Natural resistance: Faith at work

by Garret Keizer in the December 13, 2000 issue

There is virtue yet in the hoe and the spade for learned as well as unlearned hands," wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson, echoing a theme that goes back at least as far as the Rule of St. Benedict. Both the 19th-century transcendentalists and the sixth-century abbot saw value in physical labor, even though and perhaps because each in his own way placed such a high value on the intangible, be it the Oversoul or the Holy Spirit. Physical labor would anchor the soaring mind; physical labor would keep both the American scholar and the monastic community self-sufficient. Not least of all, labor for all hands, learned as well as unlearned, would help to preserve that fellowship—which Emerson would have called democracy and Benedict would have called charity—that is always endangered by too strict a separation between those who write the theology of the Eucharist and those who bake the bread.

If the virtue of the spade remains at all virtuous for us in our new century, we ought to ask if it exists as anything greater than a means of exercise or an antidote to stress. I believe it does. I also believe that Benedict and Emerson would not have understood this greater virtue as readily as we might. The virtue of the spade for you and me is that it reacquaints us with *resistance* from the material world.

To work as a willful being in a material universe is to experience resistance to one's will. Gravity, spatial distance, trees across the road and large rocks under the sod all tell me, in effect, that I cannot have what I want, or at least that I cannot have it without struggle or a lapse of time. The project of industrial and technological societies is to make the mind supreme over matter, time and distance. It is perhaps simpler to express that project as a love affair with speed. The promise of speed is to give me what I want sooner by rendering whatever resists my will weaker. The ultimate aim, to quote an ancient and familiar voice, is that we might "become as gods," not so much in knowing good from evil as in being able to say, 'Let there be light," and lo and behold—point and click—light there is. And Gates saw that it was good.

The dangers of overcoming material resistance, and of replacing an actual reality that limits my options with a virtual reality in which my options become limitless, are not hard to discern. At least they ought not to be hard to discern for a Christian. For one thing, I lose a part of my created nature—namely, that part of neurological sensation that derives pleasure through the experience of opposing force. For another, as I become increasingly impatient of even the most refined forms of material resistance (does the PC ever boot up as quickly as I want it to?), do I not also become more intolerant of moral and political resistance? As I virtually "do away with" my own body, why not do away with *every body* who opposes my will? Surely the tendency to gate off communities and to isolate segments of those communities into various self-defined and self-centered "tribes" is not unrelated to our desire to abolish all resistance from the material world. *Let there be light*—let there be speed so fast it is no longer even speed, gratification practically synonymous with desire, my wish very literally your command and very instantly your compliance. Mind over matter inevitably becomes, in this new vision of Manifest Destiny, me over you, or to use Buber's language, I over It.

But there is something even more dangerous about our wish to render all resistance obsolete. The material creation itself, which Paul saw as "groaning in travail" to bring forth the new age, is now at the point of dying in childbirth. It can be healed only by a willingness to set limits to our desires, which perhaps the creation alone can teach us. The virtue of the spade is that it puts us very literally in touch with the elemental resistance of the earth. Held in our hands, it is like a classroom pointer held in God's hand, and it points to a very fundamental axiom: We are creatures, finite and mortal. We may have the will of gods, but it was the will of God also to give us the biological needs of worms and fish, even the biological need *for* worms and fish.

I have more than once been impressed by the difference between "learned and unlearned hands" in the performance of some difficult physical task. There's a car stuck in the mud, let's say, or a large stone that needs to come out of the ground or a picnic table that needs to come out of the garage loft. It is often the brainy types who rush in first, no doubt eager to show that they have muscles too, but also accustomed to a life where ideas are power and resistance is overpowered. The working guys are more cautious. They'll circle the predicament, take its measure, smoke a cigarette first. The difference is that they know matter. They know how hard it is to budge a ton and how easy it is to throw out a back. They know that "the

sky’s the limit” only for people whose heads, like their offices, are in the sky.

There is virtue in the spade, for the learned as well as unlearned hands. We should honor it and practice it; those of us who stand in pulpits should preach it. And there should be some prophetic urgency to the message. One virtue of the spade is that when you go to dig your own grave with it, as opposed to using some other more sophisticated and “user-friendly” device, every third shovelful or so the grating voice of a stone inquires, “Are you sure this is what you want to do?”