

Bag the Bird

In my last article I brought up the topic of work, and said I would write some more about it. The more I've thought about work, the more I've realize how much of what we teach relates to teaching our kids to work hard. I have far more thoughts on this topic than most can bear reading, so I'll try not to push it too far.

One of my first jobs was working for my uncle. We put up hay. I don't exactly remember the process, but it is something like this: someone drives the tractor near the bails of hay, someone riding on the trailer stacks the hay, and someone throws the hay onto the trailer. I was the hay-thrower guy. It's not too bad until the trailer has a couple of rows on it and you have to grab the hay and push it up with your forearms—which scratches them to pieces. And then your back starts to hurt. And then the little hay particles get into your eyes, nose, and mouth. But you can't wipe them because your scratched and bloody stumps are also covered with hay.

One time I helped an Iowan farmer empty the beans out of his silo. The bottom foot or so of the silo was all rotted. Let me define some of these words for you city folk. Rot, as I understand it, is pretty much the same as bacteria manure. Iowa is a very hot place where you never get to hear the expression, "Well, at least it's not humid." A silo is nothing more than a giant metal sun magnet. The inside of a silo is enclosed, safe and sound from the gentle breezes that make hot summer days bearable. So basically it was like shoveling manure in a sauna.

One more horror story... when I worked as a computer programmer I used to have to call people and ask them questions. I don't mind needing help. And I really don't mind asking questions. But I don't like calling people. I don't know why. I just don't. I don't even like to order pizza. I'm not afraid of the pizza guy. I'm not afraid that he'll ask me tough questions I don't know the answers to, and I don't think he'll be mean to me. Some people are afraid of heights and some are afraid of snakes. I'll tell you what; I'll fly in a plane with snakes if you'll order the pizza.

All I'm saying is that most jobs require you to do things you don't want to do. Our kids need to learn to do things they don't want to do. If we are wise parents we will make our kids do things they don't want to do.

I'm not just talking about chores here. Those are good too, but sometimes our kids need to do things that they absolutely hate to do.

We asked one of our kids to get rid of a dead bird in the yard once. We showed him how to cover his hand with a bag, to use it like a glove, and then to wrap the bag around the bird. It wasn't meant to be a big deal, but it soon turned into one. There were tears and bursts of anger. "It's not fair!" "It's too hard." (And not all those exclamations were from Kathleen. ;-)) I sensed that this was important for some reason and stood my ground. He went and found a sibling he could talk into doing the dirty deed and was

suddenly as happy as a clam. Luckily, I knew where another dead bird was and made my new request. He spent a long time eying that bird. I coached through the window, “You can do it! Just get it over with! I wouldn’t ask you to do something I didn’t think you could do.” It was a long and grueling process, but I told him he had to do it.

Eventually he did it. He said, “I knew you weren’t going to let me come in until I bagged the bird, and I didn’t want to sleep outside with it there, so I just did it.” (For the record, we’ve never made any of the kids sleep outside; he was just playing out the worst case scenario in his mind.)

The interesting thing is that there was an instant change in his demeanor and his self-confidence that day. He grew up, not all the way, but volumes more than a normal day’s worth. When we force ourselves to do what we previously thought impossible, a new world of possibilities opens to us.

“Bag the bird,” is an expression you might hear on occasion in our house. Everyone knows what it means. Sometimes you gotta be tough, sometimes you gotta cowboy-up, and on a rare occasion, you just gotta bag the bird.

Don’t go out to find a bird to bag for your own child. As I mentioned, I wasn’t looking for a battle that day; it just came to me. And that particular event may not even affect your kid. Most of my other kids wouldn’t mind doing it at all. All I’m saying is that you shouldn’t be afraid of giving your kids some tasks that seem monumentally difficult *to them*. It could open their eyes to their capacity to do far more than they feel comfortable with.

Trust me, Parent, they’re going to need these experiences to make it in this life.