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“Hard Work”

My friends and family were very excited the day I received an email telling me that I was accepted into the class of 2012. I was elated, too. All of the nights of studying, volunteering, and practicing were worth it. Everyone knew how difficult it was to get into Harvard, and they congratulated me on all of my **hard work**.

But that always made me feel strange, because I didn't think of that word – “work” – as being about academics or extracurriculars. Instead, I thought real work was pounding nails with my dad. He's a school teacher, who is a carpenter during the summer. For as long as I can remember, I knew how hard he had worked by seeing him come home, covered in sawdust. That was the definition of hard work to me: sweating to get a job done, not from stress, but from physical labors that you could see firsthand in a new porch, in an addition, or in a house.

When I was 13 years old, my Dad decided I was grown enough to help him. The first day that I worked with my dad, we were renovating a three hundred year old house. My job was to remove the cement and rocks that were in the cellar. I filled up buckets full of broken cement, and carried them out to the truck. This job felt gratifying, like I was doing something different than writing a paper or solving a math problem: it was real work, moving an object over a distance.

I worked with my dad for five years from eighth grade all the way through high school. Over the course of the five years that I worked with my dad, I came to doubt whether anything I did for school really counted as work. It sometimes seemed selfish to me- who was I helping by learning integrals other than myself? It was building to something, but something that I had yet to find.

I talked about this with my dad during my freshman year of college. We were in his truck, the place where somehow I always felt comfortable telling him anything. I explained how I didn't think that academics could be counted as work because there wasn't any physical labor involved, there **wasn't** a struggle to be had over the *function of mitochondria or who signed the Declaration of Independence*. There was only the pleasure of figuring out the answers to a problem set or finally finishing a paper. But then my father said something very wise to me, as he always seems to on rides or when he knows I need some of his wisdom. He told me that he had never really worked a day in his life, because he enjoyed every minute of building, of sculpting ordinary wood into a home. He took pleasure in moments when he had to solve a problem, and even greater pleasure when he saw the finished project. Building for him is a journey, and the finished product a destination.

And my dad pointed out that even though a project may take six months, he never had to wait to garner any satisfaction from it. The *journey was the real payoff* because he loved what he did. It was the small, everyday satisfaction from hammering a nail, from cutting a piece of wood, from finding a 2 by 4 without any knots in it. It was the everyday achievements that made hard work joyful.

Sometimes, when I think of how much work I have to do, usually if it's a particularly annoying paper, I try to remember to enjoy the journey. The simple challenges that I overcome are the things that make me truly happy. Getting into Harvard or finishing a house happens so rarely in life, that we must learn to appreciate the little joys, like finishing the first problem on a problem set, or putting in a perfectly level cabinet on the first try. I have realized that success shouldn't be measured only by what we accomplish, but by the fact that on the way to that accomplishment, we enjoy the work it takes to get there. And I still appreciate hammering some nails with my dad. Thank you.