

Taking Pride in Our Work (or, Bug Season in New England)

Nonsense! Hyperbole! Yeah, right!" That's most likely what you would be saying to yourself if I tried to explain "Bug Season" in northern New England to you. While on the outside, your head might be nodding in sympathy, on the inside you would be thinking, "She's just spinning another of her preposterous tales."

I don't blame you for your unbelieving response; I find myself thinking I'm stretching credibility when I hear my voice recounting stories of an ignominious tumble down several rungs of the food chain; of tornadic, enveloping clouds of black flies that choke and blind; of seeking refuge in the lake, even though it let loose its grip on the ice only a few weeks earlier. Welcome to the North Country: where the social event of the spring is the local fire company's "Black Fly Ball" and where the sartorial preference of natives is head-to-toe netting (except, of course, at the Ball).

When we were kids, on spring weekends my family would go to, yup, you guessed it, Bug Country, to open our cottage on a lake in New Hampshire. Too young to know better (or, perhaps, to have our complaints and protestations carry any merit), my sisters and I mowed and raked the lawn, cut brush, washed windows, put the raft and canoe in the water, and helped our folks with the numerous and sundry chores required before going up to enjoy the long summer that would stretch out before us at the end of the academic year.

Back in school on the Mondays following these work weekends, we were often the targets of our classmates' stares and ridicule: Just what *were* all those red welts that traced our hairlines like bumpy red headbands? Why were we peering at the blackboard from behind eyelids puffy as rising dough? Was there some reason that we scratched incessantly, despite the *eau d'ammonia* (Grandma's remedy) we liberally doused ourselves with? How could we possibly explain to the uninitiated, our classmates, the torture of Bug Season?

This past spring, my folks asked my husband and me if we would go to the cottage and finish some carpentry they had started the prior autumn, the time of year when sensible people undertake outdoor building projects. Although my lips were shaping an agreeable "yes" and my voice betrayed my sentiments by enunciating a pleasant "of course," in all honesty, the duet of words that circled round and round in my brain and set off every alarm in my body was "Bug Season." But the articulated consent won over the inner groan.

With more than a bit of consternation, our truck was

loaded with tools, canines and canine paraphernalia, groceries, and work clothes. Our arrival dumped us into conditions that couldn't have been contrived for a more quintessential Bug Day: heavy, sultry air that defied any stirrings of a breeze; petulant, lumpy sky, just unburdened of its load of rain; and a moist warmth like a panting dog's breath. Great. Maybe we'd get enough bites while unpacking the truck to inoculate ourselves from further onslaughts. Not likely, but as Grandma used to say (when not splashing us with ammonia), "Hope springs eternal."

You'll be spared the tale of woe of the agonies we endured. Not that I can't wax pathetic, but because Nature turned a kindly cheek and the next morning ushered in strong northwest winds (read: gales), which whipped up whitecaps on the little lake, leaving a cappuccino-colored mustache of foam around its shore. A temperature in the forties with a wind chill hovering near (probably below) the freezing point was more than a fair trade, in my book, for having the hordes of little tormenters hurled away. Mosquito hat was gladly swapped for earmuffs.

So onto the task at hand. While Scott designed, measured, cut, placed, and built, I faced the Mt. Everest of plank piles—every length in it to be sanded to a furniture-quality finish. Good-naturedly, I picked up the sander and began with the 16-footers (get *those* out of the way!). By the time I finished them and started with the 12-foot boards, it had sunk in that I still had a good-sized monadnock—and a few hours' worth—of wood awaiting me, and that I could easily slide down the enthusiasm scale, down to the treads of despair and grumpiness. In an uncharacteristic flash of insight, I realized I had a conscious decision to make: I could find the task to be a chore in the pejorative sense of the word—a monotonous, tedious, odious assignment—or I could find purpose and value in my work. The latter seemed the better option, although I knew making the choice would be far easier than putting it into practice.

With every board and with each mill mark that was erased, I thought of my folks, how we were there to help them, and what a pleasure it was to have the chance to be doing so. If anyone would appreciate the extra pass of the sander or the pearly smoothness of the wood, they would. My father built the cottage—with my mother's help, of course—back in the 1950s. And my dad is a craftsman who has, recreationally, made furniture for nearly a half-century. I knew when he was

building a jelly cupboard or a hutch or a table, he didn't skimp on the minutes he spent in its preparation or finish. He took pride and pleasure in his work and great joy in the giving of his pieces (we daughters are the fortunate recipients of many of them). Ah! This was an occasion to infuse my efforts with the same thoughtfulness and care that he (or my mother, in her respective endeavors) would.

The undertaking took on a whole new life. Here I was: my beloved New Hampshire lake over my shoulder; my husband and I working side-by-side on a project; old dogs lazy and content by the kitchen woodburning stove; a respite from the bugs dealt to us; and my parents at home, eager to soon go up and see the results of our labor. How much better than that does it get? So despite arms limp as a picked buttercup out of water, a facemask clogged tighter than powder in a musket, and a top-to-bottom dusting of sawdust like powdered sugar on a cruller, not once did I adopt a just-be-done-with-it attitude. (Okay, truth be told: by the last two planks, I was thanking my lucky stars that I was down to 8-footers!)

During the sand-a-thon, I reflected back on the interview I'd read about local economies, and in particular, the section about barter. Part of what I took from that paragraph was that when we are invested in both sides of the exchange through personal relationships, the legal tender takes on more value and meaning. On this particular day, although we were assuming the porch project out of a genuine desire to be helpful and of service, it occurred to me that here was the opportunity to "pay" my mom and dad for all the years of happiness we had had at the cottage. Here was a chance to polish the silver of a currency never requested. And, lo, how I wanted to make those coins shine!

The next step in my mental meanderings led me to wonder how I can adopt this sense of commitment in all the work that I do. If I were sanding these boards for my friend, would I do so with the same care? Yes. For my neighbor? Sure. A man I know across town? Most likely. How about an anonymous person half-way around the globe? I'd like to think so, but . . . would I? Really? Would I be tempted to take a couple fewer swipes with the sander? Would my level of tolerance for mill marks increase? I didn't come to a definitive answer on that, but I hope the question will remain with me for as long as the putty we bladed into the nail holes stays put. For if we don't stop and challenge ourselves and continually ask if we're giving the very best we can—to our work and to each other—then I'm afraid the answer is evident.