

Home Repair

How our grandfathers knew from furnances

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During the coldest depths of the winter of 2008, my wife and I would sleep with the dog between us all night, then come downstairs in the mornings, huddled in our bathrobes and wearing two pairs of socks each, the dog trudging mopishly behind, and look at the expensive automatic thermostat that the previous owner had installed in the foyer. The digital number indicating our desired temperature always read the same: 68 degrees. But the number displaying the actual temperature was always below 68, suggesting that the furnace was unable to keep up with this stretch of frigid, near-zero nights. And every morning the actual temperature would be lower than the day before: first it was 66, then 64, and so on, until one morning Cyd and I awoke to find that our house was 58 degrees, ten degrees below where it should have been. Just as troubling, the house didn't get much warmer during the day; we would hear the furnace valiantly boiling water in the basement, and the hot-air vents around our baseboards felt warm, but the house stayed cold.

"Have an energy audit," everyone told us. So we called our local gas company, which sent out a mustachioed man with strange wands that he pointed at windows, walls, and doors to divine where cold air might be seeping in. "Not much seepage at all," he said, sounding proud of us for having such an air-tight house. He put some additional weather-stripping about the doorways, where the doors met the jambs, and recommended that we put plastic sheeting over the windows. "That should help a little," he said, "but really, it's just about as good as it gets right now." That wasn't what we wanted to hear, but I didn't tell him that; I worried that he'd be hurt if I said, "You don't get it—we're looking for an answer. We want something to be wrong, something we can spend lots of money to fix and then have our house be warm."

We bundled up for the next couple days, paid a scaldingly high gas bill, and held ourselves with a general mien of despair. We

figured that as long as the dog and our one-year-old daughter didn't mind the cold—and they didn't seem to—we could just struggle through, and pay our bills, until the thaw. We both knew that there was surely a way out, and that one of our handier, more capable neighbors would have found it by now, but we figured this was the price we had to pay for being ignorant homeowners; my wife, who had grown up in the apartment that her family has inhabited for three generations on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and who thus had no experience of the repairs or home improvement that attend three-bedroom houses, seemed to accept the cold and the escalating utility bill as a tax on her people, the Apartment-Dwelling Jews.

Not long after the gasman's visit, a neighbor stopped by to return a borrowed soup ladle. She stepped inside our front door and remarked on the cold—an impressive feat, since she was leaving a 20-degree outside to come inside. She asked what was wrong, we told her we'd done all we could, we shrugged helplessly. "But have you had an energy audit?" she asked. On being told that we had, she said, "But which kind?"

Nobody had told us that there was the regular audit and the secret extra-super-charged audit, but a week later we were standing outside as a team of men from a special, elite company that the gas company subcontracts with quarantined our house with plastic sheets and tape, like it was some kind of plague-ridden building in an epidemiological thriller. The men backed a truck up our driveway and stuck a Slinky-like rubber hose through a hole left in the front door's plastic, as if to suck out alien microbes. Then, through some process that either involved blowing the house full of air or vacuuming the air out of the house ("Will this suffocate our cats?" I wondered, a bit late in the game, as I stood outside shivering), they set out about to determine whether there really were any drafts. Their machines and seismographs would catch what the lone man with his electric wands had not.

"Not much problem," the main guy told us, as he removed his spaceman helmet. "Pretty tight house. Well built. Not much air escaping in or out." His team unsealed the house with alarming efficiency, rolled up the rubber hose, and drove off to their next job.

I plunged into an even deeper despair. My wife accepted the cold, stoically, as if it was her fate. I was the prisoner undergoing his eleventh hour of torture, and had begun to develop a masochistic taste for the suffering. Surely I deserved it.

A day or two later, as I sat hugging my dog for warmth, a thought occurred to me. "What if," I asked Cyd, "the furnace just isn't big enough? Maybe we need a new one?"

The next morning, I called Tri-City Heating and Plumbing, and that afternoon, a really nice guy named Steve showed up. He was lanky with bright red hair and a rather quiet, equipoised manner. He spoke softly and slowly, weighing his words, as if to avoid misdescribing what he saw or sacrificing the necessary nuance. He poked his head into each room, sniffed around, and then said, "Where's the basement?"

