

The joys of learning while earning a living



By Nate Smelle

From time to time it is good to remind ourselves of what it is that we enjoy most about the work we do to 'earn a living.' Otherwise, without taking time to appreciate such sources of fulfillment and happiness one cannot help but focus on the frustrations and apathy stemming from our 'occupation.'

Before we spend a potentially precious moment reflecting on what it is we love about our work, it is worth looking at some of the language we use when discussing labour.

I first began thinking of the language of labour while working with the municipal forestry department in St. Catharines in 2002. At the time I was assigned to a crew affectionately - or notoriously depending on one's perspective - known as the 'Tree Gang.' Working full-time as a labourer during the day and studying philosophy at Brock University each night, did not leave me much 'free time.' In order to keep up with the demands of my professors and employer, I made a habit of buying the smallest copy of whatever texts I was studying, so that I could keep them with me at all times throughout the day.

In between trimming and cutting down trees designated 'dangerous' by one of the department's managers, I would open the book and read as much as I could during each break. Though on occasion I would get the chance to run the chainsaw, my job basically consisted of tool maintenance, tossing fallen trees into the wood chipper, directing traffic, and being 'the eyes on the ground.'

According to the pair of expert arborists I was teamed up with, this last item on my list of duties was the most important, because I could see the big picture in which they were immersed. By observing what the guys up in the canopy were doing, I could spot potentially harmful, even deadly dangers invisible to them from their point of view. In other words, for at least eight hours a day, I was 'occupied' with keeping my friends and crew mates safe. The appreciation shown to me from my arborist friends when they would descend from the treetops provided me with a feeling of fulfillment, unlike any I had experienced during the workday at that point in my life.

Sorting through a long forgotten box full of random scraps of paper collected from various jobs I had in the past on the weekend, I came across an old pay stub from my time on the Tree Gang with a quote from Austrian philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein. Written on the sap-stained envelope were the words: 'Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.'

Re-reading the quote I had scrawled down more than two decades ago, I recalled how much I enjoyed contemplating such perplexing philosophical statements as I would watch the experts above skillfully work their magic, and do whatever else was needed of me to get the job done. I remembered frantically jotting down quotes and notes arising from my thoughts as we drove from tree to tree that I would later transfer into my notebook before heading to class.

Reminiscing on these fond memories and the feelings they inspired both then and now, I soon found myself questioning what it is I love most, and what I find most fulfilling about working as an editor and journalist. Continuing to search through the box of papers as I reflected on this question, I found an old notebook from when I was the news editor at The Voice of Pelham newspaper. Temporarily distracted from my introspection, I opened the book to find a bunch of notes scribbled down from a close encounter with the iconic late mayor of Mississauga ?Hurricane? Hazel McCallion.

Reading through the notes from our conversation, there was one quote from McCallion in particular that reminded me of why I chose to occupy the majority of my time over the last 10 years with this profession.

?You have to live your life with passion,? McCallion said.

?Passion is extremely important. If you love the job that you have, then you will never work another day because you love to get up in the morning and you're happy to go to whatever responsibilities you have. You've got to be happy. I believe that if you give your best to what you do, the best will come back to you.?

With McCallion's words still prodding my brain, it hit me that what I love most about journalism is the opportunities it can deliver to engage with, and learn from change-making public servants like McCallion. But this privilege of access does not provide enough satisfaction on its own for me to consider this profession a worthwhile endeavour.

In my experience, this all-important sense of fulfillment only comes when one shares what they learn with others for the sake of the common good.

Although McCallion and I did not possess the same political views, one thing we shared in common was an appreciation for the societal benefits of ?public service.? While the so-called ?old guard? may be dying off ? as investigative journalist Bob Woodward pointed out during our meeting a few weeks back ? it is in our best interest to make sure the ?new guard? fully understands and values the essential nature of public service.