Finding a Way to Toil Amongst the Thorns and Thistles

When man was banished from the Garden of Eden God said:

> The ground is cursed because of you; through painful toil you will eat from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, …By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return. (Gen 3:17-19)

These words capture our lot. We must find a way to toil and work for our food, and it will be hard because our labor will include tests and trials up until our work is finished.

How do we find a way to toil? Impatiently, we put a lot of pressure on ourselves to figure this out. We each have a story with interconnecting threads where trivial decisions often have major consequences. We look ahead with rose-colored glasses or worse yet, dimly into the obscure future. There are many possible ways to toil, and we are not given a road map. During childhood, like sponges, we begin to absorb a range of possibilities through the role models in our midst. In childhood, dreams take root. Early on, we go to school, encounter possibilities, experiment, and then the sorting process unfolds.

In my small town, I encountered local businessmen. A grocer made sure the food for the community was fresh and healthy and had a special talent for cutting meat. A hardware store owner sold an assortment of tools to make work easier and allowed a 13 year old to buy a lawn mower on the installment plan. A clothier could talk your ear off while selling a first set of baby shoes, boots for the farm, or a nice Sunday suit. A linotype printer with ink stained hands, produced the weekly paper to educate the townspeople and relied on his gossipy wife to gather the latest important local news. A well-dressed lawyer helped folks with complex legal problems and imparted a fondness for baseball and the Brooklyn Dodgers. A few outstanding teachers were also excellent sports coaches. A church pastor stimulated us to good works, helping us think more of our neighbor and less about

ourselves. The bartenders, though great socializers and therapy providers, had a tough life controlling belligerent drunks. Good people toiled and contributed to the cohesive fabric of a small rural Ohio town.

My early work experiences included mowing yards, delivering newspapers and working for local farmers, "hoeing" beans, baling hay, and painting barns. The farm jobs gave me first hand experience with the thistles mentioned earlier. Those wages helped buy my first car, but more importantly I developed a standard of doing a job well, and learned what **I did not** want to do in the future.

Closer to home I had the influences of men in my family. My grandfather sold insurance with the motto, "Diller's Policies Pay" and my father was a family doctor, and these forms of toil did not interest me as a youngster. I had two great uncles with PhDs in Forestry, and enjoying the outdoors as I did, forestry and ecology had more appeal. Books like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring,* Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* and Louis Bromfield's *Pleasant Valley and Malabar Farm* replaced *Mad Magazine*. My great uncle, Oliver Diller, the forester, led the Tree Farm program in Ohio and was a consultant to Bromfield who established Malabar Woods also know as Ohio "Tree Farm #3."

Sports competed with forestry. As a young boy I spent countless hours playing basketball year round. In winter this sometimes required cleaning the snow and ice off the asphalt, and in 7th grade I began attending basketball camp at the College of Wooster, which I did for the next six summers. Wooster was where Uncle Ollie lived. A childhood dream was to play in the NBA. You can instantly recognize, looking at my height, the same as my dad and grandfather, how unrealistic this was. But at age 15 I was hoping for the same miracle my dad's youngest brother experienced – who grew way beyond 5'9" to be 6'5," and played basketball in college. And yes, he did look like his brothers!

Those early experiences of forestry and basketball are what steered me to the College of Wooster. I was recruited to play basketball, and I could explore forestry or ecology as a Biology Major. In the fall as I was readying for basketball season, I re-injured my right knee. I did not realize it until 30 years after the initial injury that I had torn my ACL and MCL. Why it took so long to figure that out is

another story, but I knew it was bad, and I had to make a decision. Did I get my knee evaluated and repaired and pursue competitive basketball, or did I stop playing and devote my time to studies and being a good student? A door was closing on a childhood dream—but I was learning to be realistic. I was yet to understand the value of a closed door, but I would discover that in time.

It was at Wooster my interest in science deepened. My first chemistry teacher, Theodore Roosevelt Williams, was inspiring, and the best classroom teacher I have ever had. I took his Chemistry 101 and 102. Dr. Williams interspersed captivating stories of the people who made important scientific discoveries in his lectures. Lord Kelvin, Niels Bohr, Ernest Rutherford, Erwin Schrodinger and Wooster's Nobel Laureate, Arthur Compton all got top billing. I was turning from a small town athlete who had never applied himself scholastically into an aspiring scholar wannabe. Reading and studying was becoming pleasure, not work. I began to appreciate and fuel one of my natural bents—a love of learning.

