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My Father's Grin

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My Father's Grin

Like all people who love their work, I seek to establish an integrity in it, to make what I love to do and what I have to do one and the same. And like all superstitious beings, I need amulets to add magic to what conscious effort and thought can make possible. The largest of these charms is the writing desk I carried home from Oregon, built from red madrona wood. It is the field for the other things that carry me to work:

My father's grin

On the back left corner of my desk sits a photo of my father. He stands in a small boat off Cape Cod, holding up a very small bluefish he's caught on a fly rod, his first ever. He's 72 years old and the grin under his MIT 50th Reunion hat is as goofy and beatific as a boy on his first bike. This photograph reminds me there is no more blessed attitude than that of the amateur, the person who works for love. It tells me to take on things for no other reason than love, the love of something new, the chance to try something you don't already know how to do. My father's grin reminds me that while mastery is potent, a wide and seeking love is more so. He reminds me that each task has intrinsic value, and to accept the grace in that.

My mother's quilt

On the wall in front of my desk hangs a red and white flying-geese pattern quilt my mother sewed for my wife and me. A daughter of the Depression, she still finds it difficult to believe in the abundance of this world, though all her generousities – unspoken and (by her preference) unattributed, bely that part of her history. The quilt and quilter sit with me every day to remind me that, even when I feel I have no more resources, when I feel most poor, I can always afford to give something away through my work. And that will make me better.

My grandfather's knife

In the right-hand drawer of the madrona desk sits my grandfather's pocket knife with the black bone handle and deer-horn ends. I forever see him using it to dig out the compacted roots of shrubs he's transplanting, to cut the fleshy stems of roses for grafts, or to lop a length of string to tie a bunch of newspapers. I use it in the ways he used it, and for sharpening pencils and peeling apples beside, and to remember that, with patience and effort, the most difficult work breaks down into single, simple tasks. Often it's the simple tools we require, despite what we think, or wish.

Some rocks

For paperweights, I use the rocks I've brought from places I've fished, each with a hand-painted legend telling me how I did: "Umpqua River, many shad;" "Deschutes, stuck 2 , landed 1." Aids to memory, they carry the freight of friends and rivers and time spent in the one church I recognize, the outdoors. My rocks remind me that work and leisure do not conflict but complement, and when I try to bull on through a piece instead of trying to flow with it, I don't do my best work.

A grandmother's smirk

One more photograph sits on the desk: my wife's grandmother celebrating her 93d birthday, her tongue stuck out at the camera. This woman who never dressed in a color but purple and refused the Boston Post Cane when it was offered her (not wanting to be identified as the oldest resident in town) was a devoted Red Sox fan, thus patron of lost causes. (Sadly, she died before 2004). She and her daughter-in-law's mother listened to games together in their separate houses, the party line open between them for commentary. Her presence in my work place reminds me that too much seriousness is poison, that I need to allow myself to be joyful and loose, however I can manage – I need to take chances with my dignity.

Meditating Mary

Last on the desk sits a white cast resin statue of the Virgin Mary meditating in the lotus position, the original sculpted by my friend Matt Lyon. Matt, the only Buddhist monk I've ever drunk Guinness with, died when he laid down his motorcycle in front of a car that ran a Stop sign. Knowing he would likely die, his last impulse was to keep the long line of vehicles behind him from piling up, causing more casualties than his own. Matt's Mary reminds me to surrender myself once in a while, not hold myself or my work so important it can't be sacrificed for something larger. And it tells me the intention of a prayer is far more important than the form.

David Mamet said once in an interview: "Being a writer is so ethereal that I think most of us tend to surround ourselves with tchotchkes so we can actually be sure we have a past."

"Tchotchkes" is too flippant a name for my charms – that might leach their magic – but I understand what he says. The items we travel with choose our various pasts, our presents and futures. And even when I do not see myself whole in my work, I trust my amulets to push me every day. This is what I strive for: a place where my love for the work and my need to do it are united, the place where the things that carry me abide.