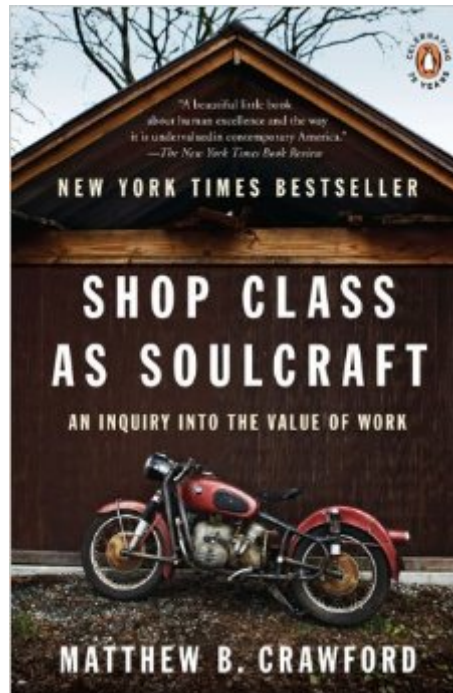


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Shop Class As Soulcraft: An Inquiry Into The Value Of Work



Synopsis

A philosopher/mechanic's wise (and sometimes funny) look at the challenges and pleasures of working with one's hands. Called "the sleeper hit of the publishing season" (The Boston Globe), Shop Class as Soulcraft became an instant bestseller, attracting readers with its radical (and timely) reappraisal of the merits of skilled manual labor. On both economic and psychological grounds, author Matthew B. Crawford questions the educational imperative of turning everyone into a "knowledge worker," based on a misguided separation of thinking from doing. Using his own experience as an electrician and mechanic, Crawford presents a wonderfully articulated call for self-reliance and a moving reflection on how we can live concretely in an ever more abstract world.

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Customer Reviews

This could easily be the most important book a parent or young adult reads this year. Matt Crawford's Shop Class as Soulcraft touched a chord with me. Both his life and his book are a rebuke to the assumptions which govern modern ideas about work, economics, self-worth, and happiness. Crawford would seem to have lived the American Dream right into his twenties. He finished his formal education (which, to judge by the breadth of references to literature and philosophy in the book, wasn't shabby) and was quickly hired by a Washington "think tank". Any young, aggressive climber would recognize this as a coveted place from which to launch of career. But where others would see a rapid ascent up the social pyramid, Crawford sensed emptiness. He left to work in a motorcycle repair shop, where he got his hands dirty, fixed bikes, and used his

brain. Where others might see "mere" manual labor, he learned the value of a tangible skill. He now shares with readers his thoughts on this value, how it is vanishing from modern society, and the implications for us as a people. Crawford traces the evolution of shop class, its intended and unintended consequences, and its subsequent rapid retreat from our schools. He lays out the historical transition from individual craftsman to interchangeable piece of a human assembly line during the industrial revolution. Much more frighteningly, he reviews how the same approach is well underway in the "white collar" information economy. Whether one has lived the absurdities of cubicle farms first hand or only through Dilbert, it is not hard to see how the modern, homogenized college prep education and liberal arts degree leaves a modern worker predisposed to try to fit as a cog in a modern information assembly line. Crawford taps a fundamental part of the psyche as he reminds us of the inherent pride in being able to say "I fix bikes" when asked what he does for a living. Does a country really need every high school student to strive to attend college? Crawford makes the case that for many this will not only be a waste of time and money, but will ultimately land them in careers in which they have trouble seeing the value of what they do. Too many will, in the words my son once used to describe my job, "type on the computer and answer the phone". This advice may be coming at a perfect time. Although he claims it is not his goal to discuss the economics of working with one's hands, Crawford still makes a compelling case. As anyone who has called tech support can vouch, it is easy to transfer information economy jobs overseas. Helping someone deal with computer software can be done from India or the Philippines, but you can't hammer a nail over the internet. Crawford builds his case with anecdote, WSJ articles, and quotes from professors of economics. We may all make jokes about droopy overalls and plumber's crack, but there's a good chance that that plumber has better job prospects than many in the graduating college class of 2009. Plumbing may not be totally recession-proof, but there will always be a demand for a person who can fix a plugged drain. Still, the best parts of the book are where Crawford talks about what working with the hands can do for a person's mind and soul. When he describes the satisfaction of hearing the roar of a motorcycle leaving his shop, knowing that it arrived in the bed of a truck, it is clearly heartfelt. His desire to share that experience with others is palpable. Well, maybe that not exactly it. More the desire to say "there is another path" to the members of our society, in particular those about to shuffle off to college because that's simple what one does after high school. To them I would say: read his book, and consider how your brain might be engaged by the thoughtful application of experience and labor in a trade. Decide if the potentially hundreds of thousands of dollars of college and years of debt really return enough value to your life to make college worthwhile. For the rest of us, now past that decision point, consider Crawford's

