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Good Work

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J.D. Head

Good Work

I have been in school now, off and on, for nineteen years. I think I am beginning to get pretty good at it.

By “pretty good” I mean that I do well in school, and I enjoy it. I enjoy reading, studying, researching, discussing – even test taking, to an extent. I like the whole process of learning, of taking in new ideas, wrestling with them, and then combining them with old ones to make something new.

Scholarship: after reading and reading and reading, you end by sitting alone at a computer, surrounded by your books, with a single light on. Staring at a blank white space for hours on end, playing with ideas, mixing them, planting them in your head, and eventually pulling them back out, to put on the page. Then erasing the words, to start all over.

At the end, though ... at the end, when once you’ve finished your idea, and placed it on a tray for the world to view, you look at three or four pieces of printed paper and wonder – was it worth it? Exactly what have I accomplished? There’s always that tension; my internal critic rises up on occasion and attacks me, forcing me to answer the question: “You call this work?” And I’m not sure how to answer him.

My father was a farmer, the son of a farmer, the son of a farmer, the son of a farmer. That’s as far back as I know, though I am willing to speculate that my family consists of many more farmers and sons, forming an unbroken line through the generations.

My generation of Heads is the first to break that line. My cousin David comes closest to a farmer: he has a degree from Cornell in agricultural engineering, and works as a manager on a large farm in California. My cousin Sam has his degree in electrical engineering; he’s in the Air Force. Jason and I are humanities majors — philosophy and English; my youngest brother, James, has yet to show any interest in farming.

And yet ...

It’s spring. The snow has melted, the trees are just beginning to bud, and the birds have returned to nest.

“The sky is blue
The grass is riz:
I wonder where
The flowers is?”

My father quotes that poem every spring. It's a yearly ritual, part of the same pull of the season on him that makes him also mention trying to find a tractor, a field to plow, and a farmer who will let him do it. I don't believe that he's had a chance to even once in the past decade and a half since we left the farm. He speaks wistfully about haying in the summer, and chopping corn in the fall, but it's the plowing, I think, that he misses the most — transforming a grey field into a dark, rich mass ready for planting, swath by swath.

The life of an independent dairy farmer is a precarious one. Milk prices surge up and down without any logic whatsoever — they seem under the direct control of whimsical, fickle Fate, and not the market forces we believe in so strongly. Accidents happen; machinery breaks down; cows sicken; weather ruins a harvest. Yet my father still gazes wistfully at unplowed fields in April.

As do I. Unlike my father, however, I have no memories compelling me to plow a field; I was nine years old when we left for Bible college. The one time I drove a tractor — our big, four-wheel drive Ford 7000 — I forgot where the brake was and nearly crashed into the corn silo.

And yet ...

Coming home from work two weeks ago, I felt this incredibly strong... something. A pull. It was a misty night, 50 degrees, and the smell of spring was present — green growing things. I turned off my radio and rolled down my window as I drove the back roads between Fairborn and Xenia. The night air was too cool, so I turned the car's heat on full blast to stop the shivering, and breathed in and in and in. It was as though I could smell the work ready to be done there in the empty fields; I wanted, for the moment, to be the one to do it.

I've watched my father work. He works, a coach might say, with a lot of hustle. I've seen him milking cows, moving from cow to cow, milk machine to milk machine, cutting corners here, paying special attention to some detail there. He knew how much grain this cow needed, and how much fertilizer the field just above the swamp would need. He worked at his job. He gained mastery.

It's been six years now since I graduated from high school. The first year out of high school, I worked at a Wendy's back home in Vestal, New York, as an opener. The best part of the job was being outside — not so much out in nature as being away from everyone else. With no one watching me, the job was my own. I

carried stock, sorted it, organized it; I knew what we would need for the day, and when to bring it in. I would bring in more on Monday to make up for extra work I knew I would be doing on Tuesday; I knew what days I could cut which corners.

