

How Hard Can It Be?

December 16, 2002

G. Gibson Carey IV

The only thing season about this true tale of events is that it actually did happen in the season of the year – but I suppose it might have happened at any season.

There was a time, in my younger and more arrogant years, when I actually believed it was possible to “get control of my life.” And the quest for ways to do this became something of a recurring obsession. Again and again I convinced myself that if I could only gain a secret skill, or overcome an unseen failing, or organize my world a little differently, I would no longer be a plaything of the fates, but would finally achieve a measure of control of my destiny. (I have since learned, as most of us have, that this is a foolish conceit . . . but in my youth I knew no better).

There came a time when I truly thought I had finally found the solution. I had at long last discovered the sorcerer’s stone. I had penetrated the maze of complicating factors that visited so much uncontrolled chaos in my life . . . and that control was just a heartbeat away.

My reasoning on this particular occasion (there were others like it, at other times) ran along the following lines . . . All week long, as I toiled at my office, I was carefully planning how I would spend every precious moment of the coming weekend. Living on a small farm, my weekends were devoted entirely to working outdoors – good work which I genuinely looked forward to. But without exception, every task I wanted to accomplish involved an encounter with a dreaded nemesis; the gasoline engine.

Whether I intended to mow the meadow with my tractor, cut wood with my chainsaw, trim weeds with my weedeater, rototill my vegetable garden, mow the lawn, or spray apple trees, there was invariably a gasoline engine that had to cooperate . . . and they never did. Because my means were strictly limited, my equipment was all old and balky. My life was filled with engines that wouldn’t start . . . or if they did, wouldn’t stay running. In a heart-stopping moment I saw it all so clearly: if I could repair a gasoline engine, control of my life would finally be mine!

I am not mechanically gifted and had known since my youth that pistons, rings, valves, points and the like would never be my friends. And so I make a lifelong practice of avoiding them. I could barely put oil in an automobile engine. But this was foolishness, I now saw. Why couldn’t I learn the arcane secrets of the gasoline engine? Hundreds of thousands of garage mechanics – most of them high school dropouts – have done it. Why not me? I was of above average intelligence. How hard could it be?

I had this epiphany as the holiday season was approaching, and work pressure at the office was easing briefly. At just this moment there came in the mail a brochure from the Seven Oaks Vocational Schools announcing a holiday series of training programs. . .

and there among them was the very thing I wanted; Small Engine Repair 101. In a heartbeat, I reached for the phone. . .

In less than a week I found myself at the organizational session. From the very outset, I was intimidated by both my instructor and my fellow students. The instructor had a breathtakingly Dickensian name – Mr. Grindrod (I do not make this up) – and was as macho a fellow as one is likely to meet. My fellow students appeared to be master mechanics already. They all chewed tobacco, had permanent grease under their fingernails and talked in easy camaraderie of torque, displacement and the like.

These were men conceived in a junkyard and birthed in a machine shop. There was not another white collared worker in sight. Was I in the wrong classroom? Had I stumbled by mistake into an advanced refresher course for Mr. Goodwrench? No, it turned out that this really was Small Engines 101, and Mr. Grindrod's opening remarks left no doubt about it. . .

“Now, men,” he said, for so we all were – twenty of us – “Lemme tell you what we're gonna do. In three weeks ever damn one of you will take apart a Briggs and Stratton and put it back together so it runs perfect. And then we're all gonna do a Tecumseh. And then good ones of you is going to do a Clinton or a Wisconsin.” This sounded good to me: this was what I had come for!

But one point was unclear. Tentatively, I raised my hand. “Excuse me, Mr. Grindrod, but where do we get these engines to work on. Does the School provide them?” Sniggers from my fellow students. In vain I looked among them for just one sympathetic face who shared my puzzlement, and might become my friend.

“Naw,” he answered fighting back a smile at the stupidity of my question. “You get ‘em offa the junk pile out back of your shed. Bring in an ole Briggs & Stratton next week and we'll get to work.” And he meant it. Everyone else nodded: they all had old motors gathering rust in a junkpile somewhere out back. But this was going to be a problem for me: I had no junkpile to draw upon.

“And another thing,” said Mr. Grindrod. “I don't want none a you men to go out an buy a lotta fancy tools, cause you won't need ‘em. Get you a setta opened wrenches, some socket wrenches, a pair of plars and a good screw driver. That's all.” This was good news to me: these could all be found on the “specials” counter in my hardware store. Money was tight and this sounded manageable.

But finding a motor to work on was going to be a problem for me. Lacking a junkpile, I cast a thoughtful eye on each of the gasoline motors in my life. I hated them all. There was only one Briggs and Stratton, as it happens, and it was the most dependable of a bad bunch. It was on a fairly new lawn mower and it started most of the time. But I had no choice: my lawn mower motor had to be sacrificed to the cause. My best engine had to “go under the knife.” But – not to worry – it was sure to come out the other end of Small Motors 101 in better condition than it went in.

