

#8

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Real object: Boots

A Fathers Example

A steady thud begins to beat against the peeling, wooden door. Once exquisite, the door now bares the signs of heavy use. Small cracks course their way through, tan paint chips at each groove and turn. The door may not be much to look at, but it is steady, firm, and unwavering, much like what is about to burst through it.

“I’m coming! I’m coming!” A voice resounds from the interior of the house. The beating slowly continues as a woman hops excitedly to answer the call. Dressed in a cactus green sweater, hopping about, my mother reminds me of a tiny grasshopper.

“Dad is home!” I think to myself. Finally my best friend, my hero, is home. In through the door he walks confidently; like a celebrity on the red carpet. With lunch-box in hand, he swings an arm around my mother, bringing her in close for a slight kiss.

“Ewww, kissing is gross” I say out loud. As the grasshopper and the celebrity continue their embrace, my attention is torn down. The leather of my father’s boot is shriveled and warped. Bits of it are withered and peeled back, revealing the metallic steel toe beneath. The yellow shoe laces, while still intact, are beginning to fray every which way. The scene appears as a sort of surgery, a surgery gone horribly wrong.

“Hey dad, your boots are pretty beat up.”

“Well, would you look at that?” comes his reply. As if he really hasn’t noticed the horrendous condition of his own boots.

“Son, always remember, you can tell a lot about a man just by looking at his boots”.

Quickly, without much thought, I look down at my own small, dangling feet. Spiderman’s gaze meets my own as my eyes rest upon my clean, surgery free, white sneakers. Two Velcro straps on each shoe keep them snug around my feet. If what my father has just told me is true, I have a long ways to go before I become a man like him.

The difference between my father’s battle-ready boots and my comfortable easy-going sneakers is not something new. “Boots protect not only the foot, but also the lower part of the leg. This distinguishing feature has been evident since the very first boot” (McDonald 7). No one really knows who owned the first pair of boots, but you can be sure whoever it was wore them for the same reason my father does now.

Early boots consisted of separate leggings, soles, and uppers worn together to provide greater ankle protection than shoes or sandals. Around 1000 B.C. these components were more permanently joined to form a single unit that covered the feet and lower leg, often up to the knee. In the 1700s, distinctive, knee-high boots worn by Hessian soldiers fighting in the American Revolutionary War influenced the development of the iconic cowboy boots worn by cattlemen in the American west (McDonald 22).

When I received my first pair of boots I was far from being a cowboy. In fact, my first pair of boots were of the working variety. They reminded me of my fathers; except they were new. Not a scratch scathed the clean tan leather. Not a single speck of dirt found its way into the tread. The perfect boots cried out my inexperience to all of those I passed by. I was eager to get out put them to good use.

Rays of golden light shimmer gently through the branches of the pine trees. Looking up, the light hugs my face, bringing sweat to my forehead.

“Everybody stop!” Rick yells, his voice demanding yet understanding. The entire troop comes to a grateful halt.

“It’s finally time for a break” I think to myself, grateful to remove the large green monster Rick calls a “pack” off of my shoulders.

“Bryant! Give me a bit of your beef jerky and I’ll give you a granola bar!”

Without turning around I know from whom the voice has come. Tom is a good friend, yet I feel he takes advantage of people sometimes, especially me.

“Tom, I didn’t pack that much jerky and you know it” I say, trying to show the same toughness as our leader Rick.

“What if it’s a *chocolate* granola bar?”

My young mind whips quickly into action. *Chocolate* is most definitely worth a bit of my precious resource. Tom isn’t trying to rip me off this time, this is a good trade.

“Yeah, ok” I say, turning to face him. With a quick toss by both of us the exchange is complete. Nibbling on a bit of jerky, I find myself a smooth, gray boulder and sit down. Daring a glance up the line of my fellow scouts, I try to make out what Rick is doing. Biceps bulging, easily visible due to a sleeveless shirt, Rick appears to be checking his military-style boots.

