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Make time for the peace and pleasure of the tactile.

The Things We Make

At the state border, the sign reads “Maine, The Way Life Should Be.” We passed it every weekend when I was a kid, and I wondered what it meant. What *was* the way life should be? And what did Maine have to do with it?

Now I get it. Life isn’t the way it’s supposed to be! It’s torn, worn, frayed at the edges! Often lonely, too. At a local talk a few years ago, environmentalist Bill McKibbens lamented that people don’t connect today the way they used to. Compared with the 1950s, he said that today friends and neighbors have dinner together half as much as they used to and that today, people have *half* as many close friends as people did then. Not the way life should be....

One reason is that, today, many of us spend more time in front of a screen than interacting face-to-face, moving our bodies or working with our hands. While our devices connect us with the world, they disconnect us, too. Research shows that children’s senses are weakening—they’re not engaging them out in the world the way they used to.¹ Not the way life should be....

A few years ago, the *New York Times* reported on Silicon Valley parents’ sending their young kids to alternative schools where computers aren’t allowed and where the focus is on “physical activity and learning through creative, hands-on tasks.” Why? Because “computers inhibit creative thinking, movement, human interaction and attention spans.”² Despairing of the world, one wonders, what *home* do we have in all this? And what *is* the way life should be?

Maybe it’s a dream, long ago and far away. For me, having lived my life in towns, “home” looks like a farmhouse (easy to romanticize). But can you hear the slam of the screen door, taste the cookies on the counter, smell the soup on the stove? Just past the kitchen, can you see the bowl of fruit on the dining room table, the chest of drawers with a quilt folded across the top?

In the farmhouse, before modern-day conveniences did them for us, people’s hands and time were busy with milking, churning, washing, cooking, making things, fixing instead of replacing, tuning up engines. Hands-on tasks can feel satisfying. Calming, too. And creative—spending an afternoon laying a patio, building a new deck, making a pie, gardening pleases the eye.

And what about the softness in that farmhouse? A sense of holding? An echo of voices suggesting pot-luck suppers, cups of tea, chats across the fence? Not that life was always social, but by comparison with ours, often alone in our cars, even errands used to bring folks into relationship. A new suit or dress meant a weeks-long social encounter: a trip to town to buy

¹ Thomas Poplawski. “Losing Our Senses.” Sunrise School of Miami, Blog, 13 September 2010. Accessed 29 January 2012 at <http://sunriseschoolofmiami.org/losing-our-senses/>, Internet.

² “A Silicon Valley School That Doesn’t Compute,” *The New York Times*, 23 October 2011. Accessed 29 January 2012 at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/23/technology/at-waldorf-school-in-silicon-valley-technology-can-wait.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all, Internet.

fabric, then to the tailor for measurements. Then fittings. How far we've come, staring into computer screens late at night and ordering on-line.

Projects brought people together, too. Barn raising, harvesting, haying. Some of that still happens here, doesn't it...In the good old days, our great-aunts would have a wooden quilt rack suspended from the ceiling. On quilting nights, they'd lower the rack with a pulley, bringing the quilt down to table level. Women would come and take their places around the quilt. Those quilt racks brought together a lot of layers—layers of calico...*and* layers of lives, in the sharing of stories and confidences, ideas and plans.

By no means a real quilter, I played with quilt squares one year in seminary after exams and gifted a stack of them to our kids. They picked squares they liked and arranged them into several wall hangings and quilts (which turned into quite an undertaking!).

Unlike those great-aunts, I worked in silence, the top and bottom layers and the batting in between stacked on the floor. Knees sore, holding the pins in my mouth, hands reaching and tying, fingertips toughening up, it was physical, slow work, one stitch at a time.

Have you noticed that the tactile “here and now” of hands-on projects is grounding? Being unplugged for long stretches frees the mind to float in dreamy reveries. That project—cutting and piecing together different shapes and colors—felt like a metaphor for you and me: *here*, stitched together in sturdy relationship; *there*, holding on by a thread; *these* seams unraveling, *those* holding fast. Each of us unique, separate and colorful...all of us connected, part of an amazing oneness.

What tasks take you into reveries? Free-floating thoughts? Painting reveries? Home project reveries? Knitting reveries? Tinkering...gardening reveries? Reveries: making sense of things, our hands busy.

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When our son was in college, my husband and I spent amusing hours with him in his basement den. Every time the kitchen door slammed upstairs, Max would call up to the newcomer, “Come on down to the sanctuary!” The sanctuary is what they called a circle of vintage plaid barcaloungers on a crusty, fragrant shag rug.

Back home in NH, John hatched a gift idea for Max's birthday: a sign in school colors red and gold, saying: “The Sanctuary Welcomes You.” He priced out a flimsy plastic sign at eighty bucks, and I wondered if we could we come up with something just as good on our own?

Half-heartedly, John went to work. Before long he was in deep: “WHY did I listen to you? I'm up to \$69 already!” Ah, but he had stories to tell, having connected with so many people about his sign. One neighbor gave him a 40-inch board, primed, left over from repairing the front steps. Another brought over a can of dark red paint. At Home Depot, he said “an old hippy and his wife” got involved and showed him the 70% off gallon of yellow. The jolly guy at Kinko's loved the sign idea and helped upsize John's elegant, serifed letters. Warming to the fun he'd indeed had, John said: “And that doesn't include the 157 Facebook friends I wrote to about the sign...or the P. G. Wodehouse characters in the stories I listened to all afternoon!” He'd had a day of

connecting, the way life should be!

A grace unfolds when our whole body engages—not just our thumbs and heads. When we create something of meaning, when the hands and the fingers work with purpose, our hearts engage, too. It might be a loaf of bread. Or a garden. Or a silly sign. My serious, just-get-it-done husband had a blast that Saturday, and when he showed the sign to his running partner Sunday morning, you could see his heart’s pleasure in his face.

These days, we might well wish for simpler, slower times. Life, after all, *should* be about connecting, taking the time to piece things together, letting reveries nourish us. Let us make time for the peace and pleasure of the tactile. And let us trust that “the way life should be” isn’t long ago and far away. It’s right here in our hearts.

So may it be.