BY DAN FOLEY CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Where have all the tradesmen gone?

A generation ago, skilled tradesmen were generally admired, and the trades were considered a noble profession. Plumbers, electricians, pipe fitters, sheet metal workers and carpenters formed the bedrock of middle-class America and created the built environment of this country.

Why are such attitudes ubiquitous within our current cultural landscape? Where does the current cultural bias come from? Is it influenced by technological advances and novel opportunities in other occupations? Or by the opinion that there is limited financial prosperity in trade work and the potential for higher wages in other fields? Is it inherent in the current educational curriculum and paradigm?

I wanted to produce a documentary that sets out to explore these questions.

After viewing the movie, each of us on the panel had an opportunity to discuss our thoughts. I discussed my own experience, graduating from college and then going into the HVAC trade. I had the good fortune to work with a skilled technician, Doug Ashwood, whom I remain in contact with to this day. Doug was a craftsman and perfectionist, and I used my intellect as much, if not more, over that first summer assisting him as I ever did in four years of college.

I quickly realized that this work was not all muscle and brawn. You needed that too, but this was a thinking man’s trade that required focus. I quickly came to appreciate the skill level and intelligence of my co-workers. They may not have gone to college, but there was no shortage of mental acumen.

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Why is this? When did society start looking down on blue collar workers? When did the trades become a path of last resort for problem students? The film does a great job exploring these questions but, like me, cannot provide
answers, only observations.

Newspaper headlines report record numbers of college graduates loaded with school loans who cannot find jobs. Just last week, USA Today predicted that student loan debt will be the next bubble crisis. It would be wise for some of this money to be directed towards the trades, helping to create a pool of skilled, employable talent. The work will never go away. Our society will always need those who can build, create and fix things we cannot do without. Clean water, heat, cooling, sanitary plumbing, hot water, etc. are not simply modern conveniences but absolute necessities. I’m sure one of the reasons for this preference of steering youth into white collar jobs is that college graduates make more money; obvious, right? Certainly not, if you are unemployed. In my market, top technicians can easily make a six-figure income, with full benefits including sick leave, vacation and medical insurance. In my own company, with the recession still lingering, right now we could employ four more skilled workers with the work we have on the books. It’s somewhat easy to find unskilled labor and helpers. But finding skilled technicians is a different story. Maybe it’s because the work is not easy. We’re outside on construction sites, not sitting at a desk in a comfortable office. Even when we are inside, it’s usually cold (or hot) because something is not working. We’ve had prospective employees show up for the first day of work and never return, not even to pick up their paycheck for the eight hours they worked. Was it too much like hard work for them?

I love this trade, and I love what I do. I enjoy the satisfaction of flipping the switch after a long day of piping a boiler and watching our creation come to life. At the end of the day, my team can point to what we worked on and say, “We did that.” I would love to hear your thoughts and experiences on this topic.

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