

Hacking Weeds, Waiting to Die

When hope has fled, youthful dreams turn to dust

I saw the distant figure a quarter mile away, surrounded by a haze of dust as he stooped to his work alongside the lonely gravel road. Our car drew nearer, and his scythe flashed in the morning sun with his abrupt, chopping motions.

“What’s he doing, Dad?” I asked, perplexed. The man’s farmhouse was a hundred yards past where he worked, his muscles bulging with each downward stroke of the blade. His broad-brimmed hat was discolored with sweat stains, as was his once-white shirt that clung to his back in the humid, already-hot day.

He did not look up as we drove past, slowing.

Activity does not equal productivity

“Hacking weeds,” was the terse reply. Dad braked the Ford hard, as was his custom, and slid up to the mailbox in a cloud of dust. He handed me a thin rolled-up newspaper and a few boxholders - junk mail, we call them now - so that I could place them in the battered steel box with “U.S. Mail” stenciled on the side.

I pulled the door to the box open, deposited the mail, and flipped it shut. Tires spun in the loose gravel and we were on our way to the next rural patron.

I turned and looked at Mr. A through the rear window, hacking at the forest of weeds in the ditch.

“But why is he cutting THOSE weeds?” I asked, my 11-year-old mind perplexed. I wasn’t much of a farmer, despite my upbringing, but even I recognized the weeds were not his. They were in the ditch across the road. They did not adjoin his land, and besides that, weeds in the ditch were the responsibility of the county, not the landowner.

“He has nothing else to do,” Dad replied, eyes on the road. He muscled another bundle of mail - newspapers, letters, boxholders - from the back floorboard onto the bench seat between us and loosened the leather strap that bound them up. The next mailbox on Rural Route 2 was a half mile ahead of us.

It made little sense to me. Mr. A toiled at a line of dusty weeds on a hot day, in a ditch that was not his, for a landowner who would neither know nor care, doing work that was completely without purpose. Yet at some level I understood that the repetitive hacking motion itself offered some solace of activity.

Not productivity, certainly not profitability, but activity.

An eternity of weeds

“How long will he do that?” I contemplated the half-mile line of weeds, most of them dead anyway, waiting to scratch and annoy pointlessly as he assailed them.

“As long as he feels like it,” was the answer. Dad concentrated on the road, fish-tailing around the next gravel intersection, spinning the wheel with a steering ball, gunning the V-8 as the car straightened out. Dad was never one to waste time on the mail route. This was not a pleasure drive in the country; he was perpetually on a mission.

“How long do you suppose he will feel like it?”

The Ford decelerated quickly for the next mailbox. “This one has the flag up,” Dad said. “Remove the outgoing mail and put it in that box on the floor. Then put the new mail inside.”

I did as he asked, dropping the little steel flag before he could remind me to do so. I flipped the mailbox door closed.

“He is just waiting to die,” he added, as though there had been no break in the conversation. “He’s got nothing to live for.”

I was silent for a moment. “No family?”

He shook his head, then pushed his knee against the steering wheel and used both hands to light a cigarette. He waved the match and then flipped it out the window, exhaling smoke.

“Not that anybody knows of. He never gets mail.”

We drove on, one mailbox after another, collecting a few outgoing letters, steadily working away at the bundles on the backseat.

A little after noon he dropped me at home, on the farm, and he returned to the Post Office in town to finish out his daily route.

In 1965, rural letter carriers used their own vehicles. Whether taking a passenger was strictly allowed or not I do not know, and I will not now ask. I learned to drive on Rural Route 2.

The vision of Mr. A hacking weeds on a hot day has remained with me for 60 years. The words have haunted me: “He is just waiting to die.”

Wisdom from Above

There is a verse in Proverbs that holds great wisdom and has unfortunately been misapplied frequently. “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” Proverbs 29:18.

It only says that in the King James Version. Modern translations are little more clear.

NLT When people do not accept divine guidance, they run wild.

NIV Where there is no revelation, people cast off restraint.

NAS Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained.

And as usual, the Amplified Version provides awkward clarity:

AMP Where there is no vision [no revelation of God and His word], the people are unrestrained.

The misapplication of this verse is evidenced in churches and other Christian organizations using it to justify developing a Vision Statement. Vision Statements are fine. They provide necessary guidance. The vision spoken of by the KJV, however,

is an actual vision: A dream, a prophetic utterance, a miracle. In that day, it was how God spoke to the people.

Probably more to the point for our times is the Amplified explanation: A revelation from God made through His Word, which today we know as the Bible.

No one would accuse Mr. A of lacking focus in terms of his physical activity. But his sweaty, furious attack on the weeds was as impotent as it was meaningless. In that sense, he was truly running wild, an out-of-control engine about to explode.

Rather than flailing unproductively at problems that do not need to be solved, a sound Biblical approach is to recognize what New Testament writer James calls “the wisdom that is from above”, and then constrain one’s activity to effective action.

This requires a clear focus on things that matter. I submit these are:

- Health - take care of yourself to avoid being a burden
- Wealth - manage your livelihood to see to your own needs
- Legacy - improve the lives of others by making your wisdom accessible

This is the right sort of restraint: Focused, intentional and worthwhile.