

Labor Day

Since our world has become digital, since we can move mountains by simply playing upon a keyboard, does the word labor apply nowadays? Labor in the sense of sweat, lifting, pushing, dragging, using hand tools, shovels . . . hammers (but now drills drive the nails) – the kind of work my father used to do.

Sometimes in the 1930's he would take me along with him on construction jobs, fitting out movie theaters with air conditioning (but never on a roofing job), when my mother had other chores to handle. He could bend, turn, twist, weld sheet metal into whatever shape the blueprints called for. He could also take out a wall, remodel interior space. One day he showed me the stainless steel bar he installed in the Officers' Club at the Navy Yard. And I felt so inferior, witnessing his skills.

Reminds me of the Irish poet Seamus Heaney's poem *Follower*, expressing his admiration of his father working on the farm: *An expert. He would set the wing / And fit the bright steel-pointed sock. / The sod rolled over without breaking. / At the headrig, with a single pluck // Of reins, the sweating team turned round / and back into the land. His eye / Narrowed and angled at the ground, / Mapping the furrow exactly. // I stumbled in his hob-nailed wake . . .*

Probably because (like Seamus Heaney?) I doubted my ability to match my father's composure with and mastery of raw matter, I took a more scholarly bent. My labor (if you could call it labor in the *blood, sweat and toil* sense of the word) had to do with books, turning pages, typing pages, using my head as a sounding board in a classroom . . . my limbs becoming mere appendages. I chose to enter a seminary to become what wags called "a pampered son of Holy Mother Church."

Except for my novitiate year up in the Adirondacks of New York – a year of no formal study, only prayer and discipline – but also labor in the hard labor, you could say penitentiary sense of the term. We shoveled snow even as it continued to come down during that long winter at Saranac Lake. We built a ski slide of huge logs. We helped a lay brother roof and reframe the windows of a burnt out stone building ("Get me a two by four!" "Brother, what's a two by four?") We helped excavate a cellar out of the hard clay under our building (we referred to this project as "the salt mines").

But you know what? That was one of the most memorable years of my otherwise sedentary life. I remember three of us, covered with sweat and dust, rolling a buried rock – with the help of pick, shovel and iron pry bar – out of the ground. I laugh over the anxiety I felt being on a high scaffold looking down three stories while trying to concentrate on nailing shingles. Indeed, I feel, even as I write about it, a kind of empathy for, a kinship with the rocks, the snow, the two by fours, the hard, solid, stuff we handled, the ice blocks we cut from a lake and guided down channels to store for summer use. It was so nice to be so close to the earth, the soil from which we ourselves, since Adam, have been molded.

So hats off to Labor, to all those service people without whom our complex society would fall apart, and to those who are so fortunate to have a hands on experience of this planet, transforming it into the things we live in and ride in and consume and - worship in. Amen.