

Just a Little Boy Mowing Yards

I had a yard-mowing “business” when I was barely able to see over the mower’s handle. My mower was not new, in fact far from it. Dad had cobbled together a motor from somewhere with a cast-metal (heavy!) deck someone had thrown away, and managed to fit a blade on it from another “junker.” The motor was actually too big (and heavy and didn’t like to start once it got hot) for the set-up, but it was what we had. Furthermore, the motor shaft, since it wasn’t made for mowing, was a little too long- which meant the cutting blade was actually right at or maybe even a little below the bottom of the mower deck. So it threw grass (and grass burrs!), rocks, and a lot of dust everywhere when revved up, which was the only speed at which it ran well. It was quite the “set-up” to say the least.

My “clients” were mostly old widows/widowers whose grown children were too busy to bothered (at least in the eyes of their parent) with the mundane task of yard-mowing. (We didn’t have “lawns” in the country). On top of that, since these widows/widowers typically didn’t have much money, they would let the “grass” (often mostly weeds) go for several weeks or even a month or so before asking Dad if I could come mow it for them. But when they finally called or sent word, he’d load my mower into the pick-up and take me over to their homes for an afternoon of hot, dusty, hard work. He’d typically drop off me and my mower with a “jug” (a re-used plastic gallon milk container) of gas and tell me, “Do the best job you can for them.” Then he’d come back to get me a few hours later, and a lot sweatier and dirtier than when he left me.

I knew better than to “charge” them any specific rate for the work. I had been (wisely and benevolently) instructed to just take whatever they offered to pay, and only to do so if they insisted on paying. Some, I’m sure like the widow of Mark 12:41-44, gave *most* if not *all* they “*had to live on.*” Understanding this, I often “bargained down” the price they suggested when the work was done. But their pride was also a factor. They didn’t want to feel like charity cases, and I didn’t want to make them feel that way... so the “negotiated” price was a delicate balancing act. Regardless of whatever money I went home with at the end of day, their yards had been transformed from a tangle mess of downed limbs and weeds and grass to something “respectable.” They were always so happy and appreciative with how “the old place” looked, that the money didn’t matter much, if at all. Sometimes, there wasn’t any- usually because Dad overruled (them, not me), and wouldn’t let them pay. But that was OK too, because from around the corner of the house or from the opened truck window, I had seen their tears of embarrassment... and gratitude.

I learned much from Dad and those experiences. Mostly, I learned what Jesus meant, “*It is more blessed to give than to receive,*” Acts 20:35. Though the *receivers* certainly considered themselves *blessed* by the simple temporary service provided, I was *blessed* with invaluable life-lessons of eternal truth. But I also learned about *compassion*, and how it enables us to treat one another with dignity and respect- both for them and their position in life generally, and for their feelings specifically. Perhaps I understand Jesus words of Matt.9:13, “*I desire compassion, and not sacrifice*” better than I would have without this experience. None (not one!) of these widows/widowers would have accepted a *sacrifice* of monetary charity from me, Dad, or anyone! But *compassionately* allowing them to “pay” for work done- even if it was what amounted to

“loose change” for most folks, allowed them a measure of pride and self-respect that was invaluable... to them and to me. And certainly, I learned the value of hard work. It was hard work fraught with many obstacles to little boy. But to me, the *value* of it was not found in the “spending money” I received, but in the outcome of the work itself. Seeing the chaos of an overgrown tangle transformed into places of clean order and modest beauty was sufficient reward, but it wasn’t the big “pay-off” for me. Instead, seeing the shame and embarrassment- both of the condition of the yard as well as the reasons for its state, converted to simple but profound joy and pride in how “good the old place looks now” was worth far more than a couple of crumbled bills or a few coins.

What should we learn from these reflections, aside from what is mentioned above?

- **That people matter.** Not just their *present condition*, but their *feelings* too, cf. John 8:1-11. Jesus was the only one truly concerned about the adulterous woman. And apparently, from not only *what* He said but also *how* He said it, her *feelings* mattered too.
- **That a little time and diligent effort, compassionately and considerately given, is worth more than money.** This is true in both directions- both for the *receiver* and the *giver*, Acts 20:35.
- **That people often can’t really help the condition they’re in.** They don’t *want* to be where/how they are, but sometimes just have no means to change it. If you can, do so... generously and without reproach, cp. Jas.1:5.
- **That *what* you do is important, but *why* and *how* you do it counts too.** Just showing up and mowing- perhaps uninvited and “because it was past needing mowing,” would have helped the yard, but may have hurt the owner, cf. Heb.12:12-13. Be sure your “assistance” is given in such a way that it “*strengthen(s) the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble.*”

It is said that we are shaped by our experiences as much if not more so than by our genetics. If this so, then I am doubly blessed- both *genetically* and *experientially*.

“What did I do with my ‘earnings’?” Well, perhaps that’s a story (and lesson) for next week... the yard needs mowing right now.

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