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Wrench Yourself

Luca W. Cintolo
University of Rhode Island, bazooka.luca89@gmail.com

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Wrench Yourself

Two Essays

This project would have been impossible without the help of many others. Some were involved directly, others less-so; a few might not even expect to be here. Whether for editing, encouragement, inspiration, or providing the right circumstances, I owe many thanks to:
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Driven to Distraction

Go take a look at an old car, a high performance car, or even a race car. You will see before you everything that is needed to go, or, in the most positive of negative senses, the lack of anything that is not needed to go. These cars were made for driving. My old '77 Mercedes Benz 240 Diesel or my brother's '62 Ford Falcon 2-door wagon, for example, both lack a familiar pocket of negative space: the ubiquitous cup holder. Of course even I have discovered that a canned drink nestles snugly between the belt buckle, the armrest, and the side of my seat. I'm not too sure if anything can be done for the Falcon. Bench seats seem to be the most righteous of vehicular ass holders.

Righteous, you say? Yes. Simple and towards a purpose. Most people enjoy a little bit of color and sparkle, but the automobile has been relentlessly glittered and bedazzled. Gelded in its gilded-ness, bereft of real productivity, the car now astonishes us with its capability to do anything that is beyond driving, while driving itself has become of less concern to potential buyers. While our cars have become increasingly powerful and capable, their owners have not shared these gains. We are blinded and distracted.

Add to the morning-mug receptacle a mirror on the back of the driver's sun visor for mid-highway appearance checks. Slap some radio controls on the steering wheel for simultaneous two handed driving and station changes. Put a 120 volt electrical socket in the center console for powering laptops, a plug here to connect your cell phone to the car's stereo system, and a little sensor with a beeping alert to tell you if you are about to back into a trash can. Stick a button here to automatically parallel park the thing, replace the transmission stick with a video game controller, and wire up another buzzer that sounds if you are about to change lanes into somebody else's car. Go back to the radio and give it a voice command recognition system, and put a brilliant GPS screen somewhere up there in the dashboard. Install a movie player in the back for the kids. Might as well add a fish-eye camera to the rear bumper since shrinking rear windshields are impossible to see out of now, especially with that TV screen in the way. Place a plastic cover over every component under the hood, and replace the gauges with warning lights. Or just one light, the dreaded "check engine." Well I *would* check it, but I couldn't seem to find an engine under that funny door up front. They don't make engines out of plastic now, do they?

Cars used to house a driver. Now we drive a house. Some people eat two square meals a day, though fast food is usually round, behind the wheel. Minivans are advertised as a place for good ol' family time, and I'm not talking about the iconic road trip that ends up being more worthwhile than the

Grand Canyon at the end of it. The drive to school has become marketed as a chance for the family to come together; the endless gizmos that go beyond bells and whistles give rise to this wholesome rolling statement of a personal lifestyle. Powered doors and headphone-equipped televisions are the new familial affection. We can finally give the children what they really want with a few checked boxes on the options list.

Options tell us about *a people*. They show us both the demands placed on market leaders by consumers and the consumers' acceptance of market leaders' ideas. There is a solidarity in public consciousness that leaves little room for accountability or questioning, little need for any form of self defense. There would be little concern to validate the existence of even a rhinestone-stamping workbench in the cockpit as long as enough of them were out there. Enough people talk on the phone while driving that manufacturers make cars ready to link up with a cell phone: that way everyone can talk and drive with ease, especially in states with hand-held phone bans. It doesn't really matter who comes up with the idea as long as enough people sit around and watch it happen. As long as *they* are doing it, so can *you*, and it doesn't matter if *they* or *you* are a car company or a car consumer.

Within the last forty years technological advances and consumer demands have given us the rolling robotic dinner-and-a-movie theatre with airbags, ten cup holders, and a metal hood that is retained for the sake of formality. Does anybody see a *problem* here? In a country where it is more important to own a halfway decent car than one pair of good shoes, automobiles reveal something about our society. We depend on cars more than any other nation on the map, yet we cultivate drivers who treat cars as virtual reality. Considering that vehicles are so crucial to the American lifestyle, what is it about cars and people that takes us away from the actual reality of piloting over three thousand pounds of steel at sixty miles per hour? Maybe our moral compass has been replaced by an electronic one in the dash.