thoughts on freedom and specialization. Maybe it does make financial sense to contract out our projects and repairs, but does that necessarily make it wrong to try to fix things ourselves? Are we truly free if so much of the technology we depend on is beyond our ability to repair it? Perhaps Crawford has a point, that there is more to work than simple money and time. Maybe dirty hands will be good for our souls."A human being should be able to change a diaper, plan an invasion, butcher a hog, conn a ship, design a building, write a sonnet, balance accounts, build a wall, set a bone, comfort the dying, take orders, give orders, cooperate, act alone, solve equations, analyze a new problem, pitch manure, program a computer, cook a tasty meal, fight efficiently, die gallantly. Specialization is for insects."-Robert A. Heinlein

This is very nicely done. There is a dignity and elegance to hands-on work, and a pointlessness to much that's done in a cubicle these days, and the author does an impressive job of bringing both to the reader's understanding. Probably the expression in this book of what can be fulfilling about craftsmanship is unmatched. If you love working with your hands but have never put your finger (pun intended) on exactly what that magic is this book will make you smile. If you've never fixed something yourself it will have you tearing apart whatever you own that can still be serviced (probably not much) and chasing the feeling you got from reading about it. I've done a lot of mechanical work but never could have expressed its virtues the way Mr. Crawford has. Great job. There are two problems. The first is the 'Malcolm Gladwell problem'. Remember when our founding fathers published pamphlets? Let's bring that back. This first appeared as an essay and probably should have stayed as one, it's just not full length book material. The other problem is that he presents a simple truth which is only half the story. To the author, there is hand-work, in which feedback is absolute therefore the work stays meaningful, and office work, in which achievement is unnecessary and an accent on procedure over substance has ruined everything. What he's missing (and this is where some of the condescension toward craftsmanship Mr. Crawford bristles at so is actually based on a grain of truth) is that all these possibilities exist in both worlds, they're just more obvious in the hands-on. We have all gotten back a car that's still broken because a mechanic only followed the procedures in a shop manual he was ordered to follow by corporate hq. Gertrude Stein's famous term was actually borrowed from a Paris car mechanic who found the younger mechanics went through the motions but didn't understand what they were working on and so missed the nuances. He called the up-and-coming mechanics a 'lost generation'. The point is that hand workers make the mistakes and work in the ways the author treats as unique to offices. Likewise, good managers cause nebulous organizations to work better. In, say, a school, it is much

more difficult to diagnose a case of students who don't learn what they could than it is to notice a light that doesn't light. And you can bet the fix will take perception, subtlety, strength of character tempered with patience, tolerance for bureaucracy, etc. etc. yet people do this. It's just harder, that's why they fail a lot. The problem with this book seems to be that the author could not find a way to do this in his former (white collar) work life and instead moved to a world in which he could recognize faults and determine fixes. When he found this spot, life became more satisfying for him. That's wonderful, and he expresses the process and joy marvelously. But it's quite different than one world being wrong and the other right - the impression he gives.

It's hard to put into words the message I got from this book. As a college graduate with dual degrees in economics and engineering who spends most of his day in a cubicle, pushing paper and feeling my soul drain out of my body, this book put into words a lot of the feelings and internal conflicts I struggle with daily. About a year ago, I grew tired of not working with my hands and using my creativity so I enrolled in a machinist training program at a local community college to satisfy my needs. I got so much out of working with my hands, it was almost therapy for me. The author writes about how much we can gain from working with our hands, stimulating creativity, problem solving, and a real connection with a tangible result from our work. Think of how many days you've spent at the office, making conference calls, sending emails and filling out spreadsheets, only to go home and wonder "What did I really do today? What is the proof of my work today?" Reading this book puts a lot into perspective and extolls the virtue of skilled trades, and the author urges a well-deserved re-examination of the skilled trades as a rewarding career option.

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