

Working to Live

Michael and I had worked together one summer back in high school. His dad's lumber company supplied sheetrock to a drywaller. The guy offered us jobs, out of professional courtesy, I guess. He had the drywall contract for some tract homes going up at the edge of town and needed some more crews to keep up with the pace. He hired us and four other kids to train as apprentices. It would be our little contribution to urban sprawl.

Sarge, the drywaller, a barrel-chested, buzz-cut, ex-marine started us out one Monday. All six of the new kids met in a house that was going up. It was framed and the first layer of the exterior was on the outside, bricks and plaster would come later. Inside it was just bare studs, wires and plumbing, with a stack of sheetrock waiting in the garage.

We needed tools of the trade, so Sarge helped us build some saw-horses out of one-by-four that he brought. He had a power saw and staple gun. He had hammers and nail bags for each of us. "You need sheetrock hammers," he told us. "The right tool for the right job. Go to the hardware store tonight and get them for tomorrow."

Meanwhile, we were taking the pieces he cut and nailing together the saw-horses. Sarge finished the cutting and started stapling together a saw-horse with the gun, "Tat, tat, tat." His baggy, denim overalls were getting in his way so he folded the pant leg over, took the staple gun, and stapled it down his leg, "Tat, tat, tat."

"Oh my God! Did you see that?" hissed out, Robbie, one of the other newbies.

"Yes I did," replied Harley, another newbie, who had gone pale. We'd all seen it and all gone the same color as the gypsum in the sheetrock.

Let's just say all of us new kids were in awe. We weren't going to give Sarge any crap. It was about a month later that we found out Sarge had lost a leg in Korea. He had it replaced with a wooden one that seemed to work as well as the original. We couldn't tell. He got around the work site as fast as any of us. And, he had that added benefit that he could keep his pants out of his way. Very convenient.

We got the saw horses built. Now it was time to start hanging the sheetrock. We set up a few of the saw-horses in the bedroom and drug in one of the fourteen-foot pieces of sheetrock.

Sarge is giving us instructions, “All right, grab it by both edges, one on each side.”

He had three of us lined up to handle it.

“Now, tilt it up over your heads.” This part was easy. The next wasn’t so. “Up on the saw-horses.”

Michael and I were on the ends, Robbie in the middle. Michael and I made it up okay, but Robbie stumbles. His left foot doesn’t clear the top of the saw-horse and it tumbles over. He goes back to the ground. With no center support, this long piece of wallboard bows in the middle, then snaps. The change in equilibrium, and the force of gravity being what it is, we all come down, sheetrock on top.

Sarge has to turn his back, he’s laughing so hard. So are the other newbies. Eventually, Sarge gets it under control, and turns around. He must be thinking that it’s a good thing the lumber company owner has an investment in this, otherwise it could get expensive.

“Take that scrap back to the garage,” he barks, “and bring in another piece.”

We do and, this time, make it up on the saw-horses with the big sheet over our heads. Now what?

“Hold it up against the joists with your heads,” orders Sarge. Do what? It turns out that the point of the saw-horses is that they are cut just right so that you can stand on them, hold the sheetrock pinned against the joists with your head, and have two hands free to nail the sheetrock to the joists. It’s even harder than it sounds.

“Nail it,” says Sarge.

I’ve got the first part right. The sheetrock is resting, I won’t say comfortably because it hurts like hell, on top of my head, pinned by my cranium to the joists.

“Um, Sarge, I don’t have a hammer,” I say. I’d left it in the garage.

“Jesus Christ, don’t they teach you kids to think in school these days?”

Sarge puts his hammer in my outstretched hand and says, “Now nail.”

And, we let fly. There’s a lot of pounding, but not much nailing. It’s a difficult proposition, the first time pounding a nail into a ceiling, upside down

with a hundred or so pounds of gypsum weighing down on your head. It's hard to get the distance right. It's hard to make the arm move right. It's just basically hard.

We splatter thumbs against the ceiling, adding a nice red tint to the surface. We drop nails, drop hammers. We poke numberless holes in the sheet. End result, though, after maybe ten minutes effort, we can get down off our high horses, and, wondrous mystery, the board doesn't fall back on our heads.

