

## *Faith and Work*

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After making do for twenty years with a gloomy, cramped, inconvenient kitchen, a room designed for trolls, my wife and I have decided to rip everything out, right back to the studs and joists, and begin over. Friends who have been through milder remodelings warn us that we are putting our marriage at risk.

"All we did was refinish the cupboards," said a neighbor, "and my husband and I quit speaking for a month."

The calm, song-writing carpenter whom we have hired to do the skilled work observes that the only couples he has known to come through such root-and-branch renovations unscathed are those who moved out for the duration. Even if we had a place to go, we could not abandon the house, because my wife and son and I are going to do as much of the work as our talents and schedules allow. Besides, I would rather get my hands dirty making over this old 'house than keep them clean in some rented place. Compared to what I do most days—the shuffling of paper and juggling of words there is a sweet solidity in tearing out plaster and banging nails.

Like sensible people, my wife and son dread this upheaval. As soon as hammering begins, passage will be cut off between the front of the house and the back. In order to raid the refrigerator, which he does now with the zeal of a bear visiting a salmon run, Jesse will have to walk outside through the yard. Since the yard is presently buried under nine inches of snow, and since laundry will have to be hauled between upstairs and basement over the same route, Ruth envisions journeys as arduous as those of the voyageurs carrying loads of beaver pelts through the north woods. For a month or so we will be cooking on a hot plate in the bedroom left vacant while our daughter is away at college. We will be fetching food from the back porch, hunting through boxes for herbs and books, washing dishes in the bathtub. There will be sawdust and plaster in every breath, grit in every bite.

On the Sunday before we are to begin demolition, our minister reads from the pulpit the world-weary lines of Ecclesiastes, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter heaven," and when he comes to the fourth item on the list, "a time to break down, and a time to build up," I cannot help thinking of crowbars and hammers.

"You see," I tell Ruth in the car on our way home, "Even Ecclesiastes is in favor of remodeling kitchens."

She points out that the next item on the list, right after a for breaking down and building up, is a time for weeping.

"Maybe Ecclesiastes just didn't enjoy carpentry" I say.

"Maybe his wife wrote that line," Ruth suggests.

When sensible people dread the prospect, when neighbors warn us of coming strife, when our carpenter shakes his musical head at the looming problems, why do I look forward to this dirty, disruptive, wearying labor? In trying to answer that, I have been thinking about the sorts of work I love.

To love any sort of work may seem an odd emotion in a country where bumper stickers proclaim that WORK IS A FOUR-LETTER WORD. In late twentieth-century America, our factories fill with robots and our stores with vending machines and our homes with labor-saving gadgets. Judging by how we spend money, we are far more intent on saving our labor than on saving our souls. There are retrograde folks here and there who stubbornly make bread from scratch or dig the garden in spring with a spade or walk up stairs; but far more of us are devoted to the ease of elevators, tractors, and automatic breadmakers. The drift of our society as a whole seems to be toward an electronic garden of Eden, in which all one's needs would be filled through shopping channels or malls, and one's toughest chores would be to push buttons and stare at screens and chew.

When Adam and Eve were kicked out of the original garden, according to the old story, God told them, "cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground." On the whole, the descendants of Adam and Eve have done better than to grub out thorns and thistles-which is why there are now nearly six billion of us on the earth. The plants of the field have given us corn and beans, rice and wheat. Yet even these glorious foods do not satisfy us. We crave easier and faster fare-gourmet meals in microwave boxes, drive-in feasts-as though only by entirely avoiding sweat and toil can we undo God's curse. If we are to sweat, we prefer doing so in health spas or on jogging tracks or beaches, an expensive sort of sweat aimed at making us look good in swimsuits rather than in heaven. The less we toil to provide for living, the more we toil to postpone dying.

Even in our push-button nirvana, of course, many people work hard at their jobs and in their homes and on their land, and some of them do so without thinking of work as a curse. Deryl Dale, our kitchen carpenter, gets up at five, drives to a coffee shop for an hour of reading, then labors all day at tearing down and building up, then-depending on the season-helps his wife in her market, garden until dark or helps his children with their studies, and on weekends he practices his music. And all he is utterly serene.

