

# Who's doing the 'real' work?

**Robyn Pearce**

I swear my shoes have a bookshop homing device! Especially in airports. On my way through Los Angeles recently I found myself standing at a book display rack. The title filling the strategically-positioned doorway rack sported a classic motorbike on the front cover. As a pillion rider chick with many miles under my butt (mostly on a vintage motorcycle with no rear springing, so believe me, I had intimate experience of all those miles) I stopped to check it out – and got hooked on the message.

If you're at all concerned about the trend to educate society into passive consumers rather than engaged participants (think food, music, entertainment, transport and clothing just for starters) *Shop Class as Soulcraft: an Inquiry into the Value of Work* by Matthew B Crawford will be worth your inspection too ([www.matthewbcrawford.com](http://www.matthewbcrawford.com)).

Just to whet your appetite, here are just a few extracts from the many prestigious endorsements.

- ◆ "...knowing how to build and fix things... is often more rewarding than becoming another 'knowledge worker' with no practical skills."
- ◆ "...a vague sense of dissatisfaction with the demands and rewards of the modern economy is coalescing into something like a movement..."
- ◆ "...millions of unemployed... struggle to find work, any kind of work, let alone work that suits their skills and talents and offers... "a tighter connection between life and livelihood"
- ◆ "...a philosophical case for choosing the trades over college... a formidable attack on the way our culture has come to devalue manual labour... defiantly rejects received wisdom about the meaning of work in America today."

Promising academic Matthew B Crawford gained a PhD in political philosophy but threw it over to start a motor cycle repair shop. Not your normal pathway to a career in mechanics, I'm sure you'll agree. Which makes him the perfect person to produce this philosophical yet practical plea to reconsider what we're doing to ourselves and to our society.

## Who's doing the 'real work'? And what is 'real' work?

It's no secret that in many societies these days our brightest young minds are encouraged to be knowledge workers. They hive off to colleges and universities, leaving the manual work to those who either won't or can't gain higher



qualifications. But how often do we stop to consider whether this is the right path for our bright young minds? What will they do, once armed with their expensive bits of paper?

So who's doing the less prestigious work? Some has been outsourced (off-shored) to countries with cheaper wage economies. (For a very interesting overview of this trend, Thomas Friedman's *The World Is Flat* is a great read.) However, many trades can't be off-shored. For instance, who's going to replace your spouting, wire your house, fix your car? You can't ring Indonesia to repair your tyre or unblock your toilet. And who will teach your child music, milk the cows on the nearby farms, shear the nation's sheep, grow the really fresh great-tasting food?

In most Western societies trades and industries are screaming for workers with good work habits to take up apprenticeships and learn practical skills. And in those same societies, especially since our economic woes of the last couple of years, unemployed knowledge workers are screaming for work. Isn't something out of whack here? Are we as educators looking?

## So what are the virtues of manual work?

Crawford has written a whole book about how manual work shapes us, and our society, but let's take just a few examples.

Learning to diagnose the ills of an engine or nut out a technical building issue takes high concentration, tenacity, adaptability and resilience. Crawford calls it 'forensic skills'. Having spent a bit of time over the years watching both mechanics and builders of various objects investigate complex issues, I 'get' that label. The challenges they deal with, sometimes on a minute-by-minute basis, can be every bit as challenging as any scientific or

mathematical conundrum a university graduate might handle.

There's a different quality about anyone who restores or rebuilds things – a 'can-do' attitude that takes a problem and refuses to accept that there is no answer.

Sometimes, however, you don't win. An engine or a building is neutral: it can't be bullied and so we learn patience and acceptance. This moulds our attitudes, our character and our behavior. Crawford again: 'Fixing things may be a cure for narcissism.' Waste of time having a tantrum – the machine/equipment/structure will not fight back!

There's always something to improve, practice, tinker with. Inner resourcefulness and mental stimulation are the result. Boredom? Don't know the meaning of the word. Such people aren't reliant on what other people produce: they are the makers and fixers. And joy and a sense of pride in workmanship is just one more outcome.

## A personal observation

I'm an enthusiastic crew member with the NZ Classic Yacht Association. Some of the vessels in the fleet are well over 100 years old. Are they easy to restore? Are they convenient and easy to sail? To both questions – absolutely no. No fancy winches to raise and lower the sails of these beautiful old ladies. Instead they're labour intensive, relying on willing hands, heavy block and tackle, belaying pins, and a barrage of other obscure nautical terms.

The men and women who restore, maintain and sail them have huge respect for their vessels. There's no room for shoddy workmanship or shoddy sailing skills: either could get you killed. But probably what I love the most is the mindset of the people. They're can-do people, resourceful, will give anything a go, with interests in many other diverse topics and fun to be around.

We need both hands and brain engaged to be well-rounded people and to live in a richly diverse, vibrant and healthy society.



Robyn Pearce is an international author and speaker. Check out [www.gettingagrip.com](http://www.gettingagrip.com) for heaps of tips on time saving