Sarge ogles the result, honeycombed with hammer tracks, blood splattered, but more or less successful.

"That's okay," he says, "tapers got kids." Meaning, of course, that the finishing crew that comes through after the sheetrock is hung, needs work, too. If we did the job too well, there'd be nothing left for them to do and their kids would go hungry. As it is, we feed quite a few tapers' kids that day, not to mention the first few weeks of our apprenticeship.

"You three, get another sheet," Sarge says pointing at the other three newbies.

By the end of the day we're beat. I can say that Sarge is a bit frazzled as well, having to deal with ineptitude times six. He's been patient, but has to get on with his real work.

"Come here tomorrow and keep going. I'll check in on you occasionally. All six of you can keep working on this house. Eventually, you'll get the hang of it and split off into two man crews. Once you know what you're doing, two of you will be able to do a house in a day and half, two days max. Now, get out of here, and get those hammers tonight."

It ends up taking the six of us all week to finish the house. Sarge had to order another twenty sheets of wallboard for it, too. But, we start to get it. Our scalps are raw, our shoulders aching and thumbs bandaged. We're happy, though. We're getting a buck-seventy-five an hour, money in our pockets.

By the end of the summer, Michael and I feel like veteran sheetrockers. After about a month, we had switched over to piece-work, getting paid by the square-foot rather than the hour. We could punch out a house in two or three days and were making good money, five or six dollars an hour. This was a fortune to us. I bought my first car at the end of the summer.

Two of the other apprentices quit after a few weeks. Robbie and Harley stuck it out. They were our competition. We'd race to see who could finish the

houses faster. They always won. They got pretty good at it. I think they took it a little more seriously.

Harley got his girlfriend pregnant, got married and didn't go back to school in the fall. Robbie quit school, too, just because the money was so good. He and Harley were a team. For high school aged kids, they were raking it in.

Michael and I talked about it. We both decided it wasn't worth it. Walking around with calluses on our craniums and gypsum dust in our eyes just wasn't for us. There had to be something more.

At this time, as I might have mentioned, I'd been working as a bartender at O'Malley's: a few days and nights a week; the occasional Sunday; just enough to get by. I'd given up my sales job long ago because it interfered too much with the rugby life. I'd gone through construction jobs and the odd clerking job, but bartending seemed to offer the most flexible schedule and the most income for the least output, while letting me focus on my rugby obsession.

Michael T was yet in the employ of the oil conglomerate. His current position was as a sales rep. He had to make the rounds to the company gas stations and counsel the operators on selling more gas, keeping the station clean, how to price, how to wipe their asses, etc., etc., etc. Needless to say, the owner/operators didn't relish his visits. Their entrepreneurial spirit was hampered and constrained by all the control coming down from the big corporate mama. Michael T was the physical manifestation of the company and bore the brunt of the station owners frustrations at the limitations and restrictions placed on them.

"Why do I have to paint the curb? Who cares about flowers? I'm just selling gas here. And, why is the company charging me an arm and a leg for gas?" so forth, so on, ad infinitum.

By the end of the day, he'd had enough. When he'd had a bad week, you could really see it in his play. He would get more violent and aggressive. At least we had this outlet. Most people would deal with the stress by becoming alcoholics, or beating their wives, or kicking their dogs, sometimes all three. Rugby turns out to be a more or less constructive channel to let off a little steam.

Dave Sieversen, our friend Dopey, was of undetermined occupation. Like me, he was doing whatever it took to get by, while keeping time available to stay on the rugby pitch. He was from Arkansas, where he grew up on a farm. There just wasn't much farming opportunity in Houston.

So, instead, he worked odd jobs. He would do hot-shot deliveries with his little pick-up. He worked occasionally as a laborer for Geoff, doing the odd clean-up job or simple carpentry at Geoff's various job sites. He mowed lawns, too. Like I said, whatever it took to get by and leave him free to feed the rugby beast. It worked for him. I think his retirement plan was to go back to the farm in Arkansas. At least he had a plan.

That's not to say that we were all dead-beats, living hand to mouth.