Two minutes later, Steve was back from the basement, holding in his hand what looked like a dryer filter covered with a thick coat of lint. "Here's the problem," he said, triumphantly. "When did you last change your filters?"

He might as well have asked me what breed of unicorn I prefer. "My filters?"

"Yes," he said, patiently. "Forced-air heating systems have filters, so that the air they're sending out is purified. They filter the air coming out of the furnace. You should change them at least once a year if you only have heating, twice a year if you have AC too. But it's best to change them even more often. Your filter, as you can see, is basically completely covered with lint and particles. So even though the furnace was blowing hot air at the right temperature, almost none of the air was getting through. It was getting stopped by your clogged filter. I put in a new one here, and I'll put in another one in

your attic unit that heats the upstairs. But you should go online and buy some. You can get them for a couple bucks each, but I'd recommend getting the ones that cost more like eight or nine dollars. They're better."

All the energy auditors, all the sympathetic neighbors—they had checked for everything under the cold winter sun, but none had thought to ask about my filters. They apparently had all figured that checking them was the first thing I would have done; getting an energy audit without first checking the filters was like calling a plumber without trying a plunger first. Worse—it was like calling a plumber without reaching with one's hand and removing the visible wad of toilet paper your toddler has just stuffed down the toilet. Who would do that? What kind of homeowner would be so ignorant of the basics of his property that he would waste hundreds of dollars, and subject his family to weeks in the bitter cold, all for want of a nine-dollar filter?

I am not handy. I don't know anything about home repair or maintenance, just as I know nothing about car repair or maintenance. (Is the carburetor part of the transmission? What is this "transmission" you speak of, anyway?) I don't know gardening. I have never landscaped. I can't sew, not even a button. I have never changed a tire, although I have called Triple-A. I can't make anything or fix anything. I am so not handy, I am a-handy.

Once upon a time, I didn't care. When I was a younger homeowner, unmarried and living in a condominium that was one floor of a 1890s New Haven brownstone, I took a certain pride in my dilapidated surroundings. The more small holes in the plaster, and the more uneven the paint on the ceiling, the more I felt like a struggling poet on the Left Bank, or like one of Anatole Broyard's comrades who tramp through the Village in *Kafka Was the Rage*. For a time it seemed that I was always reading books that confirmed the romance of being a poor man in the city, too immersed in his reading and writing to notice the anomie all around. Leonard Michaels's

Sylvia was in this regard particularly good for my self-fashioning, as not only the narrator's flat but also his love life was a wreck; it made me proud of all my deficits. I could cook for myself, and I swept the floors regularly—for an intellectual like me, that regimen seemed sufficient. I wouldn't have done less, but I couldn't be expected to do more.

Since that time I have acquired a wife, two daughters, and a two-story house, and while I am rather competent at taking care of the wife and daughters, I have learned nothing about attending to the house. Things come up—a plaster wall begins to buckle, a door swells and needs to be shaved so that it fits beneath the jamb—and what could cost twenty bucks in supplies from Loews and a few hours of my own labor easily balloons to a hundred, two hundred, five hundred dollars, as a professional gets called in. We've only lived in the house for four years, but already my wife and I have had about twenty visits from the handyman. There have been two handymen, in fact, first Vinnie and now Mark, and one of my elder daughter's first attempts at a full sentence was "Mark Steeves hammer! Mark Steeves hammer!"

