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The Crossroad

by Dave Broche

(English 1101)

I remember driving to work that day. I was happy to have my new job at a manufacturing plant. This was a well paying job and I was very comfortable with my role there having over 25 years in manufacturing, primarily within the gear industry. I spent a lot of my time out on the shop floor talking to the machinists. Sometimes just light social conversation but usually about the job and their task at hand. They greatly appreciated that I was experienced and at times would ask for my help or advice. There were many young men and ladies just learning their chosen trade and most of my shop time was spent with them. There is a brotherhood amongst tradesmen, as we all learn from others who are more knowledgeable, and they in turn go on to teach others. I felt the most complimented when one of the older guys would ask for my help. I was well-liked, but more importantly respected. After all, I was they and they were I. This is where I belonged. I had a job to do and I mattered. Then it happened, something that would change my life, and cause me to wonder just who I was.

I had never been as surprised as I was that day. I remember being called in the Plant Manager's office thinking that he was going to give me the latest list of employees to who would be affected by our country's current economic crisis. We had gone through this exercise a few times in the past, and I had no reason to think this time was going to be any different. Of course it was though. I walked through his office door and saw the Human Resources Manager sitting in a chair across from the manager's desk. This caused me to be a bit apprehensive, but after all he was a part of this process as well. It was when the Plant Manager asked me to sit down that I knew it was different this time and a feeling of shock, jolted me. He looked like some obscene grim reaper with a conscience. He was polite and so annoyingly condescending, telling me about how valuable I was and how terrible he felt about this. I stopped hearing him as he prattled on with all of the well-rehearsed blather that is offered in an attempt to make you feel better about the situation. Lost in the shuffle of all this is the fact that a person's job is singularly the most important thing in defining who and what that person is.

Driving home that morning I thought back to how I had come to this point in my life. I was born and raised on the southwest side of Chicago. This area was well known for its role in the industrialization of America. So it was common place for local boys to gravitate to these industries after high school or college had lost their appeal. They went off to answer the siren song of quick money and a steady job. I was, of course, no exception. I was a tradesman, an integral cog in the great industrial machine. I saw in my future the reward for long years of service, the obligatory retirement luncheon complete with gold watch and grateful goodbyes. But now commercial manufacturing continues in its steady decline. The greed that fueled our economy found that it was easier and cheaper to send the work to a variety of places. In a cruel evolution that spurred both social injustice and economic suicide, companies shipped what were once American jobs and American livelihoods to all points of the globe. Greed has no conscience and our work flowed to countries like Japan, Mexico, India, Malaysia and of course the great red giant, that swallower of American Industry; China.

It was a long and dark drive home that day. I dreaded the thought that I would have to go home and tell my wife and family that I had been laid off. After 30 years of steady paychecks, I wasn't sure where the next one would come from. A strange feeling had come over me. Who am I

now? I felt loneliness creep up on me like an ever increasing shadow enveloping me. I had put everything I had into my trade. I had put my future and the future of my family in the trust of that great industrial lion, the great economic engine of manufacturing. It would take care of us. But now that great engine of manufacturing was running out of steam and, what had once been, is now changed forever. So here I am at a crossroad in my life, do I continue to move forward in an ever-shrinking manufacturing environment in search of that gold watch? Or move on and journey to another place?

It has been five months since the day the Manager asked me to sit down. It's been a difficult time, one of soul searching and self-evaluation. With the help and support of my family, I have come to realize just who I am and what I am going to do. I am a skilled tradesman and manager. I served the great machine of American industry and I was rewarded on many levels, but times have changed and I must move on. So I am going to take a turn at this crossroad. I am going back to school. I'm beginning a journey to learn a new trade and to reinvent myself. My field of study is health science. My first goal is to receive my Associate's Degree in Nursing. Will that be my last stop? I'm not exactly sure, but I have decided to trade my dream of the gold watch for that of a golden stethoscope. I am thrilled and excited as I start on this journey. I feel energized as I face the daunting task before me, but more importantly, I now know who I am.