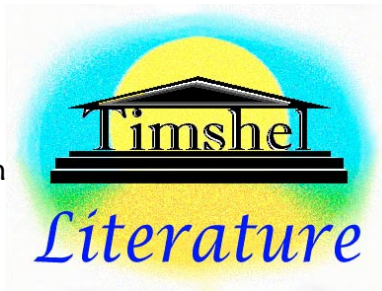


Justin Katz

Timshel Literature

jkatz@timshelarts.com



www.timshelarts.com

P.O. Box 751

Portsmouth, RI 02871

401-835-7156

Just Thinking, 05/12/03:

Back to Work

by Justin Katz

I sometimes think that I'd like to get back into manual labor.

The urge remains even after I've mentally adjusted for the little annoyances and pains that seem to be all there is while in the midst of the work, but that sift through the bottom of memory's strainer. On the other hand, I don't know that it's possible to correct for missing muck once retrospect has revealed the shiny stuff – the sunlight just right on the drive home and the feeling of fulfilled exhaustion. The “ah” of becoming clean.

The workday banter remains fresh in the mind, but the boredom from which it sprouted, flowers from manure, is diluted. But like I said, the urge remains. Even though my relatively low-paying “professional” job provides three times the hourly wages that I made on the docks, something about labor makes a worker feel worth more. It is “work” as the subconscious might define it; they are workers, not “employees.” When they punch the clock, they are no longer working – they are free.

This distinction drills more deeply than simply being bodily in the place of employment; after all, most white-collar workers still go to the office... and leave it. For the laborer, however, it is the bodily presence that defines the work, because it is the body that does the toil. When the

pier or the site or the factory is left, so is the labor. Toil of the brain, although monetarily more valuable, cannot be truly left.

This may be why I, for my part, pine for the days of bodily work — because my diversions are of the mind. Poetry can be composed while carrying baskets of flounder, but not while editing market research. Melodies can take form on the lips while the hands hammer, and soreness of the shoulder does not prevent the fingers' fumbling for chords in the evening. In contrast, as the days wash away in waves of words in the name of work, words not written are drowned out in their protest to be put to paper, even as the months and years flow by.

To a degree, of course, I romanticize the hard work. Perhaps it would be more true to say that it was a luxury for me, a young man in college and with financial support, to see it as I did. My coworkers with families barely made enough to get by; the younger among them, with no families to support, barely made enough to build hope for the future. Nonetheless, now out of college and supporting my own family, I wonder which way the balance of the tradeoff leans, with a slightly mitigated “barely” on one side and a greatly strained hope on the other.

To be sure, my approach to my hobbies, those days, was also a luxury, because making more than hobbies of them was an imperative to be addressed years in the future. Now that those years have arrived, I must devote time to building a name and networking. The hours spent on the foundation from which to capitalize on creative successes must come from my meager store of non-working time. Thus do the ends and the means vie for my minutes.

Ultimately, those are little more than additional minutes doing white-collar work, albeit unpaid. I can't help but wonder again about the calculation: as a “professional,” I must work with my mind once for pay, once for promotion, and once for my passions (although it seems I never get to the last); as a laborer, I could indulge my interior passions *while* working with my body and return with mind relaxed and ready to be utilized, rather than necessitating a mental whip to keep

from mindless distractions. Of course, the time required to *be somewhere* would have to be greater were I to work with my hands, and perhaps I misremember the hours during which the lack of stimulation was so severe as to numb creativity.

This all comes to mind because I've been thinking that I'd like to get back into manual labor, although I suppose I know that I really would not. Instead, I face the much more daunting task of deciding what, in my schedule, should give. The answer has been the creativity for far too long, now, and the incessant chore of balancing work and passion and preparation has proven to be the hardest work of all.