

blogs. “Great point,” the fake lead might read. “For more on this issue, click here.” Some heavily trafficked blogs, such as Instapundit and Talking Points Memo, don’t allow readers to post their own responses to their sites’ articles, in part to evade the sploggers.

That represents a grave wound, since interactivity and user-generated content are key attractions of the blogosphere. But it’s not just the interminable talkers who may be affected, Mann notes. The whole promise of the emerging vision of what’s called Web 2.0 is that people in their professional and personal lives will be able to interact, share, and learn from others using new technologies on the Internet. A plague of splogs could strangle this possibility. At the moment, however, splogs are not much more than an annoyance, and one that savvy Web surfers can surely dodge.

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

In Praise of Competence

THE SOURCE: “Shop Class as Soulcraft” by Matthew B. Crawford, in *The New Atlantis*, Summer 2006.

THE 21ST-CENTURY RAT RACE requires every warm body to go to college and from there to the cubicles where workers begin their career-long glide through the supposedly crystalline air of the information economy, writes Matthew B. Crawford, a postdoctoral fellow at

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the University of Virginia. It is time to reconsider an ideal that has fallen out of favor: manual competence.

Skills that require the ability to perfect something concrete are derided as “jobs of the past.” While manufacturing jobs have flowed away from America like lava down a steep slope, manual work has not. If a deck needs to be built, or a car repaired, the Chinese are no help. They are in China. And one of the surest paths to a good living is the manual trades, although that is not the main reason to pursue them, Crawford writes. The principal reason to develop manual competence is intrinsic satisfaction.

As a teenager Crawford worked as an electrician, and after attending college he started a small firm. “In those years I never ceased to take pleasure in the moment, at the end of a job, when I would flip the switch. ‘And there was light.’ It was an experience of agency and competence. The effects of my work were visible for all to see, so my competence was real for others as well; it had a social currency. The well-founded pride of the tradesman is far from the gratuitous ‘self-esteem’ that educators would impart to students, as though by magic.”

Craftsmanship means learning to do one thing really well. It is the opposite of the modern profes-

sional’s credo, which venerates the management consultant, for example, who can swoop into different companies and whip underperforming divisions into shape. Craftsmanship means dwelling on one task for a long time to get it right. In management-speak, that culture is called “ingrown.” By contrast, the roving consultant has soaring freedom.

Yet thousands of years ago, Aristotle recognized the weaknesses of the virtual as opposed to the concrete. Lack of experience diminishes our power to take a comprehensive view of the facts, the philosopher said. Those who dwell in intimate association with nature and its phenomena are better able to lay down principles of wide and coherent usefulness.

How did it happen that manual work, given its intrinsic richness, cognitively, socially, and psychically, became so devalued? Crawford attributes the decline to “scientific management,” the discipline that arose in the last century to boost the efficiency of factories. He quotes Frederick Winslow Taylor, an early evangelist of workplace efficiency, who called for managers to gather all the knowledge possessed by workmen and then classify it and reduce it to minute rules. “All possible brain work should be removed from the shop and centered in the planning or lay-out department,” Taylor wrote. This made it possible to hire workers who were less skilled and less expensive.

With the degradation of manual labor on the factory floor, the decline accelerated. Now Crawford sees a similar trend in office work,

as more people are employed as disseminators, rather than originators, of information. The rising tide of “knowledge work,” he says, will not lift all boats. “More likely is a rising

sea of clerkdom.”

By all means, go to college, Crawford advises young people. But in the summers, and for life, many would be well advised to pursue a

manual trade. Tomorrow’s craftsman will be less damaged and quite possibly better paid than the legions of cubicle-dwelling tenders of information systems.

ARTS & LETTERS

The Limits of Architecture

THE SOURCE: “Goodbye Columbus” by Philip Nobel, in *Metropolis*, July 2006, and “Columbus Explored” by John King, in *Dwell*, July–Aug. 2006.

J. IRWIN MILLER OF CUMMINS Engine Company was a civic-minded industrialist who believed that uplifting architecture could make the world a better place. He

started in 1942 in his hometown, Columbus, Indiana, population 39,000. Over the next six decades, Columbus was transformed into an outdoor museum of Modernist design that is listed among the top six American cities in architectural distinction. Now, however, its downtown is suffering from the

same enervating forces that have killed so many small urban centers across the United States. Columbus is beginning to consider the unthinkable: Should it tear down some buildings designed by the nation’s leading architects to keep its downtown alive?

When Eliel Saarinen’s First Christian Church was commissioned in 1940, it was only the first of what would become more than 60 architecturally significant buildings in town. Saarinen’s son, Eero, returned two decades later to build



Eero Saarinen’s 1964 North Christian Church, with a soaring 192-foot spire, is one of the most distinctive and influential church buildings in America.