Bryan Dodgen worked for an insurance company. He was making money hand over his plump, clenched fist, and supporting a family. Regardless of the seriousness of his job, he still carved out time for rugby. I often wondered what his clients thought when he showed up at a meeting, trying to land a big deal, with a black-eye or bruised face. They probably didn't think much differently than the O'Malley's customers getting a cold one from me at the bar. It's just the dollar amounts were higher.

Lug had a job working delivery for a soft-drink company. All that education and he had no ambition, at least, no ambition in the corporate world. We were all focused on our one thing, rugby. It was our driving force – our be-all, say-all, do-all; eat, drink, sleep, crap rugby. And, it was working for us. Everything else was incidental. Work was the tool that enabled our passion. We accepted the necessary evil, but didn't necessarily like it.

We used it and it used us. A symbiotic relationship that made the world go round.

There was the time that Lug blew his knee out. The game was on Saturday. He took the hit late in the second half. We helped him to the sideline and then, on with the game. After it was over, we helped him to O'Malley's. He didn't want to go to the emergency room. His company didn't give him medical insurance and he couldn't cover the costs himself right then. Money was tight.

So, we took him to O'Malley's, where he applied lots of general anesthetic and kept some ice on it. At the end of the night, we took him home.

When Sunday came around, we checked in with Lug and things weren't so good. The knee was swelling to watermelon-size and he still couldn't walk. Do

you want to go to the ER? No! Okay, on to Geoff's and more general anesthesia, more ice and maybe a little ibuprofen for good measure. Sunday evening it was clear that Lug wasn't going to be able to work.

As Gulley Jimson¹ says, "Be friends with your friends." What he's really talking about is loyalty. Take care of those close to you. So often, for the sake of propriety and old-fashioned, protestant, anglo-saxon manners, we neglect those closest to us to maintain that external visage of decency and keeping up proper appearances. In this case, even though it involved misdemeanors and maybe a few high-crimes, we were going to take care of our own. He is one of us after all. We devised a plan.

Lug's day starts at five a.m. Michael T and I came over early, picked him up at his apartment and took him to his job. It was still dark out and there was no one around as we helped him in the back door. It was early.

We took him to the office block connected to the warehouse. Inside was a long tile hall with offices on each side. I took the bottle of water we had brought and poured it out on the floor. Then, we gently laid Lug down in the puddle.

"Now get out of here," Lug told us. "I'll tell them I slipped and fell. They'll have to give me workman's comp."

And they did. I think he was off work for about six weeks. He never could have made it, financially speaking, on his own. The cost of knee surgery alone would have left him broke, not to mention living expenses while he was not working. Sometimes, the workers took a little advantage of the system. Usually, it was the other way around.

He missed the rest of the season. The next year when he came back, he had some pent up frustrations. He'd missed the weekly rugby outlet. For the first couple of months, his play was brilliant, very aggressive and very active. He worked toward balancing that inner and outer peace with life. After some time, he went back to the same old Lug – good, solid, dependable, with maybe a tad too much football mentality.

Ana worked with me at O'Malley's. I think I mentioned that she was a pre-med student, on her way to being a doctor and having a real job – a perfect

¹ Cary, Joyce. Gulley Jimson is one of the main characters in Cary's trilogy including: [The Horse's Mouth](#), [Herself Surprised](#) and [To be a Pilgrim](#).

match for the Scrum Doctor. She and Michael could practice their own forms of medicine, together. Ana had taken the bartender job so she could get her own place and have a little independence from her parents. She was focused and directed. She had her own thing.

When things got slow, we would chat, shoot the breeze about every subject under the sun, moon and stars. It always came back around to our two old saws eventually. For me, it was wishing that rugby was a professional sport. If it were, how my life would be different. How I could spend my time doing the thing I loved instead of wasting my time away in a bar, just making enough to squeak by and feed my addiction to the sport. This line of reasoning ignored the question of whether or not I could make it as a professional – it's just a fantasy! Let me get the big issue out of the way. Then, I can worry about the details.

For Ana, it was always that rugby wasn't a big enough end. There wasn't enough to it. It was just a sport.

She'd start off with something like, "You guys spend all this time on rugby, and what's it do for you? In the end, it's just wasted time. I'll admit, it's a good work out. It keeps you active and fit. But, it's just a game. A pastime. It's not a goal."

