

# Repairing a Nation:

How to build a DIY Culture

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04/28/2011

Not to state the painfully obvious, but we live in troubled economic times and there seems to be no clear, single solution to our financial problems. It is easy to fall into the self-perpetuating trap of being a victim: feeling helpless and without power. There are obvious mental and emotional effects on the Nation as a whole. But this problem does not belong to some esoteric entity outside our front door that we refer to as our Nation. It is *our* problem: yours and mine. The cool part is that since the problem belongs to you and I, the solution belongs to us as well.

The issue may have been created by consumers to begin with. In his essay, "The Ecological Crisis as a Crisis of Character," Wendell Berry stated it best, "That [the average citizen] is dependent upon so many specialists, the beneficiary of so much expert help, can only mean that he is a captive, a potential victim" (116). Could it be that we became dependent on Berry's specialists because we stopped being as self-sufficient as our grandparents were?

There used to be clichés which seem to have all but lost meaning in our daily language. Our grandparents whisper them in our memories of childhood. They would say things like, "good old-fashioned American know-how..." and talked about things called "block-parties." They knew all their neighbors names. These are concepts that this great Country was founded upon. One answer to our problems may be in a return to this type of co-operative living.

The idea is simple. We work together with our friends, families and neighbors to strengthen our homes, neighborhoods, communities and, ultimately, our Country - rebuilding from the ground up a strong *community-based* economy that relies on the strength of our relationships, rather than on our spending habits. We take back the power we have given to the big corporations that have become the engines of our economy. We are now in control.

So just *how* do we achieve this seemingly impossible utopian ideal? It's easy; we actively develop a Do-it-Yourself (DIY) Culture. The fact is we already live in this culture to a degree. As a whole, we already know how to do most everything: we know how to provide for every need around the house. What we don't know as individuals, we can learn from friends and neighbors, or trade skills with them.

By now, you are probably thinking that it is easy for me to say that we should just go out and do it ourselves. Obviously, I must be Mr. Fixit himself to be writing a Do-it-Yourself article. On the contrary, I'm no Mr. Fixit at all. In fact, I'm better at taking things apart than I am at putting them back together. My wife becomes nervous when I start digging around in my tool bag. With the exception of a career in Software Engineering and another as a musician, I have no formal training in cooking, construction, vehicle mechanics or anything else for that matter.

It is this lack of expertise that makes me uniquely qualified to write this article however; I have been in the position many times, where I've been forced to learn how to fix something. I'll talk about that more later on, but for now, just know that I've often found myself scratching my head, worried and wondering, "Now what?" only to find that I did, in fact, have it in me to find the necessary resolution.

Don't misunderstand. I am not suggesting that changing your own oil is going to fix America's problems. What I am suggesting is that by doing so, you will be empowering yourself: emotionally *and*

financially. If you do this and two of your friends or neighbors notice the impact and follow suit, and then two of their friends do the same and so on down the line, the result will be a phenomenal taking-back of our economic power and in turn, we will feel better about ourselves.

### **So, what is a DIY Culture?**

Before we continue, we need to answer this question. The short answer is that we are already living in one, but we want a bit more of a concise picture of what it *means* to live in a DIY Culture.

According to Dictionary.com, the word *culture* is defined as, “the behaviors and beliefs characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group.”<sup>2</sup> With this definition in mind, what we want to create is a *social group* who maintains *behaviors and beliefs* that are *characterized* by: doing their own work (or helping others) on personal projects.

Examining the question from the bottom up, we begin at home. A person who lives in a DIY Culture – referred to as a “DIYer” from here on – is a person who fears no task that may come up around the house – or performs these tasks regardless of their fear. A DIYer may change the oil in her car, upgrade the RAM in his computer or learn to make beef stew from scratch. A DIYer will learn to patch the hole in the wall that was caused by putting that new office desk together. Simply put, the DIYer does what needs to be done, rather than hiring a professional to do it.

