to separate work and spirituality, but for those whose labor promotes the virtues of agency, self-reliance, awareness and deliberation, their work is itself a form of spiritual discipline. And so my father —though he may have scoffed at the idea— was crafting a soul in addition to bringing home a paycheck. I think we can all learn a lot from the carpenters, the plumbers, the mechanics and the electricians — “each singing what belongs to him or her and to no one else”<sup>\*</sup> — about soulcraft in the workplace.

From “I Hear America Singing,” in Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, the reading for the morning.