

ENGLISH 50 FINAL EXAM  
SPRING 2004  
THURSDAY, MAY 13, 2:00-4:00 PM  
ROOMS: ES-21, LS-16, CH-1, LS-24, P-18, S-7

The Case Against Chores  
by Jane Smiley

I've lived in the upper Midwest for twenty-one years now, and I'm here 1  
to tell you that the pressure to put your children to work is unrelenting.  
So far I've squirmed out from under it, and my daughters have led a life of  
almost tropical idleness, much to their benefit. My son, however, may not  
be so lucky. His father was himself raised in Iowa and put to work at an  
early age, and you never know when, in spite of all my husband's best  
intentions, that early training might kick in.

Although "chores" are so sacred in my neck of the woods that almost 2  
no one ever discusses their purpose, I have over the years gleaned some of  
the reasons parents give for assigning them. I'm not impressed. Mostly the  
reasons have to do with developing good work habits or, in the absence of  
good work habits, at least habits of working. No such thing as a free lunch,  
any job worth doing is worth doing right, work before play, all of that.  
According to this reasoning, the world is full of jobs that no one wants to  
do. If we divide them up and get them over with, then we can go on to  
pastimes we like. If we do them "right," then we won't have to do them  
again. Lots of times, though, in a family, that *we* doesn't operate. The  
operative word is *you*. The practical result of almost every child-labor  
scheme that I've witnessed is the child doing the dirty work and the parent  
getting the fun: Mom cooks and Sis does the dishes; the parents plan and  
plant the garden, the kids weed it. To me, what this teaches the child is the  
lesson of alienated labor: not to love the work but to get it over with; not  
to feel pride in one's contribution but to feel resentment at the waste of  
one's time.

Another goal of chores: the child contributes to the work of maintain- 3  
ing the family. According to this rationale, the child comes to understand  
what it takes to have a family, and to feel that he or she is an important,  
even indispensable member of it. But come on. Would you really want to  
feel loved primarily because you're the one who gets the floors mopped?  
Wouldn't you rather feel that your family's love simply exists all around  
you, no matter what your contribution? And don't the parents love their  
children anyway, whether the children vacuum or not? Why lie about it  
just to get the housework done? Let's be frank about the other half of the  
equation too. In this day and age, it doesn't take much work at all to manage  
a household, at least in the middle class—maybe four hours a week to clean  
the house and another four to throw the laundry into the washing machine,  
move it to the dryer, and fold it. Is it really a good idea to set the sort of  
example my former neighbors used to set, of mopping the floor every two  
days, cleaning the toilets every week, vacuuming every day, dusting,  
dusting, dusting? Didn't they have anything better to do than serve their  
house?

Let me confess that I wasn't expected to lift a finger when I was growing 4  
up. Even when my mother had a full-time job, she cleaned up after me, as  
did my grandmother. Later there was a housekeeper. I would leave my

room in a mess when I headed off for school and find it miraculously neat when I returned. Once in a while I vacuumed, just because I liked the pattern the Hoover made on the carpet. I did learn to run water in my cereal bowl before setting it in the sink.

Where I discovered work was at the stable, and, in fact, there is no housework like horsework. You've got to clean the horses' stalls, feed them, groom them, tack them up, wrap their legs, exercise them, turn them out, and catch them. You've got to clip them and shave them. You have to sweep the aisle, clean your tack and your boots, carry bales of hay and buckets of water. Minimal horsekeeping, rising just to the level of humaneness, requires many more hours than making a few beds, and horsework turned out to be a good preparation for the real work of adulthood, which is rearing children. It was a good preparation not only because it was similar in many ways but also because my desire to do it, and to do a good job of it, grew out of my love of and interest in my horse. I can't say that cleaning out her bucket when she manured in it was an actual joy, but I knew she wasn't going to do it herself. I saw the purpose of my labor, and I wasn't alienated from it.

Probably to the surprise of some of those who knew me as a child, I have turned out to be gainfully employed. I remember when I was in seventh grade, one of my teachers said to me, strongly disapproving, "The trouble with you is you do only what you want to do!" That continues to be the trouble with me, except that over the years I have wanted to do more and more.

My husband worked hard as a child, out-Iowa-ing the Iowans, if such a thing is possible. His dad had him mixing cement with a stick when he was five, pushing wheelbarrows not long after. It's a long sad tale on the order of two miles to school and both ways uphill. The result is, he's a great worker, much better than I am, but all the while he's doing it he wishes he weren't. He thinks of it as work; he's torn between doing a good job and longing not to be doing it at all. Later, when he's out on the golf course, where he really wants to be, he feels a little guilty, knowing there's work that should have been done before he gave in and took advantage of the beautiful day.

Good work is not the work we assign children but the work they want to do, whether it's reading in bed (where would I be today if my parents had roused me out and put me to scrubbing floors?) or cleaning their rooms or practicing the flute or making roasted potatoes with rosemary and Parmesan for the family dinner. It's good for a teenager to suddenly decide that the bathtub is so disgusting she'd better clean it herself. I admit that for the parent, this can involve years of waiting. But if she doesn't want to wait, she can always spend her time dusting.