

Manly Work

Reading Sam Keen's chapter entitled "The Rite of Work: The Economic Man" (*Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man*), set me thinking about my own exposure as an adolescent to man's work.

My first recollection about serious work centers on my father's concrete block factory in Williams, California. I don't know how he became involved in creating materials for housing construction, except to note that he was always eager to embrace any new technology that came to his attention. For example, in the post-World War II period, heating and cooling a house with radiant heating was thought to be the cutting edge of environmental housing construction. And sure enough, utilizing this technology, my father built a house using radiant heating. I don't remember how successful it was, but I do remember my father's unbridled enthusiasm for the concept.

I spent part of my summer working at his concrete block factory. I remember the huge semi-trucks pulling into the warehouse to offload the god-awful heavy Portland Cement bags, which we needed to make the concrete blocks. We mixed the raw materials with water to create a thick liquid, which we then poured into molds to form the hollow concrete blocks. After the concrete set, we stripped away the forms, leaving dozens of individually formed blocks, each one measuring 6 x 8 x 12 inches. The blocks were transferred by hand onto storage pallets and taken to a reserved section of the warehouse to be cured. Part of the curing process, which might last for several days, included watering the blocks down every few hours so they would not lose their moisture too fast, thereby creating cracks or chipped edges.

Believe me, it was work, just plain old-fashioned hard work. A steady, monotonous pace all day, block after block, chore after chore, counting the time until the day would end. Sometimes, when business was slow, the work pace would slacken, but there was always something in the factory warehouse that needed to be cleaned or moved or straightened up. I don't remember how many weeks or months I worked in the factory, and I don't remember being paid for the work, but complaining or griping about the work was unthinkable. To this day, I remember the roughness of the concrete block as it chafed and rubbed my fingers raw.

During my last few years of grammar school, I worked at my Saturday

business. I went house to house offering to mow lawns for a price. All I brought with me was an old push mower and a rake. I had no shortage of business, but it was slow, hot, and tedious work, especially when I worked for old maids who expected a full-service gardener from a seventh grader earning pocket money.

I worked one summer on my father's grain harvester at the Japanese concentration camp in Poston, Arizona. I learned to open the hopper, fill a 100-pound sack with grain, close the hopper, and drag the sack a few feet to the sack sewer. With blinding speed, he sewed up the top, knotted each end, and flipped the sack almost effortlessly to the exit chute, where the sacks were discharged into the field, five or six at a time. The bank-out wagons would follow the harvester, picking up the sacks filled with grain, stacking them on the truck, and transporting them to the warehouse mills. On a few occasions, to give the regular sewer a break, I sewed sacks, but I never came close to matching the speed of the hired sack sewer, and I had to use every ounce of strength to flip the sack far enough to reach the exit chute. At this tender age, I'm sure I did not work every day, but I worked long enough that summer to remember how long it took – forever, I would say – for the harvester to cut its swath around the field, only to start another, leaving a six-inch overlap, round and round, all day long. The work was monotonous, steady, and mesmerizing. The superfine dust from the harvested grain filled your nose, throat, ears, and all your pores. Your entire body was covered with grain dust so fine it was unshakable. Your thirst was unquenchable, and the lunch break at midday became a luxury beyond all belief.

The most manly work I performed took place shortly after I graduated from grammar school, when I worked at haying in the early summer. I moved to my grandparents' ranch west of Williams and lived in the boys' room with my unmarried uncle, Harold. He and I left the ranch house between 4:30 and 4:45 a.m. to bale the hay while the morning dew was still on the ground. When the day's quota for baling had been reached, I drove the Fordson tractor outfitted with a sickle and cut swath after swath around fields that seemed to have no end. When the sun was high enough to warm the fields, we raked the hay that we had cut into windrows so it would not dry out before we baled it with the next morning's dew. The last step of the haying season was to pick up the bales in the field with a loader, stack them on the truck, and store them in the barn for use in the coming winter.

When evening came, I was so exhausted, I fell instantly asleep, only to be wakened a few minutes later, it seemed. "Time to go to work," my uncle would say. I never understood how my uncle could wake up at exactly the right time without using an alarm clock. After so many years of working the hay, he must have developed his own wake-up system dictated by the rhythm of the haying season.

The hours were long, but I learned to pace myself by watching Harold and my other uncles. The most important part of the day was the noon meal. We all gathered in the ranch house dining room where my grandmother laid out a meal worthy of a harvest crew. Always fried meat (pork, lamb, or beef), potatoes and gravy, two or more vegetables, fresh tomatoes and cucumbers, bread, fresh fruit, and homemade ice cream. This harvest day meal was not to be rushed, it was meant to be eaten in a leisurely manner and in its entirety, in order to stoke up the ranch hand who needed to work the rest of the day until the sun set. And did we eat! Slowly, steadily, and carefully, with second helpings, too, barely leaving scraps for the dog's dish. After the meal, we sat in the shade outside the house, munching on a toothpick, waiting for the inner whistle to call us back to work. We eased ourselves up, stretched our arms and legs, moseyed to the pickup trucks, and returned to our different fields of work.