The problem is that cars don't have consciousness. Perhaps computer technology in cars will attempt to emulate consciousness one day, attempt to give our cars a conscience. Aside from the horrific thought of printing consciousness in silicon, giving cars more control takes us further from our moral imperative as drivers.

A moral driver does not drive by compass, but rather with a conscience. Driving "with a conscience" might evoke images of relinquishing one's right of way; stopping for an out-of-crosswalk pedestrian on a rainy day or giving that first opposite person at the traffic light the left turn. These are surely fine acts of consideration, but driving "with a conscience" strikes at something much more fundamental.

We as humans share one simple pleasure; the pleasure of doing. We like to do things. We like

to play games, we like to go out for lunch, we like to talk and laugh with one another. Yet there are two ways in which a person might engage in *doing*: the active and the passive modes. The active mode is a state of full attention, even absorption, a thorough mental workout. In the passive mode we have mental autopilot. The passive mode can be a great thing in its proper context. Waiting in a long line to register your vehicle does not require hyper-attention. Getting within five ticket numbers (still a good half hour wait) might warrant a bit more concentration, but it's nice to give the mind a rest from time to time.

The problem with the passive mode is that, even in contexts where deploying it is dangerous, it continually dominates more and more of our time. Just look at the idea of multi-tasking. We can't seem to imagine a life without it, but the very concept is relatively new. Undoubtedly, being able to do more than one thing at a time has long been a human requirement, but now we have given it the dignity of a name—this "skill" of Multi-Tasking. Perhaps, more correctly, this condition.

Text messaging four people at once while simultaneously having a "conversation" with an individual in the room has become acceptable. We "connect" to more and more people in our lives, but these connections lack a certain quality. They lack a mode of active engagement.

I pause to wait for a moment when a girl I know pulls out her cell phone. "Go ahead" she says, "I'm listening." No, you are not. I can see by the quality of your body language. The eyes are glued to the screen, the face twitches at things I don't say. The interspersed little monosyllables are layered over my words instead of being carefully placed between them, as if slopped around by a mason with no proper regard for the mortar job.

We have lost the power to hold together one decent conversation because we spread ourselves thin. And when we start text-messaging behind the wheel, as we often do, we equally corrupt the dialogue between car and driver.

We as a society multi-task all of the time. Perhaps this is a result of our induction into the digital age. Perhaps placing a television in the backseat is a clue to the growing complacency about this general attention deficit. Do we no longer expect children to amuse themselves for one hour at a time? Computers are rightly said to multi-task (the idea originally described) when the processor does more than one thing at a time. Computers are sold, as employees are bought nowadays, because they can do lots of things at once. But if you put too many demands on a human's processor it will bog down just like a computer's. Nothing gets done well, nothing gets done faster. This is increasingly how we engage the world. At a time when we are capable of doing more than anybody before us, of having more done for us than anybody before us, we seem also to lack the skill—the active mode of engagement—of focusing on one task at a time. A skill whose lost luster is evident in our cars, how we

drive them, and how they are made to be driven.

What does the cup holder say about our values as a vehicular society? Mostly it says that we like to keep our laps dry. The cup holder by itself is innocent enough. But where should we draw the line? I use the ash tray on a regular basis. I don't like ash all over the car. Why isn't the ash tray in my laundry list of unnecessary gizmos? Perhaps because I am a smoker, but also because spent cigarettes are one of the most dangerous forms of litter. Litter that could be easily avoided. But put the ash tray, cup holders, mirrors that look inside the car, radio controls that invite constant attention to themselves, fancy screens with information that we don't really need, and cell phone jacks all in a car together and we get a sense of the problem: *compounded inattention*. We pilot cars that invite the driver to multi-task, to drive in the passive mode, to be generally rather than acutely aware of his or her surroundings. There is nothing less dangerous in changing a radio station on the steering wheel than on the radio itself. Both methods put one's mind on the radio while it should be on the road.

