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WHATEVER YOU DO, WORK HEARTILY

Many decades ago, my family owned a restaurant in Detroit where I grew up. Periodically, my maternal grandparents visited for extended periods. Directly from central casting, they were working class people with thick Italian accents and all the skills needed for *la dolce vita*. Usually, Granddad helped my father with some project or other, while my grandmother cooked homemade pasta and bread, picked dandelion for salad from the grassy berm in the middle of East Outer Drive, or made liquor in mason jars with fresh fruit marinating in moonshine that Dad's detective friends had commandeered from the evidence room.

I'm sixteen. The entire basement is filled with crates of grapes from floor to ceiling and along all four walls. My grandfather has selected specific varieties of grapes. The only mechanical aid he uses is a motorized grinder which crushes the grapes to pulp, after which he presses the pulp in a wooden press that he turns by hand. He starts early in the morning, 5:00 a.m. When I get up for school at 7:00, I go to the basement and watch as he slowly and deliberately turns the handle on the press to squeeze the pulp. Arthritic and bent but muscular in his seventies, he turns the handle one revolution at a time until the pulp is squeezed out, measuring out his energy to allow for many hours of such work as juice trickles from the spout. He works steadily over many weeks until he fills four large oak barrels, after which more magic ferments the juice and just the right amount of tannins are siphoned off. When he is done, the barrels are corked and sit for a year and a half before he installs the taps. After aging, the wine is a pink rose color, clear as spring water and tastes like a nectar epicureans have known for millennia. Neither of my parents drink, but it doesn't stop me from drinking it with dinner, thus beginning a lifelong source of pleasure and a dent in my stoicism.

Watching how my grandfather worked is now a part of my DNA. In our household, partially due to the family's old country roots but also philosophical bias, "the working man" was an honored title. Because of it, I have watched working men with a deep respect—trash haulers, ditch diggers, masons, carpenters, tow-truck drivers, or steelworkers straddling beams eighty stories high. My maternal grandfather had worked in coal mines and shoveled coke into hellish blast furnaces. He also knew carpentry, plumbing, demolition, farming, and of course, wine making. My paternal grandfather built the home my father was reared in, as well as another home to the rear of it to house other of his family. Before my parents became successful restaurateurs, my mother

waited tables and father hauled auto frames stacked like pancakes on a flatbed truck. Despite a working class heritage, my father preached education, and subsidized his children's as long as we were willing to do the work. The closest he got to school was the University of the Newspaper, but in our home, movie scenes of Faulknerian farmers sifting soil through their fingers wasn't corny, but as it should be. We of an intellectual orientation forget who really makes the world go around, and who facilitates our contemplation of lofty ideas and cynical irony.

I'm in my thirties in Philadelphia. At 7:30 a. m. it's already very hot and humid this early August day and I am walking to work from 11th and Lombard. As I walk down 11th Street I see in the distance a couple of young laborers breaking up concrete. One watches as the other wields a sledge hammer. As I near, the one swinging the hammer looks to be about 18. He is thin and shirtless. Sweat pours off him as he raises the hammer high above his right shoulder with one hand at the hammerhead, the other at its base, and as he swings it downward the higher hand slides down the shaft for maximum force as it smashes against the concrete with an echoless thud. What gets my attention is that he is not working frantically or herky-jerky, but works slowly, deliberate, measured, leaving no doubt he can work like that all day. As I approach him I say, "I've been admiring how hard you work busting up that concrete." He says, "Mister, this is nowhere near as hard as building walls."

Not too many years ago, I decided to teach myself to cook – nothing fancy – comfort food and simple baking. It began as a lark, but didn't take long to evolve into the soul-enriching experience of putting tasty sustenance in front of friends and watching them enjoy it. What made it so rewarding was not any compliment I may have received, but that it was the fruit of my work, my caring, my giving, such that I have come to believe that all work is prayer.