In that first year of biology I found molecules and cells were more fascinating than plants. My favorite courses became organic chemistry and histology. Biochemistry as a field was just emerging. A passion was taking root. At Wooster an Independent Study Thesis was required for graduation and in biology this meant beginning the scientific process: develop a research question, devise a series of experiments to test it, conduct those experiments, analyze the data and write up the results in the form of a thesis. I was interested in aging and atherosclerosis—or hardening of the arteries. Thomas Sydenham, the English Hippocrates wrote that a man is as old as his arteries. In reading I honed in on studies of the cause of arterial smooth muscle cell proliferation—one of the early events in the development of an arterial plaque. At the Case Western Reserve University medical library I read about a controversy regarding high insulin levels as a cause of arterial smooth muscle proliferation. Scientists at Aarhus University in Denmark said no, while researchers at the University of Chicago said yes. In reading their papers I noticed they used different methods to grow smooth muscle cells and to assess proliferation, and I wondered if the use of different methods led to the discrepant result. So I designed

a study to test those methods side-by-side and added a third method for comparison. Little did I know how that third method, which was then done in only 2 labs in the world, would open a door to me.

My thesis earned honors, and with a small measure of success I decided to pursue a research career. I did consider medicine, but scoring marginally on the medical school entrance exam, and realizing I still had a lot of growing up to do, confirmed my decision to pursue research.

I applied to PhD programs in Pathology at the University of Washington and the University of Chicago where they were doing similar work with arterial smooth muscle cells. I was accepted into both programs and selected Chicago—because it was my dad's alma mater for medical school and closer to home.

On my first day of graduate school the Department Advisor took me to Dr. Robert Wissler, one of the icons of Pathology who was once considered to become the head of the NIH. His lab had done the work on insulin and arterial smooth muscle cells. I presented a copy of my thesis to him, and we chatted briefly alone. We finished the conversation, he excused me and the Department Graduate Student Advisor went in and soon came out. As we left the office he said to me, "What did you say to him? He wants you in his lab. He has never done that before." Unbeknownst to me Dr. Wissler, had visited scientists in Australia where the new method for growing arterial smooth muscle cells was used, and he immediately recognized that I had used that method for my thesis work and wanted me to bring it to his lab.

It was in his lab where I first encountered a significant crop of "thorns and thistles." I tried to reproduce the seminal effect of the lab—that the bad cholesterol, LDL, taken from animals on high fat diet causes smooth muscle cell proliferation. I used a more rigorous system to test that but could not reproduce the effect. After 2 years of futility I moved to another lab, a new advisor and project that eventually ended successfully. I learned how to ask questions and a valuable approach to get at the truth. Come at a problem at least three different ways and if you get the same answer it is likely true.

I am not a researcher now, so you are probably wondering what happened? I toiled for 7 years in the lab to finish my PhD. It was like Jacob working 7 years to get Rachel, but waking up after the wedding night, and finding he was with older sister, Leah. I achieved the objective, but it was not the right work. Something was missing.

During my thesis writing months, secluded in the Crerar Library, I would take breaks and walk through the stacks of old books. One day I noticed a book called the **Principles and Practice of Medicine** by Sir William Osler published in 1892. This was *the first edition copy* Sir William had inscribed to Dr. John Shaw Billings. Billings, a civil war surgeon and University of Cincinnati College of Medicine alumnus, was the founder of the National Library of Medicine, the designer of Johns Hopkins Hospital and the New York City Library. I still remain stunned this copy was in the stacks and not under lock and key in a glass case! Next to that book was Harvey Cushing's Pulitzer Prize winning biography of Osler. I carted these books home, and in reading the Osler biography I saw the working out of a career in academic medicine and the high ideals underpinning medicine's role in the affairs of man.