For a time after we moved into our house, I stayed cool about my ineptitude, figuring that even as I scaled up in square footage I could stay sanguine about not knowing how anything worked. Just because I owned more joists, why should I have to learn the meaning of "joist"? But I have become increasingly aware of how handy some of my neighbors are, and—what's more—how well their handiness works for them. When I think of the men and women on my street who seem to do all their own home repair, I can't dismiss them as all brawn, no brain. The very handy across-the-street neighbor Brad is a high-school English teacher, and his very handy wife, Naomi, is a classical flutist. Jack is a high-school social-studies teacher, and his wife, Michelle, teaches third grade at the school on the corner. ("I'm working on the stairs today," Jack told me, when I was out walking the dog early one Saturday, "and Michelle is re-tiling the backsplash.") Across the street lives Bill, who for many years was a

carpenter for the Yale Repertory Theater—he’s so handy that Jack calls him with questions. Jim and Steve, a quiet, dog-owning couple who also live on our block, have gorgeous, variegated landscaping—poinsettias and marigolds, impatiens and lilacs—and a koi pond in the back yard, and Jim does all the work himself. I am surrounded on all sides by men and women, gay and straight, who build their own decks and rec rooms, solving whatever problems arise in them; garden like pros; and keep the handyman’s phone number as a last resort. I am the outlier; I am the lonely, check-writing wretch.

When I do or say something that puts my deficits on painful display—when, for example, Brad has to stop me from buying a new garden hose by explaining that fixing its leak only requires a new rubber washer, which can be had in a pack of ten for \$1.19—I imagine that people perceive this shortcoming as somehow tied to my profession, for don’t writers live inside their heads? Don’t we lack connection to the physical world? And actually a lot of us do, enough that there exists a sub-genre, the Exceptions to the Rule, writers like Wendell Berry the farmer, Thomas Lynch the undertaker, and most recently Matthew Crawford the mechanic, whose appeal rests not only on his beautiful sentences but also, as he surely would admit, on the rare, macho statement that his writing makes: I can fix a motorcycle and write beautiful sentences about it.

Had my family history been altered ever so slightly, I could have been one of those admirably capable multitaskers, crafting new pieces of furniture and then essays about them with equal aplomb. For I am not from a long line of physically ungifted men. My maternal grandfather, Walter Kirschner, was an able carpenter whose porches, decks, and family rooms still stand throughout the Olney neighborhood on the north side of Philadelphia. He was not entirely self-taught, having taken shop and mechanical drawing classes at West Chester State Teachers College (he always scoffed at its mid-1980s upgrade to West Chester University). But one imagines that he brought more to the classroom than he took away. His final

project, a butterfly-winged cherry end-table of uncommon grace and durability, is in my parents’ house to this day; it’s the work of a young man with real innate talent. By the time he took these classes, however, he was already a father—my uncle Rick had been born in April 1931, eight months after my grandfather and grandmother’s rather ... hurried marriage—and he quickly accepted a job teaching school, leaving little time for woodworking, whether for pleasure or income. The first year he taught, his subject was shop, and perhaps some mathematics (his recollections were inconsistent, or perhaps embroidered), but by his second year in the Philadelphia public schools he was a history teacher, at his alma mater, Roxborough High School.

My uncle Bob was born in 1941, and as the sole breadwinner for a wife and two sons Walter was excused from service in World War II. (Here, too, the story in later years seemed to vary. I once heard my grandfather say something about a spot on his heart, but it must have been a rather benign spot, one that he carried until his death in 2006 at the age of ninety-five.) My mother was born in 1944, and so at war’s end my grandfather had three children to support. Good thing, then, that with the return of millions of GIs there was a building boom. Needing money, still in possession of a full set of carpentry tools, my grandfather placed an advertisement in the Olney Times, announcing his availability for all kinds of small jobs. Somebody called, he drove out, made an estimate, got the job, did a good job. His reputation grew, and he worked steadily for the next forty years.

Later in his career Walter had a partner, Lou Fauzer, and occasionally they would take on another helper or two, but for the majority of his jobs he was a sole practitioner. It was an arduous life. He would leave school at 2:30, go home to his house on Gorgus Lane, change from his two-piece suit into his dungarees, get into the station wagon, be on the job by 3:15 or so, then work until 7:00, returning home for a late dinner with the family, unless the children had been too hungry to wait. Unlike some of the other dads, his brothers

and brothers-in-law, he did not give the children their baths, a typical dad ritual for the time. Exhausted, he would read a little bit of the day's *Philadelphia Inquirer*, then watch a bit of TV, especially if one of his favorites, like *The Phil Silvers Show*, was on. My mother says one of her great pleasures as a little girl was watching her father laugh uproariously at Phil Silvers. In 2003, I met Mickey Freeman, the last living member of that old *Phil Silvers* cast. He was shrunken but merry, and once I realized who he was I felt a surge of gratitude for the pleasure he'd given my grandfather, so achy and tired after a long day of sinking nails, many years before.