Over the years I have occasionally met with that union of hard work and serenity in farmers and nurses, welders and cooks, truck drivers, janitors, teachers, mechanics, letter carriers, librarians, lawyers, and clerks. These were people doing what they felt called to do, without looking for an escape, without hankering for smaller tasks or bigger paychecks. Much of the devoted work I've witnessed has had nothing to do with money. I think of my mother painting china plates or carrying flowers to shut-ins. I think of my father stopping to change flat tires for strangers or currying a horse or carving wood. I think of my sister weaving, my daughter studying birds, my wife cooking meals for ailing friends

My Mississippi grandmother reared eleven children and when the youngest of the children had left home, she threw herself into serving her neighbors, and never collected a paycheck in her life. My Assyrian grandfather continued doctoring in Chicago right through the Depression when his patients could not pay him, went bankrupt from giving away medicine, lost everything except his clothes and his instruments, then kept on practicing until he was eighty. "I learned healing," he once told me, "but how can I just fold my hands and quit?"

When I consider the varied personalities of those diligent people, I feel certain that the willingness to work hard without complaint, indeed with gusto, has less to do with temperament than with conviction. If you believe that work is an evil to be avoided, if you aspire to loaf and invite your ease, the grab for every labor-saving gimmick, you will dodge every demand for effort, whether on the job or in

school or at home, and you will coax or bully others into providing for your needs. But if you believe that work is a calling, a discipline, a way of exercising your gifts, even a way toward God, then work will seem to you as natural, as desirable, as breathing.

The building up of our new kitchen began in imagination long before the breaking down of the old one. Ruth and I have spent months drawing plans, trying to fit all our cookery schemes into a space that measures twelve feet by twelve. We draw in pencil, because every time we think the design is perfect, some doorway or appliance or pipe interferes, and we have to wield the eraser. Finally, after wearing holes in many sheets of paper, we agree on a plan.

On Sunday, after hearing the weary words of Ecclesiastes, we clear the way for that plan by stripping our old kitchen to the walls. While Ruth carries dishes and pans and food upstairs to our daughter's bedroom, Jesse and I undo the connections for gas and water and electricity. We take out the refrigerator, the dishwasher, the stove, the sink, then we unscrew the counters and cupboards and lug them to the basement. By late afternoon, the empty room echoes our footsteps, and my back flares with pain.

I lie down on the kitchen floor and press my spine flat against the scuffed linoleum. Jesse looms above me, unbent, hands on hips, surveying the bare walls, the dangling wires, the amputated pipes.

"We did it, buddy," I tell him.

"We sure did," he answers

The chill of the linoleum soothes my back. Then I groan, remembering the nine inches of snow.

"What's the matter?" Jesse asks.

"Deryl's going to need a path down the driveway when he starts work tomorrow." I close my eyes, and before I can open them, I hear Jesse clumping down the steps.

When I call him in for supper, I see that he has not only cleared snow from the driveway but has kept on shoveling back door, across the yard to our compost bin, and acre neighbors' yard to their porch.

"Thanks," I tell him. "That was a big job." "What?"

"All the shoveling."

"Oh," he says. "That. Yeah. No problem."

My mother and several friends join us for supper, to help celebrate the beginning of our labor. Ruth dishes out stir-fry onto our plates, and the fragrance of sesame oil makes me forget the pain in my back.

"How do you like cooking in a bedroom?" I ask Ruth.

"It reminds me of camping out," she answers. "I suppose it will get old before too long, but so far it's kind of fun."

Telling our guests about all that we accomplished that day, I lather myself into a sermon on the joys of doing good work for its own sake, without regard to applause or pay. After I wind down, my mother recalls that when I was in first grade I made boats scrap wood in my father's shop, then sold them to classmates for a nickel apiece. "You can see he's getting less mercenary with age," my mother concludes. I do not remember the nickel<sup>s</sup> but I remember making the boats. Getting the curves on the two sides of the bow to match and drilling straight holes for the chimneys were the hardest parts.

"So Jesse," one of our friends asks, "how much do you get per hour for helping your old man?"

"About five cents less than a nickel," Jesse answers. But at least he isn't charging me for the experience."