"It's all we want to do now. It fills us up. It possesses us. It consumes and focuses us on this one thing. Do you know how that feels?" I'd reply.

"Yes! I'm totally committed to my classes." And, she was. The amount of time she spent studying was superhuman. And then she had to work at O'Malley's, too, to maintain that apartment and independence. I don't know how she ever had any time left over for Michael.

She went on, "When I'm done, I'll have my M.D. I'll be a doctor. I'll be able to earn a living and contribute something back to the world."

She had a point, but I countered, "We've got goals, too. We're going for the championship. It'll be the sum-total of the effort we've put in to win it. That's something. I admit it's not feeding the starving children of Africa, or curing cancer, but it's something.

"What's wrong with a little pleasure or joy? Why can't we do something for ourselves? What's so bad about that? A championship is a thing of beauty. It's got an aesthetic all its own. It's not visual art, but it is, in its own way, art.

"And the individual parts, too. Like the lineout."

“What’s a lineout again?” she asks. She has been around rugby for a couple of years now, but hasn’t wasted a lot of brain power on it. She’s just there for Michael.

“The lineout is how you restart play after the ball goes in to touch – when it is out of bounds.

“The two packs of forwards line up perpendicular to the touch-line and one side throws the ball in. Because they know where it’s going, the side throwing in ‘help’ their jumper get up in the air, twelve, thirteen feet to receive it. He pulls the ball down from the top of its arc. Like ballet. Physical beauty.”

“Oh yeah, I remember now. I agree, but it’s still not something you can hold on to. It doesn’t benefit anyone else, like curing a sick child or designing and creating a building. Those things are tangible.”

“Are you saying that everything has to be utilitarian? That there has to be some ‘useful purpose’ to everything? If that’s true, then you’ve just wiped out the whole realm of Fine Arts.”

“I’m not saying that. Besides, you can’t put your ‘championship’ in a museum. It’s gone as soon as you win it.”

“It will never be gone as long as any of the players still live. It’ll always be in their minds and hearts, even down to their big toes. It becomes part of your fiber, your being, your soul. It’s something that can’t be taken away. Something that we achieved through our own hard work and determination. Something we created together, as a team. Something that is more than we could have done individually. Magic, really. It’d be a source of pride, a source of satisfaction and peace of mind.”

When I seemed to be gaining some advantage, she’d always come back, “What about the risk? You could always get injured or maimed. What if you couldn’t work anymore? How would you survive without income? You guys don’t have any plans for the future, any insurance. You just take it one day at a time and hope for the best.”

“Yeah. There’s a danger there. But, it’s worth the risk. If you could just feel it, inside, how complete you get. How full. Then you’d understand.

“Besides, we’re a family. We take care of each other. Look how we took care of Lug when he blew his knee out. No one’s alone on this team. We even have an extended community across ruggers everywhere. Remember that guy that hurt his neck in New York? They raised over thirty-thousand dollars to help

him. It came from ruggers all over the country. We've got a safety net."

Ana was never appeased. No matter the argument, it wasn't enough. In this case she was probably right. Thirty-thousand wasn't a lot, especially not for a life as a paraplegic. We used that kind of charity to mitigate, in our minds, the risk. She still longed for security. I think that was her reason for a career in medicine. Sure, she wanted to help people, cure the sick, etc. But, there would also always be a need for doctors. People were always going to get sick. It was a sure thing.

Then, like the proverbial moth, she was still drawn to the energy, the vibrance, the flame of Michael's life and the edge we walked. She longed for security but somehow needed to take risks, too. She did that by investing, emotionally, in Michael and our world.

After one of our discussions she was always quiet, pensive, pouting. She'd have a hint of a frown on her face and avoid me behind the bar. Logic would fail her when she tried to come to grips with the dichotomy of longing for safety and her investment in Michael and his world of rugby. Even if she thought I had won the argument, she didn't accept it. Something inside told her it was wrong. And that altered her mood.

That dark cloud cleared, though, as soon as Michael showed up. His easy smile and abundant energy lit her up, banishing the darkness. The love came out. She was back in the now.