

AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY
DIFFERENT...

By Denise L. Palmieri

I grew up in suburban Detroit. My dad was a barber. Most of his customers were auto workers. When Detroit churned out lots of cars, the auto workers were flush and got regular haircuts. When Detroit was lean and laid off auto workers, they let their wives cut their hair or wore it longer. Our family's prosperity was intimately tied to the auto workers'.

Thousands of workers are struggling to learn new trades or relocating to another city in search of similar work, slowly realizing that they are unlikely to earn the same wages, with the same benefits, in a new career. Many resist this message and hold out hope that their industry will rebound or that somehow they will be able to keep doing the same work they've been doing – in some cases for their entire adult life.

As outsiders, it's easy for us to look at these workers and say, "Get with it. Move on. Learn a new trade and take a different job or move out of Detroit to where there's work." It's easy for us to say it; we're not them. But in many ways, we are them. Almost all of our industries are changing. Retooling is key to surviving and prospering.

After a dozen years practicing law, I left my practice, bought a motor home, and decided to travel, focusing on understanding what other people do for a living. Some of it was just plain fun, but a lot of it was my personal exploration – deciding what I would do next with my life.

I went to the local pancake supper or town meeting wherever I was and talked to the local people. I asked whoever had the most interesting job, "I'd love to see what it's like to do what you do. If I agree to come every day for a week, and do whatever you need done, will you take me on as your unpaid assistant/apprentice?" Usually, I got a yes!

The first time I tried this was with a dairy farmer who answered, "Yup. And wear yer boots!" It was a total blast. For one week, I showed up and did whatever needed to be done – hand fed the calves, milked the cows, did bookkeeping, or drove the tractor full of manure out to the compost field. I've been told that being a lawyer had prepared me well to dump a big tractor full of you-know-what somewhere!

I had several years of these interesting experiences – a potato farm in Maine, a lobster boat in Nova Scotia, a paint store in North Carolina, a catfish processing plant in Georgia, a Hobby Lobby craft store in Texas. What I learned was how important it is for everyone in this country to do the best job they can at whatever they are employed at. I also learned how undervalued many of these people and their labors are.

Coming from a purely intellectual job, where I had been highly compensated for my perceived knowledge, it was easy to fall out of touch with what makes this country run every day and to think my work was somehow more valuable or important. Without the dairy farmer, the truck driver who brought the milk to the store, the guy who stocked the cooler, the woman who ran the cash register, or the men who made and installed the checkout stand and floors, I'd be out of luck for my

breakfast cereal and milk fix. Each of them does their job with pride and skill, and our lives are the better for each of their labors.

Asking, "*What else CAN I do?*" is a step in discovering precisely how our tangible talents can be used in different ways. Use my life as an example. I could have joined another law firm, or I could have gone "in house" with a client. Or I could have taught law or written or researched. In ferreting out my talents, I discerned that I am a connector, an educator, a developer, a dream builder. Those things came from building a regional law practice over a decade, leading a team of lawyers and guiding my clients to resolutions. I am also a negotiator, a strategic thinker, a writer, a critic, a team builder, an advocate, and (ask my husband) a strong willed woman who can argue a point. I realized that building something was important to me. I get a kick out of getting things going and both thinking "big picture, long term" and implementing the small day to day minutiae. It was important that my next role had lots of people contact, a way to bring different views together, ways to help people think differently and a little bit of theatre – I liked the drama of the courtroom and the presence of being in front of people.

I spent most of the past decade as the business development manager for a national executive recruiting firm. It let me use many of my talents and helped me to develop others like learning how to be of service. Was it what I envisioned when I left my law practice over a decade ago? Nope, not even close. I was originally thinking I might run a children's bookstore or open a B&B in Italy! But I was open to opportunity.

Like a laid off auto worker, you can just comb the remaining factories hoping to find identical work in the same town at similar pay, or you can start thinking really creatively about what you are talented at and passionate about and how it could fit into a completely different industry or geography.

There is a lesson for all of us in what furloughed blue collar factory workers have known for a long time – your job isn't who you are; your job is what you do to earn money to support your family and entertain yourself. When you're pouring the Cheerios into your bowl tomorrow morning, be thankful that someone else didn't think those jobs were "beneath" them.

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