This is why hands-free cell phone laws are a joke. Two hands on the wheel won't do any better than one if there is only half a brain to control them. If having one hand on the wheel were really a problem, manual transmissions would need a paddle shifter mandate and you would get a ticket for blowing your nose. Indeed, hands-free devices remove the tactility that is so important in illuminating their distractive quality. Holding a cell phone in your hand makes the danger of your inattention immediately tangible. Here is this thing that you have raised to the side of your face, a thing that is taking your mind off the road. You can feel *it* pressed against your ear and *your* breath on the microphone. But attach the cell phone to the stereo so that all you have to do is talk and listen (it used to look crazy to passerby), and it becomes part of the car. It becomes natural and unobtrusive. So does your lack of concentration.

I'll admit that a lot of the features in new cars are made for the sake of safety. Others are made for convenience, and sometimes the two have a mutual footing. You won't get me to stop smoking in my car. Some people need their coffee during the daily commute. So why don't we just avoid the risk of starting a fire or scalding our laps and keep people focused on the road? Sounds reasonable. But why should we make it easier to talk on a cell phone, incessantly fiddle with the radio, or teach drivers to rely on alarms instead of their eyes? In order to get at where the trouble lies, the way fluffed-up cars comport drivers, we will first need to agree on what it means to actively employ a physical skill.

Driving a car requires the seamless use of the mind and the body. It is an act of interpreting senses and initiating responses. The eyes see the road, traffic, and potential hazards, the ears listen for sirens or that perfect shift point. The nose allows you to smell trouble (literally, like when you smell burning rubber as you come into a blind turn), the hands and feet feel feedback in the wheels and the

pedals. I suppose an appetite for driving isn't always necessary, but four out of five aren't bad. The brain focuses on all of the signals and variables the road can dish out and triggers the necessary responses to keep the wheels in between the paint... unless there is a wrecked car or a bag of trash in the lane. At this point the brain commands you to swerve out of the way, to break the rules of solid lines and slow, deliberate lane changes for the sake of avoiding a crash. The hands and feet make the necessary motions. Here we see that the brain and the body are inextricably linked. To consider the body as a casing for the brain belittles the value of action. To consider the brain as a controlling unit for the rest of the body belittles the value of critical thinking. To employ only one of the two is a great way to test your airbags.

While the brain is a physical organ, critical thinking is not. What is so important about the brain is its ability to facilitate mentality, to let us think about things. Though brain and body are one, mind and body do not always share this intimacy. This can become a liability in potentially dangerous situations. When the double-back-flipping skier starts to think about what he looks like mid-air, starts to separate thinking from doing, he might find the time to consider his error in a hospital bed. In order for the mind and body to work together quickly, for critical thinking to meet a physical response, a person must engage in a task actively. We often sense that a subconscious element underscores this active engagement when its demands become extreme. We no longer think of ourselves as people doing a thing, we think through doing and do through thinking. And this is perfectly alright, as long as we are actually focused on the task in hand. The subconscious is capable of critical thinking, quick critical thinking, but we can't listen to it with a head full of white noise. When the subconscious needs to kick in behind the wheel, it will, if we allow it. This means focusing on the driving.

When you *think* about a conversation on the phone while you *do* drive a car, when you multi-task behind the wheel, there is a fundamental separation between mind and body. The fragmented subconscious now carries you through on marginally competent mental autopilot. It usually does a passable job, but passable isn't enough when your lane is suddenly blocked off. Is there a car to either side of you? (*one half...*) Do you have to hit the brakes or can you swerve? Which is safer given the current conditions? (*...of a second later*) Have to hang up, Charlie, I'm about to total the car.

It would seem that one of the main difficulties with gizmoed cars is that they destroy this physio-mental relationship. We are led to believe that a car requiring less physical manipulation allows for greater mental prowess, allows a driver to think more about the road and less about moving sticks and turning the head to check mirrors that look backwards. But a sedentary mind becomes arthritic, and in response to this induced debilitation we are given crutches; devices that eliminate the need for a driver's full participation, crutches that no longer facilitate a means of recovery, but rather become a

dependency to achieve daily motion. The problem with a car that requires less physical input is that it demands less mental output. Using the mind to control the body to control the car is a good thing, it keeps the mind focused on all the aspects of driving the car. Turning your head to check mirrors, operating a clutch and a shifter stick, or making slight throttle adjustments for a changing road gradient all require a concentration that keeps you in the context of driving your vehicle. Your three thousand pounds of steel.

