

Keep Some Self-Sufficiency In Your Life

I used to dream about becoming “self-sufficient” – growing and making most everything myself. And I put in a good amount of daydreaming time and real work toward that, raising all kinds of poultry, growing a garden, reading books on farm skills.

Then I learned economics.*

I learned that specialization and division of labor have made our modern world (including hobby farming like mine) possible. When we each do something specific that we’re each in the best position to do well – instead of trying to do everything – we tend to create more things. More things means more supply, which means lower cost, which means greater access for a greater number of people.

All that being said, many of us still feel a drive to self-sufficiency. Why?

A classic Marxist critique has been that specialization “alienates” us from our labor. And to some extent, that’s true. When we are the guy in the car factory whose only job/skill is to make the screw that goes into the motor, we’re going to feel pretty disconnected from car manufacturing.** When we constantly say “that’s not my job” or “I don’t know how” or “someone else will do it” to the challenges of work or life, we start to feel powerless.

We want to *own* some work from start to finish. We want to be able to believe that we can look after ourselves, and that we aren’t dependent on the masses.

This is why many people like the idea of self-sufficient food production – they look at the massive food supply chain and feel its inherent fragility (the more complex a system, the more easily it can fall due to natural or man-made disaster) and its distance from individual human skill.

So, what to do? The answer clearly isn’t to dump the specialization which brings wealth and flourishing. It’s also not to just plug into the assembly line alone. There’s a balance which individuals can strike in their own lives to get the best of both.

Find a few areas in your life in which you will bear at least 80% of the cost, risk, and responsibility (20% of anything will almost always be other people). Maybe it’s figuring out how to write the code for the software improvement you need, instead of begging the engineering team to do it. Maybe it’s learning how to fix your car instead of asking your Dad to do it. Maybe it’s cooking your own food, instead of bringing in all your food from restaurants.

These small steps toward ownership and self-sufficiency can do wonders for your

confidence, connection, and creativity. And the self-sufficiency you practice in one area when you don't *have* to will prepare you for the self-sufficiency you may one day be required to use.

Besides that? Enjoy the fruits of specialization and trade, knowing that they are your servants and not your masters. There is value too (and this is another article) to seeing your small part in the grand scheme of things.

* OK, this wasn't really the reason I stopped hobby farming.

** The Marxist critique is to a large extent a critique (properly) of how specialization plays out in an especially regimented and uncreative society, like the one public schools prepare us for, I might add.