Opus, the Latin word that we apply to musical composition the twin meanings of work and riches. We hear it in *operate* and *opulence*. Good work enriches the world and also enriches worker it draws on our creativity, our ability to imagine actions before carrying them out, and our freedom to act on images guided by intelligence and skill. The medieval guilds of carpenters weavers, dyers, and millers spoke of their trades as mysteries. The skills passed down from master to apprentice were powerful legacies. In our time, assembly lines and bureaucracies substitute procedures for intelligence and transfer skills to machines. The difference between a machine and a tool-between bread-maker and a bread pan-is that a tool extends human skills, a machine replaces them. When the freedom and craft have been squeezed out of work it becomes toil, without mystery remaining, and that is why many people hate their jobs. You can measure the drudgery of a job by the number of layers of supervision required to keep the wheels spinning or the cash registers ringing. Toil drains us; but good work may renew us, by giving expression to our powers.

Work shapes our body, fills our thoughts and speech, stamps our character. The accountant bears the imprint from decades of vouchers as surely as the carpenter bears the weight from tons of lumber and the jolt from thousands of hammer swings. The plumber's forearms are speckled with bums from molten solder, and the banker's face bears a crease for every foreclosure. Whatever else we make

through our labor, we also make ourselves. So we had better choose carefully what we do with our days, and how we do it, and why.

The grunt of a diesel out front on Monday morning announces the arrival of the truck bearing our dumpster, a steel box large enough up hold most of a demolished house. When the driver takes a look it where I ask him to unload the dumpster, back down our narrow driveway hemmed in by limestone walls, he rubs his chin and says, "I don't know if it'll go."

It will, I tell him, because our neighbors, with whom we share had a dumpster of the same size delivered from his company a year or so ago.

"Who was driving that time?" he asks me.

"Never caught his name," I answer. "Kind of a wiry guy, wore cowboy boots, hair slicked back."

"Well," says our driver, grabbing hold of the mirror mount an into his cab, "if he can do it, I can do it."

And he does, sawing the ungainly truck back and forth across our street, crushing piled snow with the fat rear wheels, finally easing back between the limestone walls with two or three inches of clearance on each side. He tilts the bed and lowers the dumpster, then nudges it backward until I give him a thumb's up. "How's that?" he shouts from his window.

"That's good driving," I shout back.

"You bet." He grins and waves as he drives off.

Soon after the truck rumbles away, Deryl shows up at the front door, fresh from an hour's reading of a new book on the origins of consciousness. He carries a tool belt in one hand, with a hammer dangling from the loop, and in the other hand a wrecking bar.

"Well, Scott," he says, "are you ready to tear up your house?"

"Ready as I'm going to be," I tell him.

Huffing and puffing through face masks, we light into walls, knocking plaster loose in chunks that shatter on the floor, and we pry off the splintery laths. I think about the men who tacked those slender boards in place seventy years ago, who stir horse hair into the mixture of lime and gypsum and sand to strengthen the plaster, and who spread the heavy mortar so evenly. Their work has held up well for three generations, and it would hold up for generations more, if we did not

need to replace rusted pipes and antiquated wiring and drafty window. When we tear out a false ceiling, the joists groan as they let go their grip on the nails. Every hour or so we pause in our demolition to shovel the debris down a chute into the dumpster.

During our breaks, Deryl stubbornly avoids smoking, since he is coddling his voice for an upcoming concert. Instead, he sips a cola and tells me about the book he's been reading or recites a verse from one of his new songs. Is this too sentimental? he asks me. No, I tell him, I like that verse just fine. Or he asks me if I think the human brain can be accounted for purely in evolutionary terms, seeing as how we have so much more thinking power than we need for survival, maybe a whole lot more than is good for us, like a teenager's jalopy with four hundred horsepower and poor brakes. As Deryl talks, one callused hand chisels his words into the air. The muscles of his arms bunch and leap under the taut skin. My own arms ache, and my hands lie wounded in my lap. Every summer the palms toughen up from rubbing against wood and steel and rock. But now, in late winter after months of shuffling paper, they are as soft as old corduroy. For the next month or so, every time I drive a car, tap a keyboard or hold a book, my fingers will grow numb from the swelling in my wrists.

A generation or two ago it would have seemed less strange to relish hard work. My he's been reading, on the mysterious rise of consciousness, or he recites a verse from one of his new songs. Is that too grandparents might smile at the laziness of Tom Sawyer who fooled others into doing his chores, but they would mind you that Tom was a child. Grown-ups do their own chores, less they are idlers, good-for-nothings, ne'er-do-wells. Grown-ups look after their own needs, provide for their families, help their neighbors, do something useful. So my grandparents taught by word and example. Any job worth doing is worth doing right, they used to say. The good laborer is worth his hire, they would say, quoting scripture, so do not bury your talent in the ground but I it in the world, for the master rewards his faithful servant. To try sliding by with the least effort, my grandparents believed, was to guilty of a sin called sloth.

