

Danville News Column  
Robert John Andrews  
“Another Fine Mess”  
Friday, 14 October, 2011  
Word Count: 750

Recovering from brain surgery since August, I haven't helped much with the household chores. Now that I've been cleared from restrictions, there's lots of work to catch up on: scraping and painting, sealing my driveway, removing air conditioners, mulching leaves.

Chores. What chores did you have to do when you were young? Did you get paid for mowing your lawn? Clearing the table? Making your bed? Or was it just because you were part of family and everybody had to pitch in. Household economics. You get bed and board; you weed and mow. Why should you expect to get paid? Yes, you are a servant. Isn't that wonderful? You should be honored you're a servant. Better than being privileged.

I'm working on a theory that those children raised to do chores do better in life than those whose parents don't make them do chores. By the way, playing sports or getting good grades don't count as chores.

Those never expected to do chores don't do as well in life. Something about pride. Something about self-respect. Something about doing something for others. Something about learning to work with others. Something about learning skills. Something about learning responsibility. Something about the joy of being useful: “Look, mom, I made my own peanut butter and jelly sandwich!” Something about an earned sense of accomplishment. Besides, how are they going to handle it when a boss tells them what to do?

Most chores are nuisances. At first blush. Chores can become fun. They can be. Raking leaves together. Shoveling snow together. Chances even, as author Gary Thorp wrote, where ordinary chores become ‘devotions.’ You transform drudgery to opportunity. Clear and clean windows let you appreciate the world outside. Dusting reminds you you're never finished, more dust always returns. Sweeping floors helps you reflect on what dirt and fuzz balls you need to sweep out of your own soul. He paraphrases a Zen master: “How can you save the world if you cannot tidy up your room?”

Your home displays who you are.

Or, at the least, chores can become occasions for us to learn something. Grandma taught me to spot the difference between a daisy and a dandelion. Dad taught us how to adjust the throttle on the lawnmower. Or those happy days helping in the kitchen taught how to make tuna casserole. Even being forced to postpone going out with friends because you had to take care of the dogs first. Then again that sideways brag when you get to tell your buddies (in that off-hand way) how your dad let you help him split logs with the axe

Chores: admittedly not always fun but useful. We can predict the future based upon the present. What happens if you skip your chores? Try it. Don't cut your lawn. Don't seal the deck. Don't check your car engine. Don't take out the garbage. Don't dust your room. Don't weed the garden.

Daily life is a daily struggle against the daily mess. We must interfere to keep things right. It sure makes more sense to keep at it daily rather than let it slide, for then you really have a mess to clean up. Easier to mow the lawn weekly than let it go until you need a John Deere harvester. Easier to bother changing the oil in the car every 3,000 miles rather than ignoring it and ending up with a grinding engine.

It takes an effort to make things right and tidy. Messes come quite naturally, whether in our houses or in our souls. Easier when we take care of the little messes before they fester and become big messes. Taking care of the worm is far easier than slaying the dragon.

I will sit down and help my son with his homework before he falls farther behind. I will not go to sleep angry with her -- we will talk now about what's damaging us. I will not get drunk today. I will avoid the little lie lest it makes it easier to tell the big lie. I will send the note of apology lest the bitterness solidify into concrete. I will make the effort in the little things, for it is the little things that matter most.

Let's face it: chores have to be done all the time. With our homes and with our souls. We're untidy and messy. We're unfinished and inadequate. We do our best to be neat and tidy but there's always another fine mess to deal with.