

The Joy of Getting Your Hands Dirty

A long time ago, in a smaller waist size, I had a summer job as a welder's helper. Just a college kid hired at a low wage, I was working in an architectural metal fabrication shop in Chicago. The shop floor was a huge bay about the size of a football field. High above were long rows of dirty windows stretching the length of long rails on which a huge crane would rumble overhead, moving steel and iron and stainless and aluminum the length of the shop, chugging along amidst the smoke and din of welding sparks, cutting torches and the fumes of heavy industry. There were men working and climbing everywhere in a sea of steel and gear: helmets, welders, cutters, formers, hammers, clamps, all spread around projects, machinery and benches. It was a grimy place of rust, dust and soot. I got as filthy and dirty as one can get welding angle-irons together, doing layout of designs on to enormous sheets of metal, while working with a dozen different nationalities, artisans with twisted fingers, damaged elbows and bad shoulders from years of shaping metal and working in the filth of cutting debris, showered in the constant spatter of welding sparks leaving a trail of pitted scars on their hands and forearms.

But creations of immense beauty came out of that shop: railings, staircases, stainless steel architectural details, huge steel signs, decorations for buildings, anything metal, unique and crafted by the legions of craftsmen with whom I had the pleasure of working side by side on projects larger and greater than any one man could make; projects that satisfied the creator in each and every man there. At the end of the day, when we cleaned up leaning over the huge wash basin in the locker room, scrubbing and brushing all the metal dust and dirt from our arms, hands and fingers, we spoke in glowing terms about what was built today and what would be built tomorrow. It was one of the best jobs I ever had.

Today, in our offices, we move money, ideas and information in clean electronic bits. Millions of dollars and tons of ideas are subject to mouse clicks under the sterile fluorescent glow of our workplaces far from the actual thing over which we lay ownership. We represent and market and intellectualize as part and parcel of business today working for clients' interests, investments and products. The country is a market of abstractions, of non-visceral items found in the glowing ocean of LCD screens. A market of notions, not things; ideas filed, jacketed and spiraled into presentations spread upon the vast landscape of conference tables under the flash of digital projections for the meeting of white-shirted executives and workers in business casual filling the chairs of the service industry of America.

The joy of working with your hands, and getting your hands dirty, is left to other pursuits.

I've been helping my son Tom with his Eagle Service Project, required to earn the highest rank in Scouting. Tom's project, now complete, was to build a big, husky information kiosk – a sign and display case under roof - for the Wolf Road Prairie. So Tom designed it and with the help of me, other dads and about two dozen Scouts, over the course of six work days, we sawed, and nailed and glued and cemented and installed this stunning product from the mind and hands of my son. It's now standing on the north end of the Wolf Road Prairie, Tom is nearly an Eagle, and he is filled with the pride of creation.

I understand fully how Tom feels for I am by nature a blue collar kid. I have blue collar genes from a big family of cousins, aunts, and uncles all of whom work with their hands. Kissing cousins who hug and greet each other as if there was no tomorrow; whose values are rock-solid created by that which is real, by that which can be touched and shaped and worked upon by hands that make things, by hands that fix things, by hands that do more than click a mouse or move bits of electrons from one city to the next.

The time-tested satisfaction of crafting an item, of being the creator of an object, a real thing, is simply beyond compare. There is no substitute for working with your hands. But instead we are becoming a society of people who write checks for everything we need: for the plumber, the gardener, the soccer coach, the decorator, the baseball clinic, and the swim club. We pay for our kids to be active, and we pay for things to be done for us. We pay for things to be done so that we do not have to get involved, so we do not have to get our hands dirty. But there is an unquenched desire in each of us that we ignore and have pushed far away into some hidden recess of our being, purposefully left to wither and slip from our ancestral genetic coding, namely, working with our hands. We have successfully raised our lives beyond getting our hands dirty and have left that domain for the recipients of our checks.

Thank goodness for Indian Guides, Indian Princesses and Trailblazers. Having spent far too much of my professional life, and the early years of my children's life, in a clean, dress shirt and tie, I was always happy for the visceral pursuits, the hands-on tasks, of Indian Guides, Indian Princesses, and Trailblazers as the joyful contrast to my professional life.

To simply build a fire on a Trailblazers' campout or to canoe with my children down the Tippecanoe River holds immense satisfaction. And in Guides and Princesses – oh, man! What joy there is in the simple task of making tribal property. In Guides and Princesses, we had projects, big and small: like the Arapaho Guides building the finely routed wood sign that gave instructions to our Frisbee Golf Course, or building a Pet Parade Float, or making name tags, or place mats, tomahawks and tribal pennants and, one season, a totem pole that required lots of hands working together cutting dozens of pieces of heavy felt. And when we were done and cleaning up, peeling hardened glue from our hands, we talked about what we made that day and what thing of tribal beauty we would make in the future.

And don't forget the Hand-Crafted Construction Paper Tribal Meeting Invitations. We did this in Indian Guides, but perfected it in Princesses. You're not familiar with this tradition? I'm sure it's just slipped your mind, so here's the Invitation Craft: for every tribal meeting, the dad and child of the host family make meeting invitations. Bits of feathers and colored paper glued together, with hand written words, inviting all tribal members to the tribal meeting. Then you drive your little brave or little princess around the neighborhood and they gleefully stuff these hand-made beauties into the doors and mailboxes of tribal members near and far.

You don't do this anymore!? You're missing all the fun! Email is no substitute for a few hours pasting and cutting with your kid and driving around talking about how to stick the invitation between the doors and what you're going to do at your meeting and who lives where, and who will attend and what you'll have for a snack. Try it! When you host your next meeting, make the meeting preparation a hands-on event with your kid, make invitations and make the deliveries. You'll love working with your hands, and so will your kid.

Another fantastic opportunity to get your hands dirty is to build your own Tribal Game. The Arapaho Guides have done this with their now famous Frisbee Golf. Yes! They built it! You too can build a game. Don't buy it, build it! Make it your Tribe's Signature game. Be creative, be crafty, and other Tribes will come to know your tribe through your great, hand-crafted game. Work with your hands and find the blue collar artisan hidden within you. Work with your hands and get to know the child by your side. You'll feel the joy of getting your hands dirty, of digging into a project, and in the process, create a thing of beauty, a Game, to be enjoyed by you, your kids, your tribe and your Federation. Go for it! Now! Get your hands dirty. There will be plenty of time, after your kids are grown, to keep your hands neat and clean.

Peace,
Federation Sachem Keokuk, John C. Lorenzen