Farming Isn’t an Information Age Skill

> *Hwilc pe gepuht betwux woruld cræftas heoldan ealdordom? Eorptilp, forpam se yrpling us ealle fett.*
>
> *[Master] Which do you think, amongst the world-crafts, holds the most authority?*
>
> *[Pupil] Agriculture, for the farm feeds us all.*
>
> *– Ælfric’s Colloqy*

There’s an art to making hay.

When executed properly, haymaking enables farmers to feed animals with the nutrients of preserved grass through cold winters. My great-grandfather, like many farmers of his time, used to cut and stack hay with horsepower and human hands.

Knowing *when* to cut the hay was the first of his considerations. Protein and energy concentration in the grass often declines as the plants mature, and so waiting too long can result in less nutrition. “[O]ld-timers used to talk about cutting hay around the Fourth of July,” *Farming Magazine* notes, “when they said, ‘it was stout and had some bottom to it.’”

After my great-grandfather cut his hay crop, he would “ted” it (fluffing it, thus allowing air and sun to dry its undersurface), and then gather it into “windrows” – long rows of cut hay, left to dry in the field. Weather is another important consideration for haymaking: hot weather helps the hay cure quickly, but rain can ruin the drying process. Experienced farmers know when hay is ready to be stored by its feel alone. I’ve watched a farmer out in his field, sifting through the cut grass, gauging its readiness.

Back before modern machinery simplified the process, farmhands and neighboring farmers used pitchforks to gather the dried hay onto a "slip." They would attach a sling full of hay to the cable of a "hay derrick," a hoisting apparatus that lifted it up to the barn loft. There, my great-grandfather would tightly stack the loose hay. Stacking was a crucial skill, and required a great deal of expertise: if the farmer didn't arrange and compress it properly, the hay could get moldy.

The entire process requires acumen, savvy, and hard-earned wisdom. It was, in the old-fashioned sense, a "craft" – indeed, as Alexander Langlands puts it in his book *Crœft: An Inquiry into the Origins and True Meaning of Traditional Crafts*, agriculture is the "most fundamental of crafts."

But many moderns know nothing of the savvy and skill required to execute just one of the many tasks that occupy a farmer. This was abundantly clear in a speech given by former New York City mayor (and now presidential hopeful) Michael Bloomberg. In it, he describes farming thus: "I could teach anybody, even people in this room, to be a farmer. It's a process. You dig a hole, you put a seed in, you put dirt on top, add water, up comes the corn."

In its surrounding context, Bloomberg is attempting to describe our supposed "progress" from an agrarian to an industrial society, and finally to today's information economy. In his telling, human society has continued to advance – and the work of today's "information worker" is far more skilled and intellectually demanding than the aforementioned putting a seed in the ground. "[T]he skill sets that you have to learn are how to think and analyze," Bloomberg says. "And that's a whole degree level different. You have to have a different skill set, you have to have a lot more gray matter."

Bloomberg's comments stirred the ire of many farmers and farm

advocates, who protest (correctly) that he knows nothing of the intellectual difficulties and demands of farming. But interestingly, many responded to the video *not* by arguing for the dignity of farming in its ancient and modern methodologies but rather by arguing that farmers are information technology workers, too.

One responder to the video said, "The man has no clue how much information and technology goes into agriculture and skilled trades careers. Humans flipped from 98% to less than 2% agricultural in a couple of centuries for a reason."

Dairy farmer Sarah Lloyd said in a *Journal Sentinel* review, "We have people here in the Midwest working really hard in high-tech areas across the economy. Come visit us in Wisconsin, is what I would say."

These responses are woefully insufficient, because they are at root *agreeing* with Bloomberg's designation of the ancient manual labor aspects of agriculture as backward or intellectually undemanding. This simply is not the case. If anything, agriculture – like many industries impacted by the rise of more sophisticated technology – has lost *some* (though assuredly not all) of its craftsmanship over time, because the skills we humans once completed ourselves are now automatically performed for us.

Consider, then, the farmer planting a seed in the soil.

Prior to the tractor that planted seeds in perfect rows via GPS systems, the farmer's ability to perform this simple act was predicated on a variety of things: first and foremost, his or her knowledge of the soil. As Langlands puts it, "The baseline craft of farming, the foundation on which all rural crafts are built, is undoubtedly that of digging; understanding the soil, how it behaves, how it gives life, and the expense in energy needed to work it." Farmers had to know the health and fertility of the ground prior to planting seeds

in it. They had to study its intricacies, measure its acidity, and know the amount of humus, clay, or sand it might contain.

Farmers were also responsible for a wide variety of equipment, which – prior to the growing stringency of modern copyright laws – they repaired and maintained by themselves. They were responsible for teams of horses, which required training and care. They had to know their seeds: when they ought to be planted, how deep and how closely together, whether they would increase or draw nutrients from the ground.

And farmers did not usually plant just *one* crop in their fields. Monocropping is a rather modern invention, enabled by our use of fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides. Before such items were available, farmers used diversification, crop rotation, and grazing in order to preserve soil fertility, keep yields high, and hold weeds and pests at bay.