The mention of pickup trucks calls to mind a learning-to-drive horror story that may be instructive for many young and inexperienced ranch hands reading this paragraph. Obtaining a driver's license in a rural area of California in the 1940's was a mere formality, and by age 12, most of us were able to drive and jumped at every chance to prove our worthiness. One day, late in the morning, my Uncle Matt asked me to drive his pickup truck back to the home ranch and gas it up. There were three 55-gallon drums filled with gas, which sat high up on large wooden horses, from which you could pump the gas into the truck through a gravity feed.

What a thrill! I had been asked to drive almost three miles, all by myself, to gas up my uncle's truck. It was a welcome break from the eternal mowing of the hay fields. At first, I had some difficulty getting the truck to move smoothly forward; it seemed to hesitate as if it were being held back. I revved up the engine and tried again. It jerked forward, seemed to hesitate. I gave it more gas and it took off lickety-split down the road alongside the field. I drove all the way back to the ranch, gassed it up, and was about to make my

return journey when my grandfather come out of the house to speak to me. He said he had been watching me come down the last mile of the road (this rice country land is as flat as my desktop) followed by a trail of black smoke, and he wanted to check the truck out. He looked in the cab of the truck and pointed out that the emergency brake was still fully engaged. Of course, by now, the emergency brake had been completely burned up and it no longer worked. He didn't seem upset with me or concerned about the damage to the truck; he was quite matter-of-fact about what had transpired. I unlatched the now-useless brake lever and drove back to the hay field. I never said a word to Matt about what I had done. I had no doubt he would soon find out what had happened and who was responsible. (Last month, when I attended Matt's funeral, I relived my driving mishap and wondered if he had ever bothered to get the brake fixed or whether he just waited until it was time to buy a new truck.)

When the hay season was finished, my grandfather took out his big executive-looking check register and paid me for my work in the hay harvest. I was paid as a hired hand, and proud to be one. As he gave me the check, he said I had worked hard, and I had.

Work played an important part in my freshman year of high school in 1948. When I was still in the eighth grade, I traveled to Sacramento to meet with the principal of Christian Brothers High School. I explained to him that I lived 60 miles away, I wanted to attend a Catholic high school, but my parents did not have the money to pay for my tuition and my room and board. Would it be possible for me to work my way through school? Much to my amazement, he agreed to this proposition. And every school day, without fail, I worked for two or three hours in the locker room of the school gymnasium. I picked up all the towels strewn about by the varsity players, I swept the floors and scraped the tape off the floors and benches, I hosed down the showers with disinfectant, and I wet-mopped all the cement floors in the locker rooms. The smell of disinfectant still lingers in the memories of my sense of smell. I sometimes wonder if my parents paid anything toward the cost of my freshman year. I have no knowledge that they did so, but it is quite possible and even likely they did.

When I entered Mont La Salle, the junior novitiate of the Christian Brothers, in order to study to become a Christian Brother, my work was called manual labor. There was a scheduled part of each day, immediately after breakfast and

then every Saturday morning, between breakfast and the noon meal, which called for manual labor. Every student was assigned a specific task. My specialty was waxing and polishing the dormitory floors. I enjoyed moving around on my hands and knees applying the heavy paste wax to the tile floors. After the wax had been applied and was dry, I operated a large electric polisher that gave the floors such a sheen that they looked like polished glass. For the uninitiated, the operation of the polisher could lead to mayhem because if the machine were to careen out of control, it would crash into bed frames, lockers, and doors. But for the accomplished worker like myself, the large polishing machine was operated with one hand or just a few fingers, moving it forward, backward, and side to side. It became a work ballet with the machine operator choreographing the moves of the dance. Aside from my ambition to be in charge of the manual labor assignments for the others, my first love was to wax and polish the floors. This accomplishment did not go unnoticed.

I remember, too, how I surprised one of my teachers when I undertook to clean out an old storeroom that had not been touched in years and then to reorganize the room with an orderly system, storing and stacking in boxes everything left that was usable. I weighed less than 140 pounds, and some of the boxes seemed many times my size. The teacher openly marveled about the steadiness of my work and how easily I managed to lift, move, and stack the boxes. Truth to tell, I didn't think it was such a big deal; it was just knowing how to pace yourself and how to leverage your weight to make the box work for you.

When I reached college, I realized that my attraction for physical work needed to be replaced by the work of the mind. In my college semesters, I generally took 21 units, and during one semester, I took 24. In addition, I practiced the organ three hours a day. It was three years, graduation, and out. I often wonder if one more year of practice on the organ would have made a difference in my life.

Whether it is accurate to describe myself as a workaholic, I cannot say, but on one occasion I told a counselor that I believed work defined my life, and this state of mind led me to great highs, some lows, much restlessness, and periods of dissatisfaction. If I'm not working on something, I feel I should be, but if I am working, I am never satisfied.

I have said many times, no one has ever died from hard work, and I don't believe I shall be the first.