Before scout troop 589 ever set feet in the Wind Rivers of Wyoming, extensive planning had taken place. We had discussed not only what to pack for the trip, but even *how* to pack it. Clothing, medical supplies, and yes, boots. Boots were considered of lesser importance by most of the troop because they either had a pair of the hiking variety, or owned a pair of comfortable shoes that could handle the beating of a twenty-five mile hike. I had neither.

My father was quick to help when I went to him with my quagmire. He gave me a pair of new, still in the box, work boots. The only reason my Dad hadn't used them yet was they were a little small for him. The hiking trip would be the first time the boots had been on an adventure.

Mimicking Rick, I too look down and begin to inspect my boots. I am elated to see a thin film of brown dirt now canvases the boots.

"Now I'm becoming a man" I think to myself, happy and slightly relieved the boots don't look so new anymore.

As quickly as my thought about manhood enters my brain, it is replaced with a sharp pain coming from the heel of the left boot. Perhaps a rock entered the boot, or maybe my feet are just unaccustomed to walking so much. Reaching down, I begin to gently undo the yellow laces. The laces are still new enough that they quickly slip through one another, untying my knot gracefully. With a hand firmly around the back side of the boot, I pull with all my might. The pain continues to increase as the boot finally gives in and slides off my foot. What I see next makes me gasp.

Skin that once covered the heel is torn and lumped into a wrinkled mound. The skin now visible under the tear is a soft red. The quarter sized blister is extremely sensitive and burns even when not being touched. It seems becoming a man will have to wait.

Standard hiker wisdom dictates that unless you want to end your hike with weeping blisters, you'll need to break your boots in (Steele). My loving father neglected to tell me this when he so graciously gave me my boots. In fact, he was more than confident the boots would be "great" to hike in. My blisters have proven him otherwise.

Those much wiser than myself have said the following.

“Experienced hikers have tricks to break boots in quickly. Some apply mink oil daily, others swear by the Army method of fully immersing booted feet in water and walking in them until they are dry. The best method is still brief daily use. By walking in boots every day, the uppers will naturally wear to the shape of your foot, and the soles will wear to your gait” (Steele).

If I would have known the tricks of so called “experienced hikers”, I may have saved myself a great deal of pain. But I did not, and the only way to eventually become experienced is to first walk the path of the un-experienced.

Beginning as a roar, the noise now reaches a crescendo, and pierces my ears. The Makita chop-saw slices through the #4 rebar like butter, despite the dreadful racket. A small look downward revels sparks showering my leather boots in a striking dance of orange and yellow. The once light tan color is now a muddy brown. Stained with oil, crushed by cement panels, and burned by sparks, the boots barely resemble their former selves. They have become something different, something better.

My feet are no longer sore, nor are they bothered with blisters. In fact, my boots are remarkably the most comfortable shoes I own. They have come a long way since our first adventure in Wyoming, and so have I.

“Hey Bryant, nice job cutting that bar” says my boss, John.

“Thanks, I think I’ll bring ear plugs next time” I reply with a chuckle.

Taking a moment to wipe my forehead, I set down the saw, relived the job is now complete. Looking up into the clear blue sky, I take in a deep breath of fresh air. Without much thought, I think of how grateful I am to be alive, to have a job, and money to pay my bills.

“Those boots are pretty beat up” says John, looking awkwardly at my feet.

“Well you do know what they say don’t you?” I reply.

A smile begins slowly in one corner of mouth and moves its way to encompass my entire face. Looking John firmly in the eyes, without blinking, I say what was taught to me a long time ago.

“You can tell a lot about a man just by looking at his boots”.

Works Cited

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Steele, Tracey. Yahoo Voices. 30 June 2009. 27 January 2013 <<http://voices.yahoo.com/how-properly-break-hiking-boots-3638157.html?cat=46>>.