

Memories of a '53 Chevy Stimulate Nostalgia for Simpler Times

Juniper, my daughter, handed me tools and held the light while I worked on the car. I removed bolts from the pulley on the water pump, and I immediately ran into problems. There wasn't clearance enough between the water pump and the car's fender well to remove the pulley. If I couldn't get the pulley out of the way, I couldn't put a wrench on the bolts that held the pump on, and the job was over before it was even well-started.

I backed out from under the hood of the car and said, "Engineers who design cars should have to take one completely apart and put it back together before it goes on the market." I felt irritation with the car's designers and with myself for not having the skills, knowledge, and tools to do the job.

I tried to clear the irritation from my thoughts. Besides acting as a mechanic to try to repair the car, I was Juniper's teacher in how to fix automobiles and one of her teachers in how to approach existence. Finding frustration with cars and with existence was not a good lesson to teach her or myself.

Many years before that evening, I bought a '53 Chevy sedan, before they were collector's items but after they were old enough to be cheap transportation. It belonged to a teenager who had bought it and started to fix it up. His parents said he had to sell it because it was taking too much of his time that he should be devoting to study so he could graduate from high school with good grades.

The original, blue and white paint was in good shape. The upholstery was the original, grey cloth upholstery, in good shape.

He said, "Don't try to talk me down on the price. I put a lot of good work into that car. It's a good car, and the price is right."

I respected what he said and paid him his full asking price.

I drove the car from where I bought it. On the way home, I stopped and had a new exhaust system installed. While the car was on the rack, I spotted the broken spring leaf that caused the car to sit low on the right rear.

I drove from the muffler shop to a wrecking yard and bought a used but undamaged leaf for the spring. When I got home, I blocked up the rear of the car, removed the spring, took it apart, replaced the broken leaf, put the spring back together, and reinstalled it. Then the car sat level and rode well.

The engine ran noisily. There was so much room under the hood, I climbed into the engine compartment, sat on the fender well, and comfortably worked on the engine. I removed the rocker assembly from the top of the engine, took it to a machine shop and asked the skilled workers there to surface and polish the rockers.

I bought and installed new rocker shafts and put everything back together. I started the car and listened. The engine was so quiet, I almost couldn't hear it run.

I had tires put on the car, and it was ready for the road. My total investment was well within my limited budget, and I had a car that looked good, drove well, and got about 22 miles per

gallon, respectable mileage in the days when gasoline cost about 35 cents a gallon.

Many years later, I exited from fond memories of the '53 Chevy and examined the later model car whose water pump I had intended to replace.

Juniper had volunteered to help me with the water pump replacement because she wanted to learn how to work on cars. It was easy to see she was tired from driving down the mountain, attending classes at the college all day, and driving home.

I told her, "I don't think there's much you can learn from this. I can't see how to get the pump off. I'll try to put the pulley back on, and I'll have to pay a mechanic to replace the pump. He'll earn his money. Why don't you quit for the day?"

"Okay. I think I'll walk a while before I go to bed." She walked down the road that I had plowed clear of snow during the day. The gate was locked, and there was no one on the ranch but our family.

The nearly full moon shone on our mountain with all its snow.

I finally discovered the right combination of tools and techniques to get the pulley, with the fan belt still on it, back into position, and I reinstalled the bolts I took out so long before, in an optimistic moment.

I thought about two cultural ideals. The Rural Westerner fixes anything mechanical with a piece of baling wire, a pocket knife, and a pair of pliers.

Or, Industrial, Urban Man, economically successful and a specialist, pays for anything he needs done by any other specialist.

I was neither of those. My half-time job taking care of a Girl Scout ranch in northern Colorado's Rocky Mountains provided housing and a small cash income.

Keeping the ranch buildings, roads, tent areas, and machinery in good shape required proficiency in plumbing, carpentry, electrical work, and general repairs, but some problems, I couldn't fix, especially under the hood of a car where equipment filled the space so tightly I couldn't remove the water pump.

'53 Chevys are collector's items now, priced accordingly. I'm sure I won't own one again.

In the next few months, Juniper would learn to change the oil and filter, grease the car, change a wheel, and replace burned out bulbs. She would realize her life was busy enough with the activities she really wanted to be a part of that she wasn't going to have time to learn to be a proficient mechanic.

She would be satisfied with that. I didn't know the details of how it would go for her yet, but I thought it would go in a good direction.

If I didn't get too involved in other projects nor waste energy feeling frustrated, I had time to be with my family and to participate in my daughters' home-centered education. I had time to write, time to play my guitar and sing, time to explore the wild mountain where we lived, alone at times, and with my family or part of my family at other times.

I shut the shop lights off and walked out into the night.

Fresh snow lay soft on crusted snow. The sky had cleared about dusk, and the thermometer headed down. It was still dropping, headed for ten or zero by morning.

Brilliant stars scattered across the sky above me and dimmed near the bright moon. The forest stood dark on the mountain.

Somewhere up the mountain, a great horned owl called, was quiet a while, and called again. I thought of the bird in the dark night in the mountain forest, a harmonious part of the community of life, satisfied to be an owl.

I stood in the mountain night, certain that I would learn much more in the years ahead of me, but also certain that learning to be a skilled mechanic wouldn't be part of what I learned, because it didn't fit with the rest of my life. We would take the car to a mechanic, and we would pay for his work and respect his skills, knowledge, and tools.

I would continue in my own direction. I walked toward the house, ready to clean up and then settle for the night, satisfied enough with my existence to relax in the cold mountain night.