

BY CLAYTON DEKORNE

Review: *Shop Class as Soulcraft*

I am late to the party reviewing *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work*, by Matthew Crawford. The book came out in 2009 and created quite a splash then. You can find many reviews online, most of them positive and well-deserved, and Crawford made the rounds on many a talk show (including an appearance on “The Colbert Report”), delivering his message on the value of hands-on work. Crawford’s specific trade is the rebuilding and repair of old motorcycles. He is a gearhead at heart, but his exposition deliberately celebrates all trades in which knowing comes from doing. “My purpose in this book,” he writes, “is to elaborate the potential for human flourishing in the manual trades ...”

The book opened my eyes to the problems of sustaining a skilled workforce. This is a topic I thought I had a firm grasp on, and I have written frequently on different perspectives of this challenge, beginning with “How Will Construction Solve the Skilled Labor Crisis?” (Sep/19). Reading Crawford’s book, I began to see just how big a chip I have on my shoulder about social class. As I raised the issue previously, “What never gets discussed in industry reports, but may prove to have the greatest impact on the lack of youth participation [in the construction workforce], is the issue of social class. Young people today don’t want to align with outmoded, underserved, and culturally marginalized social groups. Put bluntly: Young folks don’t want to be associated with what they perceive as low-class work.” While I still believe this statement rings true and think it lies at the heart of why it has become increasingly harder to fill needed construction jobs, the big “Aha” for me reading Crawford’s book came in his critique of the American workforce as a whole. According to Crawford, it’s not just the blue collar workforce that has been disrespected; it’s white collar workers, as well.

Crawford builds a convincing argument that the entire U.S. workforce suffers from the attempt by industry managers to separate thinking from doing. In the push toward standardization of process, the soul of every worker has been drained. While the value of manual work may seem undervalued from our perspective, it’s perhaps even bleaker for white collar workers who have been persuaded to become “knowledge workers” and “creatives,” but end up eking out their livings meeting quotas in cubicles. It is a critique that explains the popularity

of “The Office” and “Dilbert.” We are all in the same boat, it would seem, driven by a relentless economic engine and steered by efficiency experts who place value only on rule-based systems of production and devalue human experience.

Ultimately, Crawford urges everyone to reach for and embrace the fulfillment that comes from self-reliance. This sort of self-reliance is not the ideal of the rugged individualist, or as Crawford says, the “cult of the sovereign self.” Fulfilling work is not so much self-directed as it is directed by the work itself, by an essential truth: Does the motorcycle run clean or not? Is a house frame level and square or out of whack? These are realizable measures of fulfillment. The self-reliant worker is directed by the work, whereas work directed by others can only provide arbitrary measures of performance. Even if workers are designing or making a tangible thing in the usual mass-production environment, they are alienated from the situations where those things have purpose. That is merely a husk of Crawford’s argument. I urge you to read the book for yourself. But the upshot is veteran tradesmen and tradeswomen who are on site with things that perform or don’t are the closest in the social hierarchy to realizing this self-reliance, this flourishing of human potential.

I can’t dispute Crawford’s view, but I am disheartened by the lengths Crawford needs to go to make his points. Crawford is a philosopher as much as gearhead, having gone

the extra mile to earn a Ph.D. in philosophy backed by an undergraduate degree in physics. He can go toe-to-toe with anyone in the upper strata of society, but for all his advocacy of practical knowledge, much of the book is, well, so bookish. There’s not a lot of practical knowledge in it, only glimpses of the challenges faced by the mechanic. But as I think about it, that makes sense. It wasn’t written to gratify those who might already have found fulfillment in self-reliant work. What does he need to persuade them to do? Rather, I suspect, it was written to persuade those among the ruling class who make decisions for entire fields and industries, challenging the long-range viability of a production-based economy relying solely on rule-driven processes and algorithms. Perhaps it was also written to persuade a few of those academically trained cubicle drones, urging them to make a career shift. I hope the message is heard by both these audiences.

