

Curse of the Handyman

The other day I was listening to an older widow discuss how she would love to have a handyman around the house. How that she has a list of items that need attention. Then she mentioned how she has a friend who said that it is actually worse to be married to a handyman, because they are so busy fixing everyone else's problems that they have no time for their own. It's the old "cobbler's kids don't have shoes" scenario.

What makes a handyman handy? I would argue that it is partly willingness and part experience. The more that you try to succeed at something, the better you will eventually become. So why some willing to become "handy" and others are not willing? Why are some people very willing to fix someone else's leaky sink but has never finished installing a shower in their second bathroom?

Why do some people disguise their abilities? I have a friend who is a computer expert, but whenever someone asks for help, he tells them that he only works with Linux (a white lie).

As a kid, I was interested in electronics and electrical junk. (This was before PC's were widespread.) My mom collected stuff from rummage sales for me to salvage parts from. It was not long before the stuff piled up faster than I could tinker with it. Whenever I saw the stuff, I would feel guilt about not getting to it. Fast forward several years to early in my marriage. My wife would bring home broken dressers that might need drawers repaired or something like that. My wife's idea was that I could fix the dresser and then strip it and then she would paint it. I did a few of those projects, but they would always accumulate faster than I could get to them, with my very demanding job and all.

Perhaps some are quicker to realize that just because you 'can' do something it does not mean that you "should." When I consider the market value of my time, it makes more sense to just buy a nice basic dresser than invest several hours stripping and repairing it.

Perhaps it's more than the opportunity cost of performing certain repairs. From personal experience, I can say that problem solving and fixing things can drain one emotionally. It seems that passion is a limited resource. Is it possible that the cobbler is just so drained from his customers that the last thing that he wants to hear about the repairs needed on his kid's shoes--more problems.

So what about the handyman's unattended repairs? What about the cobbler's kids' shoes? Should their wives take those repairs to someone else? The answer is definitely "no" if it will disgrace the man. But sometimes it does make sense to "outsource" certain activities and toss out or eliminate others.

I wish I had a dollar for every time that I have heard the expression, "Hey, you're an electrical engineer, can you fix my [insert electronic gadget here]?" I used to take the challenge and spend all kinds of effort to wrestle the problem to success (or a humiliating defeat). Now I simply explain that it is just a matter of time and money. It is amazing how costs cause people to realize some activities should not be undertaken. Perhaps that is why that nowadays most consumer electronics are discarded rather than repaired.

Eliminating junk and non-essential activities can actually be quite liberating. It frees us to apply our passion and energy toward our most important tasks—the really big, ugly, hairy monsters!