I knew this cluster of values by experience long before I heard it referred to as the work ethic, a phrase that has lost its edge from tumbling over the lips of too many cynical bosses and politicians. Whatever happened to the work ethic? laments the manager w wishes to squeeze more profit from his employees. What<sup>er</sup> happened to the work ethic? groans the official who wants shrink the welfare rolls. As I understand it, a regard for the necessity and virtue of work has nothing to do with productivity or taxes, and everything to do with fulfilling one's humanity. A have seen it embodied in the lives not only of grandparents but of parents and neighbors and friends, this ethic arises from a belief that the creation is a sacred gift, and that by working we express our gratitude and celebrate our powers. To honor that gift, we should live simply, honestly, conservingly, saving money and patching clothes and fixing what breaks, sharing what we have

Those values are under assault every minute of the day in a consumer economy-from advertising, from the glittering goodies in stores, from the luxurious imagery of television, magazines, films, and from a philosophy that views the universe not as a gift be honored but as a warehouse to be ransacked. If money is meaning, if winning the lottery or beating the

stock market defines success, if the goal of life is easy sensation, then why lift a finger so long as you can force someone or something else to do it for you?

I can think of many reasons to lift a finger, among them delight in exercising skill, in sharing labor with companions planning a task and carrying it through, in bringing some benefit to the world. But the chief reason for relishing work is that allows us to practice our faith, whatever that faith may be. The Buddha advised his followers to seek right livelihood, to provide for their needs in a modest and responsible manner, with respect for other creatures, in harmony with the way of things. We show our understanding of the way of things by the quality of our work, whether or not we have heard the Buddha's teachings. The old theological debate as to whether salvation is to be gained by works or by faith begins from a false dichotomy. Faith concerns our sense of what is real, what is valuable, what is holy; work is how we act out that faith.

The Shakers condensed their faith into the maxim, "Hands to work, hearts to God." Anyone who has looked at their furniture or buildings can sense the clarity of their vision. "One feels that for he Shaker craftsmen," Thomas Merton observed, "love of God and love of truth in one's own work came to the same thing, and hat work itself was a prayer, a communion with the inmost spiritual reality of things and so with God." Mother Ann Lee, who launched the Shaker movement, counseled her followers to "Do all your work as if you had a thousand years to live, and as you would if you knew you must die tomorrow."

If the purpose of life is not to acquire but to inquire, to seek understanding, to discover all we can about ourselves and the universe, to commune with the source of things, then we should are less about what we earn-money, prestige, salvation-and more about what we learn. In light of all we have to learn, the difference between dying tomorrow and a hundred years from tomorrow is not very great.

Tomorrow, Deryl's partner, Steve Neuenschwander, will return from week of studying the Mayan ruins in Mexico. I have met Steve, a as clear as one of these late winter mornings after a thaw when maple sap begins to rise; but I have not seen him work.

"He's an artist with a hammer and saw," Deryl tells me. "He makes me look like a wood butcher."

I doubt that anyone could make Deryl look like a wood butcher, his eyes and hands are so sure. But I know that Steve's arrival will fill up our small kitchen and put me out of a job.

In the evening, after Jesse comes home from school and so practice, he and I pry up the shabby linoleum and the buckled particle board underlayment that some quick-and-dirty remodeler installed back around the time of the first moon landing. We will replace it with plywood that should outlast us, and we will set the plywood

down instead of nailing it, to prepare a surface for the red oak flooring that will come to us from the hills of southern Indiana. Tonight we finish the breaking down; tomorrow we start the building up.

Before we go to bed, Jesse and I stand quietly in this room has been whittled down to the bare studs and joists. It is diagram of a house, a diagram carried in the minds

of carpenters before it rose here on a foundation of limestone blocks. We can see on the two-by-fours where those vanished carpenters chalked their measurements. They measured well, plumbed and squared the walls, drove the nails home, as though they were buildings shelter not for strangers but for sisters and brothers whom would never meet.