

Twelve Years behind the Mule

I was born at the most important sea change in history, as far as I was concerned. Just in time to have to work behind a mule right up to the day I left the farm – about a month before my father brought home his first tractor. I can see a couple of you are looking at each other and wondering, “What the devil does that have to do with Viet Nam?”

Well, when Peck asked what I was involved in back in that era, it reminded me how absolutely certain I felt in those years that whatever was coming out of my mouth was the absolute wisdom of the day. I mean, it was no big place, but I did hang around a college for some time. Long enough to convince myself I was “learned,” as we said back then. I could scoff at Schopenhauer because he stole his big ideas from Buddha. I could kick the legs out from under any attempt to compare Hitler to Genghis Khan. So in my own opinion, I was a learned man. That was many years – decades! – ago, and you would think with a head start like that, I’d be a regular rocket scientist by now. But in reality the opposite is true. All those years of walking behind a mule taught me more than all the books I ever read. Hah! I can see some of the younger crowd is having a hard time even picturing this! Well, I did plow with a mule and here is what I learned. In those days, farmers took pride in how straight a row they could plow (forget soil conservation! That wasn’t popular yet.) But a mule is a tricky instrument to operate, I can tell you, and for me the hardest part wasn’t dealing with a half ton of stubborn, or the day-long bone-wearying manhandling of the plow. You could reduce the effects of stubbornness by training your mule for the job at hand. You could reduce some of the manhandling some more by plowing with the right tool – don’t drag around a single-beam walking plow if a sweep is all you need. Of course, we’re talking about the hard kind of plowing, so you older folks remember what a moldboard looked like, and you younger folks don’t get lost in the details and miss the point.

No, the hardest part was plowing a row straight enough to satisfy my father. Here is the trick; every farmer back then learned it as a child, like I did. To plow a straight row, you pick a spot as far across the field as you can and can aim for it. A tree is good because you can keep sight of it even when you’re a lot shorter than the mule you’re following. Then you always, always, keep aiming for that tree. You can’t help but get pushed a bit one way or the other for a second or two, but you always keep your eye on that tree and keep your mule’s behind centered exactly between your eye and that tree. If you do a good enough job with that first row, then every other row can just follow it along and they all end up straight.

If another farmer comes by to visit, he knows how this is done as well, and just by sighting down the rows as he walks the edge of the field, he can see the exact spot you were aiming for on your first row. Any fool can look at the field when you’re finished and know without measuring anything whether you kept your rows straight.

You still are going to slip on a clod, or the mule is going to pull to the right or left against your advice, or you might be so intent on that tree that you plow right into a nest of ground bees – they are not your friends. But if you push past those little things and keep your eye, the mule’s behind, and that tree lined up, you’ll have a first row that will guide the rest of your rows and give you what we used to call “a pretty field.”

And that’s all anybody needs to know to be happy in his or her work. Determine what you want to accomplish. Gather the right tools. Set a goal far away enough to make petty problems fade to nothing. Yes, the work can be physically demanding, but some jobs aren’t. (Isn’t that right Parson?) Not only will you achieve that level of quality you want, but anybody can look at what you’re done and see what your guiding point was, and that you held to that line all the way to the end.

Now after your kind attention to all that, I have a little piece I wrote that was meant to put this lesson in a more compact package. So if you can bear with me just another minute, I would appreciate you all listening to these lines, and maybe talking with me about what they mean, because I would surely like to know. Here goes:

Twelve long years of walking behind a mule
Was really all the school I ever knew
Any farm boy chafing in his strictures
Yearning for wisdom beyond this furrow
Need only let his mind drift with his work
The answers all are there for the harvest.

To plow a straight row you need a target
Far away and clear enough, a north star
To reach that star you cannot look only
at your own feet or at the mule's behind.
Sure, you have to mind where you are stepping
But you must never let your gaze wander.

If every step is to your target
When you look back, your path will be perfect.