Expanding our idea, the DIYer lives in a neighborhood which contains other DIYers. Occasionally, these neighborhood DIYers will have projects come up that cannot be done by one person, so they gather together to help one another. When they are not working on projects, because they are grateful to each other for helping freely, each DIYer may host a gathering (sometimes referred to as a barbeque), at which he or she will feed his or her fellow DIYers and engage in enjoyable social activities that can produce a sense of lasting happiness.

If we continue the expansion of our developing DIY Culture, we find that whole neighborhoods of DIYers exist all over the country. Not only do these DIYers help their neighbors, but also friends and family from other neighborhoods. Sometimes, these helpful DIYers find simple ways of doing things and post their ideas on internet forums or blogs. They want to share their knowledge, so that other DIYers from all over the country may have free access to knowledge.

This is what a DIY Culture looks like. From barn raising parties of our American ancestors to modern community gardening, it is, in essence, the cooperative spirit upon which this great country was built.

### **A DIY Culture is cost effective**

I discovered that we needed a new porch by accident. The iron railing I happened to be leaning on one day broke free from the cement-slab of the front porch. The event led to the discovery that 30 years of harsh Montana Winters had eaten away the integrity of the cement, and the whole thing needed to be replaced.

My initial idea – after talking to friends who were knowledgeable in such matters – was to patch the broken corner by straightening it out with a sledge hammer, walling it in with a wooden frame, and re-pouring cement to fill in the missing corner. After a single, gentle blow from the hammer decimated the slab as though it were a dirt clod, my initial idea was nullified.

Plan B was to build a new porch; a better porch. You might consider it a problem that at this point in my life, I had never built a porch or anything close to it, but not-surprisingly (to me anyway) the final product turned out just fine. It was sturdy (I tried jumping on it, kicking it, everything short of dynamite), bigger than the original, and more pleasant to look at than a plain slab of cement with iron railings.

The cost of materials to build my masterpiece was under \$300.00. A custom porch, built by a professional company may have cost upwards of ten times that amount.

According to data from the Department of Commerce 2007 Census, the home improvement industry alone is a multi-million dollar industry, in which Americans spent roughly \$226.4 billion in residential improvements and repairs. It does not specify (the D.O.C. could not easily pinpoint this information if it tried) how much of this is spent by DIYers or professionals (Davis, and Holland).

This means that as a Nation we spend a lot of money which directly affects this DIY Culture. It should be noted that these numbers do not include other areas of DIY possibilities: the vehicle maintenance/repair industry, food production industry, gardening industry, computer industry and anything else you can think of that you can do yourself. You quickly get the idea of the amount of money being spent in America on products and services that we spenders are capable of taking care of by ourselves - for *fractions* of the cost. That is money that could help pay off that car loan early; money that could benefit our swiftly deteriorating public education system.

### **A DIY Culture is a Happy Culture**

*The worst crime is to leave a man's hands empty.  
Men are born makers, with that primal simplicity  
In every maker since Adam. (Walcott 150)*

Perhaps on some level, the detrimental psychological and emotional impact caused by the current economic issues we face is more important than the financial impact on our home and country. The financial impact stands to intensify this state of panic and despair. In his essay *The Ecological Crisis as a Crisis of Character*, Wendell Berry seems to argue that the lack of knowledge in broad areas of household work – for example – is a cause of the current problems we face from an emotional point of view. Berry says of the person who is educated and knowledgeable in only one field - what he refers to as the specialist:

From morning to night he does not touch anything that he has produced himself, in which he can take pride. For all his leisure and recreation, he feels bad, he looks bad, he is overweight, his health is poor (116).

Every time I drive by that porch I built, I get this feeling in the pit of my gut, reminiscent of the times that Mom hung my drawings on the refrigerator door when I was but a child. It is worthy to note that at the time the whole project was more like a giant pain in my ass than it was a type of happy project I was given the opportunity to work on. I spent the few days it took me to build it in a panic fueled by self-doubt. How in the world did I think that I could possibly build a porch of all things? I was certainly not a carpenter; I built websites for crying out loud!