Langlands notes that in Exmoor, a region he has studied as an archaeologist, "A remarkable seven-course rotation seems to have promoted cycles of wheat, barlet and legumes interspersed with years of grassland pasture. In this system, if the fertility of the soil was in question, perhaps because of poor yields, a field could be reverted to grassland and grazed by livestock…in years of corn surpluses, for example, a greater number of fields could be put down to grass for grazing, and for longer periods. This would allow the farmer to build fertility for future years in what we might consider today a form of investment."

Many farmers, in our own time, are re-adopting these ancient methods of crop rotation, cover cropping, and rotational grazing – suggesting that perhaps Bloomberg is wrong in his assumption that all the changes of the past millennia are inherently good. Many in the agricultural industry are realizing that there is indeed an ancient wisdom to the practices of indigenous and peasant farmers, ancient sheepherders, and cattle grazers. They suggest that perhaps,

in our widespread embrace of technology, there are some forms of wisdom we have lost.

The skills of a farmer would take pages to write down. Their practices used to include fleecing, milking, butchering, curing, drying, swathing, pond-making, beekeeping, and horsemanship. Today's farmers must still build an enormous knowledge of horticulture, animal husbandry, meteorology, and soil science. Many of them know how to care for a cow with mastitis, how to help birth a lamb, and, yes, how to tell if hay is ready for baling simply by its "feel." Farmers in my state, which is in the arid West, must know how to irrigate, a discipline that requires intricate knowledge of the soil, evaporation levels, the technology and equipment involved, and more. They must know how to handle and maintain huge, complex pieces of equipment. They must determine what to grow in what years, and where, and how to make a profit off their crops (no mean feat in this time of trade wars and low commodity prices).

I have been interviewing farmers and writing about agriculture for nearly seven years now. Every year, I grow more intimidated by the amount of work and skill required to be a farmer. Michael Bloomberg has probably never heard of a "steckling," has no idea the work and skill required to grow a biennial crop. He has not studied the various grazing methodologies – continuous grazing, mob grazing, rotational grazing, strip grazing, creep grazing, and multi-species grazing – that farmers and ranchers debate, study, and implement.

But Bloomberg's dismissal is part and parcel of our culture's disdain for manual labor or "blue-collar work." Matthew Crawford captures this disdain well in his book *Shop Class as Soulcraft*: in the 20th century, the "intrinsic satisfactions" of various forms of manual work were "degraded by automation." Henry Ford's assembly line served to sever "the cognitive aspects of manual work from its physical execution. Such a

partition of thinking from doing has bequeathed us the dichotomy of white collar versus blue collar, corresponding to mental versus manual."

But this dichotomy falls prey to two big errors, Crawford argues: "First, it assumes that all blue-collar work is as mindless as assembly line work, and second, that white-collar work is still recognizably mental in character. Yet there is evidence to suggest that the new frontier of capitalism lies in doing to office work what was previously done to factory work: draining it of its cognitive elements. Paradoxically, educators who would steer students toward cognitively rich work might do this best by rehabilitating the manual trades, based on a firmer grasp of what such work is really like."

In our own time, Crawford writes, parents still don't want their children to become plumbers, because they still accept this dichotomy. Even though a plumber commands a good deal of knowledge and wisdom (and can charge a good deal of money) in the execution of his or her craft, he still faces a cultural condescension (as does the farmer) that we must reckon with in our time.

"Skilled manual labor entails a systematic encounter with the material world, precisely the kind of encounter that gives rise to natural science," Crawford suggests. "From its earliest practice, craft knowledge has entailed knowledge of the 'ways' of one's materials – that is, knowledge of their nature, acquired through disciplined perception."

Langlands argues similarly in his book, suggesting that our abandonment of manual, physical crafts has weakened our understanding of the world, led to a harmfully consumptive society, and cheapened the vital connection between body and mind captured so beautifully in the old-fashioned *crœfts.* "We have become detached from making, and it isn't a good state for us to be in," he argues.

According to Langlands and Crawford, having only 2 percent of the American workforce on the farm is not a net benefit of the information economy – it's a bug. It signifies a loss of connection between the consumers of food and the makers of it. Only this kind of a widespread disconnect could lead a politician like Bloomberg to display such complete ignorance of both the ancient and modern workings of the farm. Our understanding of intellect and knowledge was once a deeply embodied thing, a principle that was not just tied to a computer or code, but to the very pragmatic workings of wood species and soil types, "the right angle, the plumb, and the level," weft and warp, shoe and harness, seed and sward.

We should not view the past through the lens of snobbishness or disdain. Rather we should seek to understand and appreciate the skill and artistry of manual labor. As Crawford suggests, we should "publicly recognize a yeoman aristocracy: those who gain real knowledge of things, the sort we all depend on every day." It is this sort of humble respect for craft that undergirds a healthy society – and signals a wise politician.

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