

July/August/September 2009

Indiana Contractor

From the Desk of the Executive Director

When Matthew Crawford finished his doctorate in political philosophy at the University of Chicago, he took a job at a Washington think tank. "I was always tired," he writes, "and honestly could not see the rationale for my being paid at all." He quit after five months and started doing motorcycle repair in a decaying factory in Richmond, Va. He chronicles his journey from philosopher to mechanic in his new book *ShopClass as Soulcraft: An Inquiry Into The Value of Work*.

As Apprenticeship schools in Indiana honored their graduates this May and June I found the tenor of the book resonated with what I witnessed.

His book is about the importance of using your hands to make and repair things. He compares the kind of life many people in developed countries lead -- inside cubicles (think of "The Office"), working on things that are several levels removed from the physical world -- to a life of skilled labor that requires ingenuity and experience, and provides the kinds of challenges that human beings were made to relish.

The 132 graduates may not realize it now but they have made a wise career choice indeed. As Crawford points out the work of the tradesman is secure; it cannot be outsourced, and it cannot be made obsolete. Such work, he says, ties us to the local communities in which we live, and instills the pride that comes from doing work that is genuinely useful.

Consider this quote from Princeton economist Alan Blinder about how the labor market of the next decades won't necessarily be divided between the highly educated and the less-educated: "The critical divide in the future may instead be between those types of work that are easily deliverable through a wire (or via wireless connections) with little or no diminution in quality and those that are not." Binder goes on to summarize his own take: "You can't hammer a nail over the Internet."

The new p-h-c graduates will discover that learning their trade is not limiting but, rather, liberating. Because they are in possession of a skill that cannot be exported overseas, or downloaded, they will stand a decent chance of finding work. That work will be challenging but meaningful and something that not everyone can do.