And so, the first night of school arrived: my first time in a classroom in many a year. It was a snowy December evening. I loaded the lawn mower into the trunk of my car. Almost as an afterthought, I looked around for something in which to carry my modest assortment of tools. My eye fell upon a straw basket lying neglected in a corner of the laundry room. It was left over from the previous spring's Easter egg hunt, and it seemed just the thing. It was back to school for me!

I knew I was in deep trouble the moment I pulled into the school parking lot. My fellow students were all driving vans, which they pulled up to the loading dock leading into the classroom – which was actually more of a machine shop. And from their vans they rolled out enormous tool chests: hulking grey steel twelve-drawer affairs of a kind I had seen only in Sears catalogs, containing hundreds of tools. And these they pushed into the classroom and up to their assigned workbench. And then back to their vans for their Briggs and Stratton engines. Without exception, they had all carefully mounted their rusty old engines on a wooden frame to hold them for the forthcoming disassembly. The man at the workbench next to mine had mounted his on an empty wooden dynamite crate. Nobody had told me a word about this.

And into this macho scene I made what proved to be a sensational entrance . . . pushing a yellow lawn mower with one hand and carrying in my other hand a pastel pink straw basket containing my pathetic handful of tools nestling in a bed of green plastic grass. Everyone was utterly astonished! (They are probably still talking about it). A hush fell over the room as everyone stopped and stared. They could not believe their eyes. I yearned for some witty remark to make but no words came to my rescue. Mr. Grindrod came to my bench and took it all in with silent amazement. And then he looked away: words had failed him, too. He saw trouble ahead, and so did I.

The first night's task for everyone else was to remove the head from their engine. For me, it was to remove my engine from my lawn mower.

Looking back over the years to my early schooldays, there was often one boy in the class who was hopelessly out of it . . . who never got the picture . . . who never understood anything . . . who probably had some massive learning handicap that no one recognized in those days. I remember how we made sport of him. We were not unkind – or did not think we were. We were all enjoying the obvious – that this kid simply didn't get it. Well, now I know how that boy felt. For now I sat at his desk. I was so out of my depth it was pathetic. I understood neither the questions, the answers, nor the explanations. I barely understood the language they spoke. I was instantly so far behind my classmates that it was clear to everyone that I could never catch up.

My fellow students did not know what to make of me. They were never openly discourteous, but they could not believe what they saw and heard. When they went to the bathroom they would detour past my workbench – which was nowhere near the bathroom – just to see what outrage I was visiting upon my motor, and then I could hear their guffaws as they marveled to one another in the distant men's room. And no one – not a

single one – offered the slightest sympathy or sign of friendship. I was a pariah, ostracized by monumental incompetence.

Of course, it was particularly hard for Mr. Grindrod. From the outset he saw me as one of the supreme challenges of his career. If I was to finish even my Briggs and Stratton – to say nothing of my Tecumseh and the other engines we were to do – it would take massive amounts of time and attention away from his other students.

By session four, things had grown particularly embarrassing. One by one, other students had disassembled their Briggs and Stratton, repaired whatever was amiss, put it back together, and actually started their motors up. From this side of the workshop and then from that, there would come a mighty ROARRRRRR as one more motor fired back into life, to the cheers of the assembled students. And I was still struggling through Phase 1, trying to take mine apart. Never had I known such impotence.

Appropriately enough, the final humiliation came in the final session. Sure enough, every other student had finished his Briggs and Stratton and at least one other engine while I was still struggling to reassemble my first. With only twenty-five minutes left before the entire course was over, it appeared that mine was at long last back together and ready to start. I filled it with gas and oil while Mr. Grindrod and all my classmates gathered, watching with massive pessimism, waiting to see what was going to happen. I gave it a mighty pull on the starter cord. Nothing. Not a pop. Not a fart. Not even any compression.

Mr Grindrod lost it. He was all but foaming with anger and frustration. “By God,” he raged, “Ain’t nobody has never finished his Briggs and Stratton in my course. Gimme that Goddam wrench . . .” And in less than fifteen minutes he did work that had taken me ten agonizing hours: he completely disassembled my engine, located and corrected my egregious error, put everything back together, filled it with gas, pulled the starter cord, and it started like a champ. He thrust a Certificate of Accomplishment at me, gave me a final withering look, and departed, a shaken man. I pushed my lawn mower redux out into a snowy night, loaded it in the trunk of my car, and shook the dust of that awful place from my feet forever.

And what, you ask, was the final outcome? Had I learned anything? Was I any closer to control of my life? And what about the Briggs and Stratton on my yellow lawn mower?

Well, my knowledge of small engines did increase modestly, but not enough to give me any confidence in my ability to fix one. I am today as dependent upon repair shops as ever . . . and when I find a good one, I go to extravagant lengths to maintain good relations with the proprietor. And while I came no closer to gaining control over the fates that disorder my life, I did learn the importance of currying favor with people I depend upon. And on that list, no one stands higher than my small engine repairman. So I suppose you could say I am the better for the dreadful experience.

And the yellow lawn mower? When spring came and the grass started to grow, it started on the very first pull . . . and then never ran again.