My grandfather worked Saturdays, too, until 1971, when he put in for retirement from the public schools. Then for ten years, the best ten years of his life, he carpentered full-time but only five days a week. His children were out of college, he had his public-school pension, and he had more contracting work than he could handle. These were the years when he and my grandmother finally did some traveling—to Europe, Israel, Mexico—although this was more to satisfy intellectual curiosity, to see those places he had read about in the newspapers and in the pages of *The Nation*, than because either of them liked being on the road. They were homebodies, well grounded in their West Mount Airy neighborhood. The travel Walter enjoyed most was motoring on a Sunday to the countryside beyond the urban sprawl, in Bucks County or in the Amish country farther out. He liked other neighborhoods, too, including the one where he did most of his carpentry. Occasionally when I was visiting he would take me on a weekend drive past a job site, explaining as he slowed the car how he was improving the house we were passing. These were modest ranch houses, maybe the occasional Dutch Colonial revival or Cape Cod, sometimes dressed up with a contrasting color of paint lining the dormers. "I'm fixing those steps," he would say, or "Around back I'm putting on a new back porch." Then we would drive off and go to a movie, followed by dinner at Wendy's or ice cream at Friendly's.

My grandfather did not talk about his work as if he were a highly

skilled craftsman. He had accomplished his best and most delicate work earlier in life, and for no money: the furniture he made for class assignments in teachers' college, some copper pitchers that he hammered, and—my favorite—two small woodcut prints on white paper, including one of Walt Whitman in profile, looking like a lion-maned satyr. Matted and framed, they now hang in my mother's dining room. My grandfather was a good artist, and he could have been great. His life story could be written as a litany of what-might-have-beens: he also had a very fine ear for music, but never learned to play an instrument. Still, I do not think he ever regretted the tradeoffs he made. He forewent art and music so that he could support a family. Having married in the depths of the Depression, he stayed married for fifty-nine years, and more if you count the devotion that lasted into his widowhood. He had three children, twelve grandchildren, and more great-grandchildren than he could count. Not so bad for the sixth of eight children born to an illiterate Jewish cobbler who never learned more English than it took to say hello to his scant customers.

My grandfather was industrious to the point of self-denial; he was incapable of spending money on himself, and he only permitted himself a nice house because he could do the work to make it so. He was not a Puritan—he loved a dirty joke—but he had a very old-fashioned, and nonnegotiable, sense of himself as a provider, and once married he would never have stepped out on my grandmother or left the family. He was not very communicative, but he was there, and he paid the bills, and he could fix any leak or mend any breach in the wall, and his family knew that they were safe.

It's common to identify these qualities of industry, abstemiousness, and grateful stoicism with men and women who were young during the Depression. But my grandfather was already out of high school by the time of Black Tuesday and his experience of the Depression was not a child's fear and bafflement but a father's sense of responsibility to do something about this mess. As a teenager he had become interested in radical politics, and now he was a new dad, still without a college diploma, unsure what the future held. He began

to read more deeply in left-wing magazines, and soon he and my grandmother were attending Communist Party meetings. During the 1950s, when some family friends lost jobs during the HUAC witch-hunts, and when a pair of FBI agents appeared at my grandparents' door one day to ask them what they knew, my terrified mother asked her mother, Rebekah, if she and Dad were Communists. "I'm not going to tell you," my grandmother said, "because then if anybody asks, you'll be able to say that you don't know."