But with a flushed-face, a fully charged cordless drill and circular saw in hand, a pile of lumber and a plan, I went to work despite my fear of failure and the end result -with help from the friends in my networked DIY Culture - was surprisingly different than my expectations. It turned out to be a great porch! On top of that, I felt better about myself *and* my poor financial circumstances. I felt empowered.

Even though someone else now lives in that house and enjoys warm summer evenings sitting on my porch, the thought of it brings a smile to my face and the memory of a valuable lesson learned: *I am capable of learning and doing new things*. Each time I am forced into a position to learn this lesson again (which is annoyingly more often than you might expect) I reinforce that little voice that tells me that I can.

Matthew B. Crawford eloquently describes this concept in his essay, "Shop Class as Soulcraft," which was later made into a book of the same name:

The satisfactions of manifesting oneself concretely in the world through manual competence have been known to make a man quiet and easy. They seem to relieve him of the felt need to offer chattering *interpretations* of himself to vindicate his worth. He can simply point: the building stands, the car now runs, the lights are on (9).

To do my part in building our DIY Culture, I take this idea with me when I help my friends, neighbors and family. I'm no carpenter, mechanic, gardener or chef but I help others when I can and the idea of "I can" spreads like wild-fire when it is intentionally shared with others. My sense of accomplishment will infect you when we have successfully built a new porch for your front door.

With this idea in mind, let us consider one more benefit gleaned from our budding DIY Culture: shared knowledge. I can learn from your previous mistakes. By working together (two heads are better than one, right?) we will also uncover new tips and tricks to make the job easier. The idea is: by working together, we improve our individual skills and benefit each other.

It is easy to see how these concepts can spread from one person to another and another and more until a thriving DIY Culture is a part of everyone's life. It all started because you decided to learn

how to change your own oil, or because I tried my hand at making my own butter and we decided to share our newfound information with each other.

### **Where do we go from here?**

So now the task is to piece this whole concept together. Close your eyes (please wait until after reading this part, that is) and try to visualize living in this DIY Culture. What would it look like? How would it feel?

First, consider that whenever a problem occurs, fear is removed from your reaction. Whether the car breaks down, the computer is infected with a nasty virus, or you just want to attempt to make your own cheese, you no longer fumble through the yellow pages for an expert. Instead, you know what to do. And even if you don't, you still know how to handle the situation because you have a whole list of people you know would be willing to help you out or point you in the right direction. If in the end, you still decide to let a pro handle it, you can rest assured that you have made a most informed decision, without fear.

Next, since you are now fearless and in control of the solutions in your life, you are generally much happier and willing to spread that happiness. If you are happy and as a result able to help ease the burdens of those near you in your life, then that happiness is spread exponentially throughout your community and eventually throughout your Country. We as a Nation will once again understand those concepts we were taught in grade school as more than just concepts – that is to say, concepts such as “Brotherly Love” and “The Golden Rule” and so on.

Also, consider that we are all saving a little much needed money. Whether it is money we need to pay the bills or a little extra money we can finally put towards our savings, there is more of it. Let us not forget that local businesses that survive off of the Do-it-Yourselfer and compete with the Big-Box businesses will appreciate your spending money at their establishment, helping to keep their doors open another day. This is money that the professional you would otherwise hire would likely be spending at the aforementioned Big-Box Business that will survive regardless of the local economy.

So where *do* we go from here?

The answer is simple. Relax! Don't be afraid to try new things. The next time an opportunity arises for you learn something new, take it with joy and gratitude. Start a new hobby. Take up a craft. Ask your neighbor if they need a hand when you see them working on their own project. Don't be afraid to ask them to help with yours. Take pride in work well done and pat your neighbor on the back for their well-done work.

A DIYer is not defined for one area in life. Conversely, he or she is someone who does not fear the guilt and shame of ignorance; they boldly go forth in defiance of ignorance to learn, to teach and to build a DIY Culture with the very essence of the concept: they do it themselves.

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