



Against the Grain

The 'rule' here on 'A Story A Week' is that we talk about a family member when their birthday falls on a Sunday. (Although a couple of years back I actually missed a chance when son-in-law Ian's birthday came around on that schedule. I didn't know! His next chance comes in 2014, and I've got a string tied around my finger ...)

But I'm going to bend the rule a little bit this week, because although the birthday in question was this past Friday, and not Sunday, I simply can't pass it up. It was my turn, and I'm now 60!

I mentioned this milestone in the first story of the year back in January, where I said I would be making this a 'year of change', and regular readers know that I have indeed been trying to explore some new directions in my work. 'New directions' refers to the fact that I am now trying to work together with other people to create prints, rather than completely by myself, as I have been doing for decades. But an experience I had many years ago makes me wonder if this is really such a good idea. That sounds like a cue for a story ...

It's the mid-60s, and Dave is a high school student in a small town in Western Canada. The high school curriculum in those days had two main streams: one set of courses - the academic stream - intended for those students who expected to move on to higher education, and one - the vocational stream - for kids who would presumably be joining the 'blue-collar' workforce after leaving school. In order to assist students in finding the most suitable program, the school had a Guidance Counsellor available for consultation. This counsellor showed up one day in one of my classes, announcing that we were about to be given a series of aptitude tests. The idea was that testing us on a mix of skills and personality characteristics would perhaps provide useful information in helping us select a suitable career.

All these years later, I have no clear memory of just what the test entailed, beyond that it included page after page of multiple choice questions, many of which didn't really seem connected in any way to specific types of employment. We all dutifully filled everything in, and the papers were taken away for analysis. Some time later, the counsellor returned to the classroom, ready to discuss the results.

It seems to me that if this were taking place now, such discussions would perhaps be held one-on-one between the counsellor and the student, but that's not how it was handled back then. The 'result' of the test was simply a short list of 'recommended occupations' - determined of course by the answers we had given to the many questions, and the counsellor went round the classroom, giving each person's name, followed by the occupations. I remember none of the other students' results of course, but it must have been on the order of, "Joe Jones ... fireman, policeman. Jill Smith ... nurse, school teacher." Something like that.

I do remember my turn. And I rather suspect a number of the other students in the room that day may remember it too.

"David Bull ...

(pause)

... monk."

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Har har. It's easy to understand though, how they came up with that recommendation. For a question like, "What would be your favourite way to spend Saturday evening: a) reading a book b) partying with friends," my answer would have obviously been 'a'. I was clearly a self-contained kid, perhaps a bit anti-social. The analysis of my answers presumably led to the one 'job' in their system that involved the least human interaction.

Now this is all kind of funny, but it is of course not too far off the mark in describing the way I have actually lived for many years. I *did* move to a foreign country, isolating myself from friends; I *have* lived alone for many years; I *am* clearly bookish, and not outwardly 'social'.

But here I am now - at age 60 - initiating a new way of working; one that will mean that there will be all kinds of people coming into my home and workshop all day every day. My quiet and peaceful life will be greatly disturbed.

Am I crazy to try this? I think not. I am hoping of course, that this will be good 'medicine' as I move forward through my 60s and then into the even more scary numbers that follow, even though it does go against the grain for me to some extent.

A monk you say? OK then; it's time for me to finish writing that bible ... of printmaking!

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