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A tilted fence of then and now

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commentary

I looked out the window the other day and saw that a section of our fence had suddenly tilted to one side like a member of Congress in an election year. For one nutty moment, I wondered if maybe the fence was still straight and it was the world that had lurched out of alignment.

After all, in this queasy era of earthquakes, volcanoes, economic waves and a cranky political populace it sometimes seems that the whole world has vertigo and now leans at odds with the straight and upright.

But it was the fence that was tipsy and not the position of the world. And before I was through with the repairs I had still another of those new understandings of long-gone parents that come to a person late in life as you grow gray and sometimes wiser.

Three of the five posts in that section of fence had rotted off in the large blobs of concrete that had held them upright. The fence was weaving in the wind like a sailor on a toot. That meant somebody had to replace those posts with new ones. And as the only man I know who works for free at our house (and worth every penny), I was elected.

First the concrete that had held the posts had to be removed. That is the totally unfair thing about replacing fence posts. It's not like replacing a light bulb. When a light bulb is kaput, you don't have to remove and replace the light socket. You just screw in a new bulb.

But you don't just screw in a new fence post (though somebody should invent that). Before replacing the post, you remove the 80-pound lump of concrete. That means digging the dirt away from the concrete and breaking the lump into manageable pieces with a sledge

hammer. Unfortunately typing newspaper columns, though mighty weighty work in its fashion, is not something that prepares you physically for using a sledgehammer.

I know now why they used to make people in prison break rocks with sledge hammers. And it's not because the state needed smaller rocks. The chore is meant to be mean. It's meant to make you think about whether you ever want to rob another bank (or if you are a big-time banker in the modern era, whether you ever want rob another investor).

Prison wardens didn't make prisoners break rocks with big hammers because they thought it would build muscle. They didn't intend it as an exercise program. They intended it as punishment. And that's what it is, whether you have been sentenced to prison or whether you're a desk jockey fixing a fence.

I spent several hours on those posts. But I did it while thinking about my parents, as I always do when doing the hard labor that I have mostly avoided in my life, My parents were farmers in their younger lives in an era before power equipment had arrived in that line of work. Their power equipment was horses, the strong back of my father and the pure unmitigated fortitude of that generation.

And while I have had to sweat for a few hours over replacing three fence posts, my father probably averaged that many each month on the farm. He did hard farmer labor day after day, year after year. He dug rocks out of fields. He repaired steel wheels on farm implements. He spent hours tilling and planting and harvesting.

And in summer, my father would get up in the middle of the night and go divert the irrigation water from one field to another.

My mother worked as hard in her realm of the kitchen and garden, harvesting and canning and cooking on a wood stove in the oppressive summer heat.

For good measure, she and my father hand-milked a dozen cows twice a day.

That's what this city boy thought about for a few hours last week while stabilizing a fence. I thought of my parents who stabilized me. And I didn't really have the ungrateful gall while remembering them to think how hard I was working.

They have been gone for years but they still spend time with me, reminding me again and again how easy I have it by comparison with yesterday's workers and many of today's.

Our absent elders don't let a little thing like death keep them from sharing their wisdom with those whose path they smoothed.

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