

Too Many Irons in the Fire?



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Be\Do\Have

I was standing at the front of the crowd, watching the blacksmith ply the old ways. He had produced everything from iron puzzles to plant hangers—and you could feel the shift through the onlookers when Melvin Allbeck said, “Next I’m going to show you what it really means to have too many irons in the fire.”

He was making nails, like George Washington would have used, out of long, square rods. He placed about four of these rods in his coal forge and cranked the bellows until the rods glowed red-hot, and hotter. We watched the amazing change as the metal heated *and then blistered*. “When the metal blisters like that,” he said, “it’s no good any more.” He then took one of the blistered rods to his anvil, struck it with his hammer, and the metal shattered into flakes and pieces.

True, it is wise to keep some irons in the fire, ready to use without wasting time. But how many irons are too many? How many ideas, projects, relationships and business deals blister and become worthless because we can’t give them the attention they require?

And worse, what if all those irons are first priority? With the daily emergencies and interruptions, you can’t remember it all, can’t shift gears fast enough and can’t focus long enough. Something has got to give.

Truth is, it took years to work ourselves into where we are today, it will take a good while to work ourselves out—if we really want to do so. Here are some lessons learned from Melvin, the blacksmith.

Invent structures for your own success. The blacksmith often has to make his own tools. He even makes tools that enable him to make other tools. Some tools that we all need are the effective use of a planning calendar, a polite way to say, “No,” and a sense of humor that lets us laugh at ourselves.

Adapt your environment. The blacksmith tended to work in a darkened location so he could judge the temperature of the metal by its color. This was critical to his success. If under Longfellow’s spreading chestnut tree you can’t see to judge the heat of your metal, move to where you can. Likewise, it is most

productive when our environments support our work and play rather than adding to our frustration and backlog.

Have the courage and persistence to change a little at a time. To form the metal of your life, you have to heat it, work it, then heat it and work it again and again. Don't leave yourself in the forge until your life blisters and flakes. Don't let the metal cool and harden until you get it like you want it.

Take time to learn your trade and know your metal —or is that *mettle*? Practice makes permanent, so develop good habits and a well-tempered strength of character. Know thyself.

Simplify. A blacksmith does not even need electricity. Everything we own also owns us. Our “things” —house, car, computer, etc.— demand our time, energy and resources. Do we really need our lives full of so many busy, demanding things?

Take care of yourself. You dip the hot metal into a *slack tub* full of water to cool it. The slack tub had healing powers from these mineral-rich metals, and when kids got poison ivy and similar ills, they would be dipped into the slack tub to help the healing. Take some slack time to cool and heal for yourself.

Get rid of the slag. When the hot metal comes out of the forge, it immediately develops a form of rust called “slag” that flakes right off when you hit it. What kind of rust and flakes do you really need to keep in your life?

Don't bicker much. A *bickern*, or stake anvil, is about the size of a big magic marker and used for detail work. When you are bickering, you are working on a very small anvil, and you are not getting much done.

Have some fun with what you do. Give a home-made nail to the folks who watched you make it, help someone every day, exaggerate greatly in fun, be creative and make some puzzles and other things that work.

I learned a lot in the hour I spent with the blacksmith. When working with red-hot metal, as with shaping our lives, sparks are bound to fly if you are going to create something worthwhile.

There are also lessons to learn about quality, integrity, enjoying the work of our own hands, mentoring, helping others and knowing when to take a break. It's easy to get out of touch when we focus too much on the bottom line. Let us be mindful of how many irons we have in the fire as we —forge ahead. And to Melvin Allbeck of Hurt, Virginia, thanks for the nail...

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