

Work and Blessing

By Anna Von Reitz



My Son was born many years after my Father died, so he often asks for information about the enigmatic past, and I struggle to explain both the man and the vanished world he belonged to.

Dad was a Big City kid. He grew up in Chicago, Illinois, and he loved the finer things of life --- symphony music, opera, French perfume for his wife. Yet, after the Second World War, he came to live on a dairy farm in Wisconsin.

This new life required him to get up at 4 o'clock every morning and begin the extremely arduous labor of taking care of feeding, watering, and milking and then mucking out for forty dairy cows. Fortunately, Dad loved animals and the animals loved him.

Two and a half hours later, 6:30 precisely, he was down the road to his Day Job and an eight hour shift of various kinds of construction and design work before he came home in the late afternoon and began the entire round of milking and caring for cows again.

In between, he managed to till and fertilize and plant the farm fields, maintain and harvest the orchard, and care for the bee colonies in the apiary. He was lucky to get an hour before bed to read or listen to his beloved phonograph, and the next day it all began again.

My Grandmother worked as hard in her own way as he did. She was up at the same time, only her tasks were different. She had the laundry and the bread-baking and the breakfast making to do. She raised the truck garden, five acres of vegetables and berries to feed the family and leave produce to sell or trade to the neighbors. Anyone who ever raised a backyard garden knows what a challenging task five acres of truck garden is for one woman.

Everyone worked and everyone worked hard. Everyone helped the others. We all "pulled the sledge" in the winter, bringing new loads of firewood up the long slope to the back door of the farmhouse. Everyone watched the weather. Everyone kept an eye out for chicken hawks.

The Work Ethic involved would stop most people today stone dead in their tracks. We're mostly all fat and lazy from three generations of electrical gadgets and gasoline engines, fast food, sugar, and grease. It wasn't always like that.

People used to do enough physical work to be physically fit without paying dues to a health club.

My Father never bulked up muscle like Arnie Schwarznegger; but, he was the kind of powerhouse that could pick up the back of a car and just hold it suspended while another guy changed the tire. His muscles were long and thin like spun steel cables and his reflexes were better than a cat.

To this day, I can glance at a man and know instantly if his muscles come from working or from a spa. I can tell the same thing from a man's hands. And I always have more respect for those who have worked and who do know what work is, because work -- actual work -- grounds us to reality.

Work makes us aware of our limits, as Clint Eastwood's character, Dirty Harry, used to say. Work brings forward our capabilities. It teaches us who we are and what we can best contribute, what we love, what we hate, and what matters. Work is not only noble in itself, it makes us noble when we accept its challenges and embrace its rewards.

My Father, a typical German, used to say that it doesn't matter what work you do, only how well you do it and the spirit with which you do it.

I can still see him mucking out the cow barn in the early morning. To him, that manure was "gold for the garden" and it didn't bother him at all to shovel it. He didn't find any kind of work to be demeaning. His spirit could stand above it as effortlessly as a lark ascending, but I think he was happiest in the moments he got to spend in his workshop, building things.

In his hands, a wood plane became an instrument of precision and grace. In his hands, a grinding wheel achieved the edges that grindstones dream of. There is a "zen" that happens between a true workman and his tools, an effortless and joyous knowing and of being in the moment of creation, when time seems to stop, and there is only the flow of the vision taking shape. Those were, I think, the moments he enjoyed most of all.

So today, the workmen I hire to build and repair things here at my home are astonished to find that I know about tools and have tools --- and can use them myself. I know the processes of labor and the order of things. I know when men are truly skilled at their work, and when they are bluffing. I know when they have drinking problems and when they are slacking. I can calculate a roof pitch. And for some reason, they are always amazed that I would put on a pair of old sneakers and ratty sweatpants and slather paint on walls.

Work, physical work, makes us better people. It teaches us to properly value the work and skills of others. It humbles us. It attaches us firmly to planet earth, the facts of life, and meaning of our lives. It gives us satisfaction that can come to us in no other way. It provides us the means to thrive and to challenge ourselves, to create, to care-take, and to join in that slipstream of creativity that gives life to us all.

So whatever your work is, take pride in it today. Remember that it is important and that you hold the keys to making it fulfilling. It's your life and your work is a vital part of your life. Join me in remembering my Father, a man who never turned his back on any task that needed to be done, no matter how humble.

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