Changing a radio station also requires a physical input and a mental output, but the two are not directed towards driving. This is where the tactility of obtrusiveness becomes important. As with the hand-held cell phone, the dash-mounted radio does not bely its necessary distraction. The steering wheel controls are a bit more deceitful. They give the driver the illusion of safety, they let the driver relish the thought that nothing can be better than two hands on the wheel. They undermine the physio-mental relationship so crucial to driving a car. The mental distraction of changing the radio never goes away, but it is hidden under the guise of not fumbling around the dash. So we change the radio with confidence, with the idea that we are driving more safely when really our brains are doing the same exact thing with our hands in a different place, and all the while the ease of the wheel-mounted controls makes us use them even more often. A slight twist of the thumb might require a few less primary motor cortex synapses than a full arm extension, but a few inches away the frontal lobe's power of critical thought has still turned from what is coming ahead on the road to what is coming through the stereo speakers. What on earth is this? Oh my God, more commercials! I just heard this song on the other station... Holy-shit-that-car-is-stopping!

It happens all the time. Just a few weeks ago a friend of mine turned his head to look out the window in traffic. "Heyyyyyyyyy" I groaned with increasing volume and panic in my voice, sticking my foot as hard as I could into the passenger footwell, searching for a pedal that wasn't there. I could hear the ABS kick in as we stopped about five inches from the next car. Ill at ease, I had already tried to grant him my hyper-awareness through an osmotic process, since ten miles earlier we had nearly glided over wet lanes into a car while he changed tracks on the mp3 player. Being a hyper-alert passenger is nerve wracking because you have all of the right ideas, none of the control over the vehicle, and psychic osmosis is impossible. You are like a small-time fisherman caught in a big storm, yelling futile commands at the waves.

When the fisherman doesn't drown in the storm, he learns to mind the weather. "No harm no foul" can be an awful line of thought. It is a justification for desensitization that steals the lesson to be had from getting away with something *this time*. Nearly rear ending somebody from thirty miles an hour warrants a yellow flag in my playbook any day of the week. It should leave a driver rattled and

with a renewed sense of awareness. It should not be brushed aside. There is something genuinely wrong with nearly rear ending somebody; it is a product of inattention behind the wheel. When we almost made a train out of an SUV and a convertible, what scared me most was the driver's slight chuckle before his return to business as usual—another song change on the radio.

So what are the rules for the phone jacks, the talking radios, the navigation systems and cruise controls and massaging seats and even cup holders and ash trays? Well, the only hard lines I can point to on the road are drawn in white and yellow paint. The use of such gadgets requires sound judgment. GPS is a fine thing, though I tend to like to know where I am headed before I get there, unless you start playing with it in heavy traffic. Tipping your head back to take a sip of coffee is alright at a red light or on the open highway, as is looking down for a moment to light a cigarette. And, if there is nobody on the road, there is nobody to cruise control your way into. If you pick a moment where you can temporarily go into autopilot without risking the safety of other drivers, it really is Okay. Yet consider that while cars become safer in crashes and more able to avoid crashes, people nevertheless crash them. Though crumple zones have stopped hoods from potentially decapitating drivers and engines from crushing them, and steering columns now collapse instead of turning into chest-borne spears, more powerful brakes, better aerodynamics and more precise steering will do nothing in the hands of a zombie driver. Improved cars could offer a net gain in driving potential, but instead we trade *our* responsibility for the car's capabilities.

Is it not clear that autopilot should be an exception, not the rule? If even the pace of life in this digital age is unavoidable, could we not slow it down a bit when we are traveling at seventy-five miles per hour? Forget about reading between the lines: recognize that there are other lives between them. Recognize that paying attention to doing one thing, to driving, should never be an outdated *modus agendi*. Put on the dark shades of active focus. Reduce the glitter and rhinestones to a dim glow. An incredible vibrancy already exists right there on the road. We need to pay attention to that vibrancy, to the potential for sudden extremes, so that we can react just as swiftly. If this need doesn't drive you, you shouldn't be driving. Think about it. Just not while you're behind the wheel.

Take the Time

We have so much time in our brief lives that we forget to stop and appreciate the gift of time in the first place. There is a good chance your grandparents used to take hours to do laundry and had the forearms to prove it. Rubbing, wringing, shaking, hanging, ironing--wrinkles were not yet in style. How impressive the electric washing machine and dryer must have been to them. No more clothespins, no more dogs tearing the sheets from the line.