I actually am not sure that my grandparents ever really were Communists. My grandfather was one for self-mythologizing. Also, when one stops to imagine how he and the Party would have fit together, it's tough to come up with a plausible scenario. He didn't have much patience for listening to other people talk, and he liked being the smartest, most intellectual person in the room. Could he really have sat patiently in endless meetings, listening to others debate the finer points of the Bolshevik-Menshevik split or Stalin's execution of Zinoviev? Not likely.

But whether or not he ever signed on the dotted line, I do think that aspects of the Party mentality were always discernible in my grandfather. He always prized loyalty, for example, and he did sometimes prize correct ideology ahead of truth. This blind spot had some salutary results, however. Not only was my grandfather progressive on the Negro question way back in the 1930s, because Communists were supposed to be, but he was tolerant of gays and lesbians in the 1980s, a time when most retired, heterosexual septuagenarians still considered homosexuality an unfortunate deviance, at best. It's not that he felt any kinship with the gays, any more than he would have had black friends fifty years before; it's just that he never lost the Communist habit of siding with an oppressed group. He didn't get *The Daily Worker*, and he had long dropped off of any CP mailing lists; his lefty reading consisted largely of Lewis Lapham's essays in *Harper's*. But he knew the Party sided with the little man.

He also had a Communist attitude toward manual labor, and

toward the balance in one's life between thought and labor. Although he never explained it to me this way, I have realized since his death that he must have been cognizant of how perfectly he embodied the ideal proletarian revolutionary. In fact, it's the kind of worker's well-roundedness in which he certainly took a good measure of pride. He divided his days between teaching history to working-class white kids (and trying to slip some class consciousness into his lessons) and working with his hands, building better housing for the masses. His bookshelves were stocked with old radical classics, Steinbeck and Dos Passos and Howard Fast. He was sexually continent but politically adventuresome. If the Soviet Union had been stocked with Walter Kirschners, Communism never would have fallen.

In fact, my grandfather's aestheticizing the carpenter's vocation this way, seeing it as one component of a healthy proletarian soul, would be a good explanation for how he was able to leave it behind. When he retired in the early 1980s, having been hit with an unusual spell of bad health—a heart attack followed quickly by a curable kidney cancer—he retired swiftly, un sentimentally, and for good. He sold his station wagon. He boxed up his tools and delivered them to the Boys' Club, saving for himself only a hammer, a wrench, and a set of screwdrivers. He was still in his early seventies, quickly returning to the good health he would enjoy for another twenty years; he could have become a hobbyist, made furniture, rediscovered his gift for woodcuts. He could have ceased being an artisan and become an artist. None of it interested him. He was done. It always perplexed me that he could slough off a talent like that. But if what drew him to carpentry was, in part anyway, the political statement it made as work, then perhaps it held no appeal as pastime. After all, wood-working as a hobby sounds like an activity of the leisured class, and that was not how he saw himself.

That attitude would explain, too, why he did not bother to teach his children. Uncle Rick, my mom's oldest brother, spent two summers working alongside his father, but when I asked him not

long ago about the experience he said it had been far from satisfying. “He would send me to get stuff at the hardware store, or ask me to hold his ladder steady,” Rick said. “He didn’t trust me to do any real work, and he didn’t have the patience to teach me.” Rick had an aptitude for building things, as did my mother, who almost never got to go along on jobs; Uncle Bob, the middle child, was a bookworm who had little patience for manual labor. But it hardly mattered to my grandfather, since carpentry was not a hobby to be shared with one’s children. It was work, and since Rick and Bob and Joanne would find their own work, well suited to their talents and inclinations, it was of no concern if they couldn’t use a mitre saw.

In fact, my grandfather generally held hobbies in low esteem. To him, they were no better than games, and he hated games—the only thing he wouldn’t do to please his favorite grandson was play cards. He also didn’t go to the beach, or grill meats in the back yard, or join clubs of any kind. These were all markers of middlebrow bourgeois existence. My grandfather believed in hard work, self-improvement, and the appreciation of high culture (he always had season tickets to the Philadelphia Orchestra, as well as several theater companies, and he reserved his highest esteem for the violinist Jascha Heifetz); he did not like small talk or Rotarian bonhomie or voluntary associations. He was not interested in civic improvement, or self-improvement. He was a revolutionary, but as it had turned out the revolution was not coming, so best to just keep one’s head down and do some honest work.