And I loved that work: the grunt work. The scrubbing, carrying, lifting, tossing. The intellectual life I have more or less chosen for myself contains so little that is tangible, so little that seems real, that there is a simple... joy that can come from tossing a 35-pound box of French fries from the storage area to the hand truck. On the best days, there was no special rush, no manager riding my back — just me, out in the freezer, the parking lot, the storage shed, working.

I could feel, for a time, true to my genes. My forefathers were all *independent* dairy farmers; the risks and rewards of their jobs were all their own. They answered to no one, and generally left everyone else alone, content to “work with their own hands,” bringing what they needed out of the ground, planting, plowing, planning. It was good work.

I have done good work. I know what it means, in my own way, to work with my hands. And I know what it means to find joy in working with my hands.

While I was out of school for eighteen months between my sophomore and junior years, I worked at a number of manufacturing jobs — first as a temp, then at IBM for a year, and finally at HADCO. HADCO hired me as a permanent, not knowing that I hoped to be going back to school six months later.

HADCO was the most regimented job I’ve had to work. For three twelve-hour shifts a week, I stood in a clean room, arrayed in white coveralls, gloves, hat, and boots to protect the precious circuitry I made from myself, and worked. No variation from the plan, no independence, no real variety — just feeding copper panels to a machine, and taking them back out. There was no way to put my stamp on my work, to be able to say to myself that I have done something good; the work I did was exactly the same as everyone else’s.

After a few months, though, they trained me to work on the front of the line. Preclean — where the top millionths of an inch of every piece of copper are chemically stripped clean so that they can be circuitized. Preclean was a one-man show. It was, in an insane technological way, like running a dairy. Instead of cows, I had “preclean lines,” to which I fed panels, instead of grain.

That was the best part about the job: feeding the panels to the machine. There were different sizes and weights, some of which could be run on this line, but not on this. I had to watch for jams in the machine — points at which a panel would get caught inside the long conveyer and back up all the panels behind it — and prevent them. I had to find the “hot jobs” for the night, and make sure they made it into the clean room before any others.

I loved the finding, the organizing, the carrying... the heft of the panels in my hands, the way the muscles in my back and abdomen would tense to hold me upright as I slung panels from one tray to another. I liked keeping the machine

moving, filling out paperwork, finding ways to move the jobs in the right order so that no part of my work conflicted with any other part. I liked the feeling of going home at the end of the day and falling asleep, knowing I had done my work, mentally and physically exhausted.

I liked working at the front of the line, alone. There was a battered old tape player in there, pieces of it's case falling off, metal parts all corroded because of the chemicals in the air. It played tapes too fast, but I had a tape adapter for my CD player that worked well. At three o'clock in the morning, the middle of my twelve hour shift (I still carry a lot of pride in being able to say that, yes, I have worked twelve hour shifts), I'd be hauling forty pounds of panels back and forth, between the storage bins and the machines, singing away to Dave Matthews, Collective Soul, Weezer, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers... I felt like someone out of Sandburg's poem, "Chicago" — the loud, laughing, cursing, singing, tired workman who can do and does a job that no one else wants, and does it well, because he does it for the joy of the job, the joy of good work.

It's not the job that appeals to me; it's the work. The honest labor. The feeling of standing at the beginning of a task, of focusing, working, and ending the task. The push and pull and discipline. The working with one's hands, knowing that what you make at the end of the day was not there before; that you will be tired; that you will have done work, and good work.

So how to answer my critic? Knowing that I can do physical work, and that I can like it; that my choice of a life of the mind is not made out of a fear of work, but of love for it, I say this:

When we read, when we study, when we discuss and think and watch, we are seeding the gray wrinkled fields of the mind with ideas — mixing, churning, mulling — recombining them in new ways. It all leads to the point where we can sit down, before the blank screen, and begin to write — to bring out of our minds new thoughts to think, thoughts that weren't there before. We send these new thoughts out into the world, and wait to see what will happen.

It's the moment we live for, as thinkers and writers, and finally as humans, who love to work. It's a Spring moment: sitting before a white page, before covering it in black: the pause at the edge of a gray field, just before you begin to turn the sod over, and plant.