What about that big knob over there? Give it a turn and instantly-hot water will fly from a nozzle, and if it's too hot, don't wait for it to cool, just back off on the dial a bit. If you fill up this little device and press the button before your shower, you can come out to a piping cup of coffee made from beans that were ground by the pound without even the thought of a sweaty brow.

Most of us wake up to a home that does not require somebody to throw a log or two in the stove at four o' clock. No need to tumble down the dark stairs, just flick that little lever on the wall. Don't worry if you do tumble into it anyways because you can always buy walls in 4x8-foot sheets at the store now.

Do we even need to leave our walls anymore? Why be hassled with driving to the market? Stay home between ten in the morning and four in the afternoon; your groceries will still arrive. That lady on the back of the supermarket's delivery truck is not crippled with chronic pain and she looks affluent enough to own a car (after all, she can pay to have her groceries delivered). Not visibly busied by children or working from a home office, she's just saving her time. Perhaps they should sell us on ultimate convenience: frozen dinners by mail take almost no time at all!

Our time is so valuable, in fact, that society reminds us to save it at every possible moment, as if we can create a stockpile of rollover life-minutes by not using them between 7AM and 7PM.

Well, what are we saving our time for? More time to save time?

Spending time is like living on a set bank account balance. At every minute you have sixty seconds to spend. If you don't spend them, they are wasted. If you spend thirty seconds, you still only get sixty for the next minute. Time is a resource stream. If you're not using it, you're wasting it. To come to this realization I had to waste a lot of time playing video games with resource streams.

We all waste time, to be sure. Ten minutes between classes, twenty between getting out of work and picking up the kids, fifteen between being ready to leave the house and when you actually have to go; we can't spend every drop in the stream. Full engagement is often measured in hours and we don't need serious mortar between all the fine cracks. We should, however, pay attention to how we fill the bigger gaps in our lives.

I'm not advocating an assembly-line model of life, one built upon the ideal of maximum efficiency. I prefer the image of a workshop; it has a personal touch, a romantic quality to its productivity. A workshop shuts down at night, is a bit more prone to the hiccups of life and a bit more agreeable to the need for occasional passivity. A workshop that does no work, however, intolerably wastes its sole employee's time.

We should take the time to learn how to do things—not just for the sake of productivity, but for the sake of fulfillment. We exist in body, after all, as much as we exist in mind or spirit. This is not to say that *doing* only means physical activity.

There are many things we can actively do without taxing the body. Reading, for example, makes passive use of the body. Yes, the eyes see the page, but the work occurs in the mind. The sense of sight does not provide feedback so much as it provides a conduit for information and ideas.

Now I don't value manual skills over cognitive ones; I think the two should exist in balance. I'm taking the time today, however, to make an argument for learning manual skills because they are the first ones sold off to the lowest bidder. A phenomenon, I think, caused by a general undervaluation of manual skills. It's a shame, because learning and doing manual work can be uniquely

rewarding and beneficial.

Mowing the lawn, repainting a room, lubricating (with dry graphite only!) a sticky lock, picking up groceries, cleaning and folding laundry, cooking food, washing dishes, sewing, and changing the oil on the car; some people never engage with any of these tasks. These are things, many "the basics," (and some not even real "skills") that keep us down to earth.

Doing for ourselves need not always be about economics, either.

I don't change my own oil to save money, so let's get that out of the way right now. I buy my oil in quarts or gallons; garages buy it in barrels. I buy my filters one at a time without any bulk discount, and I have to go to the store, pick up the supplies, and eventually return the dirty stuff for recycling.

As you can tell, I don't change my own oil to save my time. I do it to spend my time. When the internal combustion engine is the trick, I want to be the magician on stage. I want the *satisfaction* of controlling the magic and the intimacy that comes with my work. I don't merely want to be actively engaged in the audience, to *watch* it attentively; I want to be the performer. I want to be the reason, with blackened hands as my proof, that somebody made an old diesel idle at a gritty purr instead of a clackety racket.

But a problem arises when venturing into such skills, and a discussion with myself might help us work through it. Feel free to take a part.