It would be too generous, however, to pretend that this was all personality, no persona. Like just about everybody else in the world, my grandfather styled himself. He wore clothes until they were threadbare, but he knew it: he liked looking too busy, and too indifferent to bourgeois fashion, to shop for something better. (At the same time, he very much enjoyed my grandmother’s beauty and her good taste in dresses; she was a lady, she had her hair set regularly, she wore a tasteful amount of jewelry—she was a catch.) His carpentry, too, was not just a vocation, not just a political statement, but a

form of self-presentation. At his best moments, in his Party days, he must have had a terrific self-image: In a sea of bookish wonks, many of them unathletic yeshiva bochers, he was the lone guy with real proletarian skills. His act was that he was the one who didn’t have to put on an act.

That was his way, and my grandfather never seemed bothered that he had failed to bequeath it to his descendants. Like the Yiddish language in this country, it was a one-generation thing. The carpentry, the handiness: It died with him. His children grew up to become a doctor, a lawyer, and a social worker. His grandchildren include two lawyers, a businessman, a wine merchant, a sexual-health educator, and two writers. I don’t think any of us can fix anything; if one of us can it’s kept pretty quiet. There is no family less likely to make conversation, during a bar mitzvah or a Thanksgiving dinner, about power drills or drywall.

I have to imagine that most of us have learned, as I did in the winter of my freezing-cold discontent, to wish for a little more of the old man’s skill. Being unhandy does not serve one well. One of my brothers has tried to do better. Daniel lives in Austin, Texas, where there surely is more unspoken peer pressure to know how to hang a door than there is in New Haven, Connecticut. Also, like me, he’s a husband and father without much money. So when it came time to paint the nursery, he and his wife painted. When it came time for moldings on the walls, he had a handy friend come and show him how, and they did it together. He’s trying. Meanwhile, I call the handyman, and to make myself feel better I do self-serving, exculpatory math: “This piece that I am working on instead of fixing the screen door, if I can sell it to a glossy magazine, I’ll get maybe two dollars a word, ten thousand dollars—that pays for a lot of handyman time. Even if I sell it to a literary quarterly that nobody reads, maybe that will be five hundred dollars. Why would I fix things when I can write? Division of labor! That’s the ticket. Mark Steeves is good at fixing our house. I am good at writing about why I need him to.

That works out well.”

And it does, but I am not satisfied. It's not the loss of dollars that haunts my sleep, not even the loss of dignity. It's the loss of knowledge. Like Yiddish—like communism, for that matter—handiness was powerful. A language offers a particular way to order one's thoughts; the language that the Jews brought from Eastern Europe inclined them toward a wry, wise, weary melancholy. A political ideology, too, helps construct experience, and in my grandfather's case it gave him a canon of books, and a whole world of intellectual reference points, that helped elevate his thinking above what his peasant, immigrant parents were capable of. I suppose some people hold every one-time socialist responsible for the crimes of Stalin, and in truth I'd have been pleased to hear my grandfather sound a little more regretful about the years he'd spent apologizing for the Soviet tyranny. But that's not fair, I think; the movement had given him ideas, it had given him books. That counts for more than those of us raised with literature can imagine.

More than his childhood language or his young man's revolutionary ideals, my grandfather's grown-up vocation empowered him every day with a physical, sensible pride in what he could do, and what he had done. He made things that he knew would outlive him: decks, sunrooms, screened-in porches. Writers hope to make things that last like that, but we're aware that our kind of knowledge is often perilously ephemeral. For proof, look no further than my grandfather's Yiddish, which is almost gone now, and his beloved political tracts, which championed an ideology now in disrepute; in his lifetime, my grandfather saw how quickly even the most profound and animate words can be rendered impotent, like Golem put to sleep in the attic.

But attics! My grandfather renovated quite a few of those. If he were alive he would drive by them, point from his window, and show you what a man with a little learning and a few tools can do.