

A Letter of Appreciation to the Trades

by MARC FORGET

It has been a year since I hung up my hammer above the mantel and exchanged the tool belt and jobsite for a laptop and a home office. The learning curve has been vertical, and the work set very different from what I had relied on for the previous 20 years. In this change, I have been fortunate that my colleagues have been supportive and a pleasure to work with. This career transition came as a surprise to my friends and acquaintances and brings out a couple of consistent responses from them and me when I share the news.

Most people immediately say, “That should be easier on the body.” I find that both an interesting first response and not necessarily the case, given the desk pounds I’ve acquired. The comment that always seems to follow is, “Do you miss it?” My answer is always “yes,” but the why behind the “yes” is what I want to share with you today in the hope that you will discover (or re-discover?) what you find valuable in your own work.

The first point, as I can best describe it, is the “Doing.” People in the trades use a novel combination of both physical and mental exertion that produces an irrefutable result. Some days, we just follow a script, and the work slips into a flow where the task is completed without our appearing to exert any thought. Think of the steady rhythm of laying a floor or shingling a roof. Other times, we spend most of the day grappling with math and angles, putting our effort into forming the plan before the stairs or intersecting roof lines or intricate flashing details take shape.

In either case, falling into production or solving the puzzle, we get satisfaction from creating something substantial that was not there before. The result of what we do is tangible and will be used by our customers and by others we will never know. In a world where so much feels temporary, doing something that results in a firm and lasting product is novel.

The other part of the job I miss is the people. The cast of characters in the trades is difficult to describe to outsiders. Good, bad, and many shades between, these personalities color our days and our stories long after they have moved on. When my old business partner and I meet up, the conversation will often turn to former subs and workmates. Since we are both terrible with names, these individuals are usually reduced to nicknames or anecdotes, not always



complimentary. Even nameless, they are still remembered and continue to provide humor or instruction, and mark milestones in our careers.

Even more important than the cut scenes that the bit players provide are the main characters that we work with as a crew. I have heard that many people find this kind of shared experience in sports or the military, but I found mine in construction. Working with other professionals to complete a task fulfills me, and then seeing the physical result at the end of the project enhances that gratification. The on-site banter and workflow shorthand, along with the shared obstacles overcome, are not easily replicated in a Zoom meeting.

Please don’t mistake my observations for some romantic view of being on the tools. The jingoism about the trades that you see printed on shirts or bumper stickers has never held weight with me. The glossy view of working in construction quickly tarnishes when a 2x6 shatters in your hand from the cold or when you visit the ER after having a violent disagreement with a table saw.

There must be something, though, that keeps you going beyond a paycheck or a clever quote on a hat. I certainly don’t miss some parts—the commute, the dust, the uncomfortable temperatures, and many other dimensions. My career change has already given me new ways to measure accomplishment and has provided space to think through what parts of my old one kept me motivated. Go find yours.

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