"That's all good and well, Luca, but where did you learn to change your oil?"

"Well, by doing it."

"But how can you do it if you don't know how?"

"I read a little bit about it and looked at some pictures, but I didn't really learn *how to do it* until I did it—the writing just says *how it's done."*

"Didn't somebody show you?"

"Ummm, not with the oil. How much a feeler gauge should rub between the rocker arm and the camshaft on a valve adjustment, yes, someone guided me there. But the oil I just did."

"Aren't you worried you could have screwed it up then?"

"No, I read up on that."

"You're impossible."

How do you first venture into an oil change? It starts with three thousand miles or a "new" used vehicle—there is no way to be sure that the previous owner took care of your ride. At this point we have the idea that oil should be changed, probably even that it is drained from the bottom and filled from the top. Yet people also know that there is a certain way to change the oil; for a first timer the way is dark.

The first step is seeking illumination. If no mechanics are handy, we hit the books. We try to wrap our heads around the general idea of the oil change, then figure out what the procedure entails on a specific car. Perhaps we go out and buy a shop manual or look for an online forum whose members own the same car as we do. The forums are nice because you can ask them questions, they often contain better pictures, and they don't necessarily assume that you have any mechanical knowledge at all.

We figure out what type of oil we will need and how much of it we should buy. The people at the parts shop can tell you what number filter your car takes, but we have to find out where it goes. We also learn what size wrench, or wrenches, the job requires. The fits-all (or as I like to call it, strips-all) adjustable wrench does not belong anywhere near your engine, or nuts and bolts smaller than 20mm.

At this point we know how the oil is changed. Even with concrete specifics, the oil change remains abstract idea in our head. We still don't know how to do it, and we never will until we just get down and do it. Yes, you can be learning the procedure at somebody's side every step of the way, but the tacit and sensory knowledge, the knowledge of the hands, only comes with the work. It takes time and practice, even in the most mundane of tasks, to get *the feel* for things.

An expert hedge-trimmer can make the right cut in one pass. A good cook knows how to slice the vegetables just right. A good painter doesn't brush on too much or too little. Just as a good musician knows the rest note, the note of

silence, these people get the feel for restraint. Don't trim too deeply. Don't mince too finely. More paint is not a good thing. It drips, sags, and peels from the wood. Thin coats are best. Warm the engine up, let it sit, and check the dipstick when you're done. Too much oil actually deprives an engine of lubrication, as the overfilled crankcase turns into an oil-frothing machine. Frothy oil is full of air bubbles, and air bubbles don't lubricate. Don't use too many examples, you will drive the reader crazy.

Even when armed with all of the proper tools and knowledge, it takes time, the first time, to do something. I still chop peppers as if I were dissecting them. I think my first oil change lasted nearly two hours. But this is new territory. The tracks have not been laid, the maps remain crisp and foreign. We are explorers! This is part of the charm in learning a new skill. Learning to do something means *leaving our walls* and dealing with inconvenience. A little bit of hassle is a good thing; it builds character.

Fortunately, the hassle of physical labor is quickly traded for gratification. You have visible proof, at the end of the job, that you accomplished something. Proof that isn't in some cookbook, but in the pudding... or maybe a pan of dirty 15w40. While you once held only the idea of an oil change, now you have held the drain plug, the filter, and the wrenches. Your dirty hands show that you put an idea into action.

The first time you put the fill cap back on and fire it up, you feel like you've just completed open heart surgery. Changing the oil, spark plugs, or even transmission fluid for that matter really isn't as bold as working on someone's ticker, but try telling that to a successful first timer. A first timer who has conquered new territory, traveled from the land of abstract "how it is done" manuals to concrete "I did that" dirty hands. And even though the newly inducted shade tree mechanic probably won't notice much, if any, of a change in his or her car, the pride of accomplishment, the change in his or her self, is undeniable.

The change marks an increase in self-sufficiency, in personal utility. I think of my skills like my tools. I don't have a large tool collection. I buy pricier,

higher quality tools. Not top of the line stuff, but good; the American made, forged steel, lifetime warranty variety. Anyways, I like adding tools to my collection when I can afford it. And as long as I don't lose them, I'll have them forever. Then, whenever confronted with a situation that requires the use of tools, I can scratch my chin as I scan my mental inventory to see if I have what is needed.

