

CHOP WOOD, HAUL WATER

By John Leonard

Among the many things I have learned from my old friend Tim Welsh of Notre Dame, is the concept of “Chop Wood, Haul Water.” Tim taught this to many of us during our tenure in the 70s in the environs of Syracuse University. Tim will likely humbly deflect credit to someone else, but for me, Tim is the only person I ever heard express this thought so he gets all the credit from me.

Tim tells the story from ancient and rural China, where essential elements of life involved staying warm and having water to drink, to wash, to live.

The ancient Chinese described life as consisting mainly of “chopping wood and hauling water”...activities that consumed much of their day, their seasons, their lives. Occasionally this is interspersed with something exciting like a birth, sad like a death, happy like a party, thought provoking like the story of an elder. But mostly life was “Chop Wood, Haul Water.” If you wanted to live a happy and fulfilled life, you learned to like chopping and hauling, since that is mostly what life consisted of.

The point being that today in 2012, nothing has changed.

In “real life”...we do a number of routine and mundane tasks and occasionally, it is interrupted by something very exciting, very upsetting, or “very” something. But mostly, life is about routine, mundane tasks. For the student, studying, going to practice, cleaning your room, getting an education from your parents. For the Coach, running twice daily practices, doing swim meet entries, taking out the garbage when your significant other tells you to do so, washing the car, etc. etc. etc. Routine, basic stuff. The modern equivalent in every way of “Chop Wood, Haul Water.”

Now if the ancients were ONLY happy during the births, the weddings, etc., they would have lived the vast majority of their lives in degrees of boredom and misery.

If we live only for the big swim meet, the big race, the big social life, the new car, similarly, we’ll be most of the time pretty dissatisfied with our life and “unfulfilled.”

Now ask yourself how many of us, and our children, DO feel dissatisfied and unfulfilled. Sadly, the percentage of people is pretty high. The media around us in the form of movies, TV shows, etc., show us a world that few of us ever know...constant excitement, stimulus, joy and sadness, happy romantic moments, etc. ADULTS realize this is fantasy and “life compressed” to watch only the very highest and lowest of sports. But most of life is “Chop Wood, Haul Water.”

The key to a fulfilling, compelling, meaningful life of course is to find meaning and satisfaction in the “chop wood, haul water tasks” of daily life. Love studying. Love practice. Love washing the car. Love taking out the garbage. (*ok I’m stretching it there...*)

And if we teach our children well, teach them to love Chop Wood, Haul Water as well.

My son Jackson, now a student at the University of Florida has heard me lecture on “Chop Wood, Haul Water” and it’s meaning since he was four years old. I am thrilled that he has learned it. Here is an email from Jackson to me earlier this month:

“If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heavens and earth will pause to say, here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.”

-Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

And beneath that marvelous quotation, Jackson wrote: “Funny the things you find in books that make it easier to “chop wood and haul water” when the wood is tougher to chop and the water’s heavier to haul than usual.”

Thanks Tim Welsh for a great lesson to me and to all the children we try to “Teach Well.”