

Working With Your Hands?

by Joe Lapp

published in Divided City, spring 2006

The idea of anyone wanting to write for recreation was strange to my grandfather, let alone writing as a form of work. “Grussdaudy,” as we called him in Pennsylvania Dutch, lived in a culture dominated by hard, dirty, physical, hands-on *work*. The son of Amish parents who joined the conservative Mennonite church when he was young, work for him and his community was farming, and if not farming then some other physically-based job like carpentry.

A few in his tight-knit community would have grumbled about work, calling it a curse that God put on man when Adam first sinned in the Garden of Eden. Mostly, though, work was imbued with the healthy necessity found in any rural community where physical labor is a direct means of survival and with the religious sacredness of God’s approval for those who used their bodies hardily in their work and did it as for Him.

One October day a few years before he died I visited my grandfather in his Lancaster County, Pennsylvania home, a trailer on the grounds of the family farm. Grussdaudy asked about the stack of books I carried. He didn’t understand what a “journal” was, until I told him that it’s like a diary.

“You like to write?” he asked, with a half-wondering, half-unsure tone.

“There are people who make their living writing these days,” I said.

“Yes,” he answered — acknowledging, but not accepting, the fact. But of course, there would have been those people in his day, too; they just wouldn’t have been a part of his world.

Life was more practical for him. His days were spent toiling in the fields and barn, rearing a family, later mending leather and laces in a shoe shop. Even in old age he sat at a table cutting patches to pass the time, patches that would end up in a blanket that, stitched by the hands of covering-wearing Mennonite women and shipped overseas, would give warmth to a lonely traveler.

My father is a preacher, or at least he was for much of his life. Now, in his “retirement,” he works forty hours a week for an Amish man who owns a paint store, watching the

store and driving his boss, who is prohibited from driving by Amish tradition, where he wants to go.

Even when he was a preacher in Washington, DC, he was only partly supported by the church. Over his preaching career he worked a variety of jobs to make up the difference — catalog deliverer, courier, janitor, storage shed salesman. Even when he wasn't working at his jobs or working as a pastor, he worked around the house or the church, mowing lawn, cutting down trees, repairing porches. I often helped him with these projects — sometimes happily, sometimes grudgingly — and he passed on to me practical, physical skills like cutting a board, pushing a lawn mower, painting a wall. He often set me up with a summer job where he worked, too, so I could earn some money of my own.

I grew up, then, in a culture that was a hybrid of the rural, Amish-based tradition of my grandfather and the urban, African American environment of Kenilworth, DC, where my father spent most of his preaching career.

Neither of those cultures were big on academic pursuits, so I was in my twenties when I learned about graduate degrees. I started hanging out with some intellectually-minded folks, then went for career counseling that indicated I would like the academic life. "I think you would enjoy an English major," my counselor said. "Of course I would," I replied, a light bulb going on in my head. I knew that majors in English existed, but it had never occurred to me that I could pursue something so, well, un-practical.

My father helped instill a love of the written word in me by reciting Longfellow poems by heart as bedtime "stories." He also helped bridge the gap from physical-labor-as-work to academic-activity-as-work — preaching involves a fair amount of study and writing. But even with that example, I wonder sometimes if I could be truly comfortable making all of my money from brain-based rather than hands-based labor.

Now, with my undergrad degree in English and in the middle of a multi-year writing project on my family and neighborhood, I still do physical work — catering — to pay the bills. I tell myself that "putting on a tuxedo and serving food to rich people," as I call it, is a good-paying job with a flexible schedule that allows me time for my own writing and research. I tell myself that my reluctance to take professional steps toward a true, paying writing career is due to my innate artistic aversion to the business end of things. But maybe it's just that I can't let go of the old you-gotta-work-with-your-hands ethic.

Of course, writing *is* working with your hands, just not in the way my grandfather thought about it. I'm glad I'm not a farmer like my grandfather. Sure, driving tractor

can be fun, but those winter milking mornings would kill me. I've thought of being a preacher like my father, but one can't always rely on one's father for work. In the end, I know that a responsible life includes supporting oneself, if you're physically able, and that means working for a living. Whether I'll actually ever be comfortable enough with, or good enough at, the writing life to have it earn my keep, I don't know.

Come to think of it, though, in his "retirement" my father is writing a book himself, a series of daily devotional messages. If I stick with the writing, maybe I'll end up following the work of his hands after all.