This is the value of manual skills. Like a personal chest of good tools, time-affordable (nobody has enough time to get all the good ones) personal tools come with a lifetime warranty. They have an immediate tactility, because tactility is in their nature. They hearken back to a basic desire to be neither a thoughtless brute nor a floating brain, but rather a "complete" human being. Engaging in a true manual skill resonates an unparalleled harmony that feeds an important natural appetite; the need to effectively use one's body, the need of personal utility. The added benefit of manual skills is that they work more than the hands.

Could it be that diagnosing carburetor problems flexes the same power of critical thought I use when reading a line of Vergil? Could it be that the reward of seeing lightly tanned spark plugs, indicating a good carburetor air/fuel mixture, is similar to that of perfectly parsing a line of Latin poetry? Could it be that critical thought is mutual to the two fields, that working in either one might benefit the other?

Especially when we first learn a skill, we have to really think about what we are doing, have to apply a full-force effort. This is why the first time always takes so much precious time. This is also why it holds such a precious reward, a feeling of time spent well in a new way. It is exploratory, invigorating, and sometimes a little dirty.

Unlike tools, however, skills become better with time. Instead of showing wear and tear, skills build with exercise. Like the calcification of bones, skills harden with use and we can test them to further extremes. As we become better at skillful (manual) work, as we get *the feel* for it, we think less about what we are doing. On the flip-side, we have more that's been done to think about.

Just as the abstract is an entry into the concrete, a gateway from ideas to

actions, actions can become gateways to ideas. Building a physical skill gives you some food for thought. Perhaps your time under the hood will lead you to question yourself and your values. Perhaps you will find some truth about human existence under the valve cover, or in *thinking about* why being under the valve cover is so mind-warming. This truth might be compelling enough that you feel the need to share it with others. Then again, maybe witnessing personal growth, the expansion of your own abilities, is enough in itself.

This doesn't mean you should go under the hood to "find yourself." There is barely enough space under the hood to fit an engine nowadays, let alone some new-age inflated ego. No, the point of engaging in the kind of work I have been talking about is to give yourself over to something. If you are thinking about self-revelations when you should be changing the oil, you're gonna screw something up (and I'm not referring to contrived personal deductions).

This benefit, this food for thought, comes after the fact and from underneath. So as much as I say "take the time," realize that you don't get to keep it. That would signal a regression to rollover life-minutes syndrome. No, the purpose of manual work, as with real intellectual work, is *spending* time. You will, however, find your purchase worthwhile.

You can't put a price on seeing "delicious" written in a dinner guest's face, in seeing his or her appreciation that you decided to forgo the frozen food aisle. If this dinner is out on the patio, it is not just garden that moves guest, but the gardener. For all the economics that pervade our daily lives, we don't (I hope) look for people spending money on labor to save time. Our eyes are on the performer. We know that there were rehearsals, that there were mistakes and challenges, and sometimes we see the flaws. But we also see the personal investment, the effort spent on a visible skill.

No wonder, then, that the live musician is always more captivating than the one on CD. That even a mediocre *cake made from scratch* makes for a better birthday, that a few drips in the paint are no bother when the brush belongs to you. And also no wonder, then, that we appreciate the musician's, cook's, or painter's perspective—a thoughtfulness tempered by hands-on experience.

The time spent on developing manual skills is not simply a temporal expenditure, it is a personal investment with a two-fold dividend. Our skills are a cerebro-manual sphinx: as fiercely grounded as a lion, able to soar on the wings of an eagle, and as comforting as a friendly face. They bring together two spheres of our being, the too-often separated earthiness and loftiness of our existence.

While some tasks are harder than others, even the rhythm of the simple ones can birth an emergent complexity of *thought on doing them, which* can be intellectually stimulating. And of course we don't all have the same tastes and will not be equally moved by the same skills. Across the various degrees of difficulty and appeal, however, the gains from giving yourself to work are clear. You will be appreciated and you will appreciate yourself. So go get a cookbook or some paint swatches or a pair of good gardening gloves. Or maybe—if you are not opposed to the idea—maybe even take the time to go grab a shop manual, do a little reading, and put a wrench in hand. More than your engine will benefit.