

Live and Learn

By Dennis Knight

Permit me to become a little introspective. I learned a new word today, and by definition it describes me. Turns out I am an autodidact, meaning somebody whose knowledge is self-taught. How well I'm doing at it is for others to judge, but knowing I am one makes me feel right with the world, and that I learned the word in the process of being the word is especially satisfying.

It strikes me that no matter the level of formal education one achieves, a fulfilled person is one who is a lifelong learner. A doctor of philosophy at the age of seventy may find the same fascination in learning about lizards as her grandson would at the age of seven. The opportunity to be an autodidact is reserved for every person on earth.

In 1973, science fiction novelist Robert Heinlein in *Time Enough for Love* defined the essence of a lifelong learner: "A human being should be able to change a diaper, plan an invasion, butcher a hog, conn a ship, design a building, write a sonnet, balance accounts, build a wall, set a bone, comfort the dying, take orders, give orders, cooperate, act alone, solve equations, analyze a new problem, pitch manure, program a computer, cook a tasty meal, fight efficiently, die gallantly. Specialization is for insects."

I have the highest admiration for those who are formally educated in the arts as well as the sciences, and respect the work and sacrifices they have made to get there. I am not sure what it is in my own character that admires degrees when accomplished by others, but eschews the process for myself. Maybe it's a matter of impatience, laziness, lack of confidence, or a combination of all the above.

While my own resume doesn't reflect college credentials, I can hope it demonstrates a degree of learning by dint of professional and personal accomplishment. At every stage of my life I've competed, collaborated and held my own with well educated people. What could be more rewarding than that?

There is a little irony in knowing it has taken me seventy years to discover the word autodidact and yet how so closely it defines me. I'm calling myself semi-retired these days, but I do so not so much to take it easier but for time to take more in, knowing that every morning brings another day of learning. I'm sorry to leave you now, but I've got some autodidacting to do.