Osler opened an address to nurses in 1891 with these words written by Robert Louis Stevenson (who was well acquainted with physicians having died prematurely of TB):

> *The Physician is the flower of our civilization; and when that stage of man is done with, only to be marveled at in history, he will be thought to have shared as little as any in the defects of the period, and most notably* ***exhibited the virtues*** *of the race.* ***Generosity*** *he has, such as is possible to those who practice an art, never to those who drive a trade;* ***discretion,*** *tested by a hundred secrets;* ***tact****, tried in a thousand embarrassments; and what are more important, Herculean* ***cheerfulness and courage****. So that he* ***brings air and cheer*** *into the sick room, and often enough, though not so often as he wishes, he* ***brings healing****.*

These idealized words awakened within me another deep-seated bent, a desire to help others through relationship. The idea of medicine as a noble

profession with a front row seat into the dramas and tragedies of the human experience took hold, and I decided to move from the bench toward the bedside. I saw the necessity of being a student and servant of humanity not knowing exactly where it might lead.

I retook the MCAT and did very well. I applied for advanced standing, having already taken the first two years of medical school as part of the PhD program, and got in.

Nearing completion of medical school I had to choose a specialty, but due to a payback arrangement with the years of government support for my research training, I would need stay in academia, doing research or teaching. I considered Cardiology, Endocrinology, and maybe Family Medicine.

I chose Family Medicine for two reasons. First, there is value to the health system in knowing your patients over a long period. I saw a lot of waste and inefficiency when that did not occur in medical school. Second, academic family medicine, then a young medical specialty, only 18 years old, needed researchers. When it came time to decide where to look for residencies I had a very limited list—family medicine programs in University settings that included a cholesterol clinic and research program. Once again another seemingly unrelated set of events and people directed my path.

My PhD dissertation committee included a rising OB-GYN professor, who had interviewed for the open chair at the University of Cincinnati. On that chair search committee was a man named Dr. Robert Smith, who so impressed my OB-GYN professor that when I ran into him in the hospital back in Chicago and told him I was interested in Family Medicine, he said I should look at Cincinnati because of Dr. Smith. Cincinnati had not been on my list.

I interviewed at 6 programs across the mid-west. Three programs including Cincinnati were excellent, but my wife who accompanied me interviewed pastors of potential churches in these communities, and in Cincinnati, a pastor took the time to share his lunch with her, and that is how Cincinnati became our top choice.

Looking back, my path to choose academic medicine, as a way to toil was not a straight one. My first experiences with medicine were mixed. I admired what my

father was doing and realized his place in the community, but his work style, which I did not fully understand, influenced me not to do medicine. I went to college to play basketball and become a forester, but an injury closed an outlet and shifted my attention to learning the new field of molecular biology. My college research experience opened a new career direction and led to an opportunity to join a world-class research institution. A study break as I was writing my thesis led me to a book that provided a way of seeing medicine in a different light and gain a glimpse of what an academic medical career could be. A chair search committee meeting between a potential candidate and Dr. Smith, and my wife's meeting with a local pastor directed us to Cincinnati. A journey marked by serendipity, where a series of decisions or events begun with entirely different intent, led to unplanned, plentiful opportunities.

That is how I came to be an academic family doctor at the University of Cincinnati. In my current position I practice, teach and lead and have had many more first hand experiences with the thorns and thistles of work. I have come to accept them and understand their value. Some steer us in another direction. Others require us to grow new skills. Some teach us lessons about ourselves. Through the toil amongst the thistles I have recognized and further developed specific gifts and talents—strengths if you will. I realize my current role chairing the department requires these very strengths: being a learner, enjoying intellectual work, thinking strategically, gaining satisfaction from developing and helping people, and driven by a desire to do a job well.

Work finding is both a fitting and molding that requires faith, risks, and resilience. We begin with the tasks immediately in front of us, preparing for the unseen tasks of the future. The early formative experiences that test and come to define us, if done well, open doors of future opportunity. I could not plan or see this far ahead when I got started. My vision is not that good. I still have a pair of rose-colored glasses—though I try to use them less. The future is seen dimly through hopes, and the desired clarity in understanding, finding the purpose of our work, occurs when we look backward.

In the end the attitude toward our toil makes all the difference. King Solomon contrasts two different attitudes we can choose toward our work,

> "for what does a man gain with all his work and all his effort that he labors with under the sun (and we can add, amidst the thorns and thistles)? For all his days are filled with grief, and his occupation is sorrowful, even at night, his mind does not rest. This too is futile."

But in the very next verse he offers a contrasting choice.

> "There is nothing better for man than to eat, drink and enjoy his work. I have seen that even this is from God's hand." (Ecc. 2:24).