

Mike Rowe: Dirty Work

Mike Rowe, the presenter of the [Dirty Jobs](#) program on the Discovery Channel, suggests that we need to change our view of what work means: it's not just Blackberries and iPhones and comfortable offices.

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The Dirty Jobs crew and I were called to a little town in Colorado, called Craig. It's only a couple dozen square miles, it's in the Rockies. And the job in question was sheep rancher.

My role on the show, for those of you who haven't seen it – it's pretty simple. I'm an apprentice, and I work with the people who actually do the jobs in question. And my responsibilities are to simply try and keep up and give an honest account of what it's like to be these people, for one day in their life. Job in question – herding sheep. Great.

We go to Craig and we check in to a hotel and I realize the next day that castration is going to be an absolute part of this work. So, normally, I never do any research at all. But, this is a touchy subject, and I work for the Discovery Channel, and we want to portray accurately whatever it is we do, and we certainly want to do it with a lot of respect for the animals. So I called the Humane Society and I say "Look, I'm going to be castrating some lambs, Can you tell me the deal?"

And they're like, "Yeah, it's pretty straightforward." They use a band – basically a rubber band, like this, only a little smaller. This one was actually around the playing cards I got yesterday, but it had a certain familiarity to it.

And I said, "Well, what exactly is the process?"

And they said, "The band is applied to the tail, tightly. And then another band is applied to the scrotum, tightly. Blood flow is slowly retarded, a week later the parts in question fall off. "

"Great! Got it" OK, I call the SPCA to confirm this – they confirm it. I also call PETA, just for fun, and they don't like it, but they confirm it. OK, that's basically how you do it.

So the next day I go out. And I'm given a horse and we go get the lambs and we take them to a pen that we built, and we go about the business of animal husbandry.

Melanie is the wife of Albert. Albert is the shepherd in question. Melanie picks up the lamb – two hands – one hand on both legs on the right, likewise on the left. Lamb goes on the post, she opens it up. Alright. Great. Albert goes in, I follow Albert, the crew is around. I always watch the process done the first time before I try it. Being an apprentice, you know, you do that. Albert reaches in his pocket to pull out, you know, this black rubber band but what comes out instead is a knife. And I'm like that's not rubber at all, you know. And he kind of flicked it open in a way that caught the sun that was just coming over the Rockies, it was very – it was, it was impressive.

In the space of about two seconds, Albert had the knife between the cartilage of the tail, right next to the butt of the lamb, and very quickly the tail was gone and in the bucket that I was holding. A second later with a big thumb and a well calloused forefinger, he had the scrotum, firmly in his grasp, and he pulled it toward him, like so, and he took the knife and he put it on the tip. Now you had think you know what's coming Michael, you don't, OK. He snips it, throws the tip over his shoulder, and then grabs the scrotum and pushes it

upward, and then his head dips down, obscuring my view, but what I hear is a slurping sound, and a noise that sounds like velcro being yanked off a sticky wall and I am not even kidding.

Can we roll the video? No I'm kidding – we don't – I thought it best to talk in pictures.

So, I do something now I've never ever done on a Dirty Jobs shoot, ever. I say, "Time out. Stop." You guys know the show, we use take one, we don't do take two. There's no writing, there's no scripting, there's no nonsense. We don't fool around, we don't rehearse, we shoot what we get!

I said, "Stop. This is nuts. I mean, you know – This is crazy. We can't do this.

And Albert's like, "What?"

And I'm like, "I don't know what just happened, but there are testicles in this bucket and that's not how we do it."

And he said "Well, that's how we do it."

And I said, "Why would you do it this way?" And before I even let him explain, I said, "I want to do it the right way, with the rubber bands."

And he says, "Like the Humane Society?"

And I said, "Yes, like the Humane Society. Let's do something that doesn't make the lamb squeal and bleed – we're on in five continents, dude. We're on twice a day on the Discovery Channel – we can't do this."

He says, "OK." He goes to his box and he pulls out a bag of these little rubber bands. Melanie picks up another lamb, puts it on the post, band goes on the tail, band goes on the scrotum. Lamb goes on the ground, lamb takes two steps, falls down, gets up, shakes a little, takes another couple steps,

falls down. I'm like, this is not a good sign for this lamb, at all. Gets up, walks to the corner, it's quivering, and it lies down and it's in obvious distress.

And I'm looking at the lamb and I say, "Albert, how long? When does he get up?"

He's like, "A day."

I said "A day! How long does it take them to fall off?"

"A week."

Meanwhile, the lamb that he had just did his little procedure on is, you know, he's just prancing around, bleeding stopped. He's, you know, nibbling on some grass, frolicking. And I was just so blown away at how wrong I was, in that second. And I was reminded how utterly wrong I am, so much of the time. And I was especially reminded of what an ridiculously short straw I had that day because now I had to do what Albert had just done, and there are like 100 of these lambs in the pen, and suddenly this whole thing's starting to feel like a German porno, and I'm like ...

Melanie picks up the lamb, puts it on the post, opens it up. Albert hands me the knife. I go in, tail comes off. I go in, I grab the scrotum, tip comes off. Albert instructs, "Push it way up there." I do. "Push it further." I do.

The testicles emerge, they look like thumbs, coming right at you. And he says, "Bite 'em. Just bite 'em off." And I heard him, I heard all the words. Like, how did – how did I get here? How did – you know – I mean – how did I get here?

It's just – it's one of those moments where the brain goes off on it's own and suddenly, I'm standing there, in the Rockies, and all I can think of is the Aristotelian definition of a tragedy. You know, Aristotle says a tragedy is that moment when the hero comes face to face with his own identity.

And I'm like, "What is this jacked-up metaphor? I don't like what I'm thinking right now." And I can't get this thought out of my head, and I can't get that vision out of my sight, so I did what I had to do. I went in and I took them. I took them like this, and I yanked my face back. And I'm standing there with two testicles on my chin. And now I can't get – I can't shake the metaphor.

OK, I'm still in poetics, in Aristotle, and I'm thinking – out of nowhere, two terms come crashing into my head that I haven't heard since my classics professor in college drilled them there. And they are anagnorisis and peripeteia. Anagnorisis and peripeteia. Anagnorisis is the Greek word for discovery. Literally, the transition from ignorance to knowledge is anagnorisis, what our network does, it's what Dirty Jobs is. And I'm up to my neck in anagnorises every single day. Great. The other word, peripeteia, that's the moment in the great tragedies, you know – Euripides and Sophocles – the moment where Oedipus has his moment, where he suddenly realizes that hot chick he's been sleeping with and having babies with is his mother. OK. That's peripety or peripeteia. And this metaphor in my head – I got anagnorisis and peripetia on my chin.

I got to tell you, it's such a great device though. When you start to look for peripetia, you find it everywhere. I mean, Bruce Willis in "The Sixth Sense," right? Spends the whole movie trying to help the little kid who sees dead people, and then, boom – oh, I'm dead – peripetia. You know? It's crushing when the audience sees it the right way. Neo in "The Matrix," you know? Oh, I'm living in a computer program – that's weird.

These discoveries that lead to sudden realizations. And I've been having them, over 200 dirty jobs, I have them all the time, but that one – that one drilled something home in a way that I just wasn't prepared for. And, as I stood there, looking at the happy lamb that I had just defiled – but it looked OK. Looking at that poor other little thing that I'd

done it the right way on, and I just was struck by if I'm wrong about that and if I'm wrong so often, in a literal way, what other peripatetic misconceptions might I be able to comment upon?

Because, look, I'm not a social anthropologist but I have a friend who is. And I talk to him. And he says, "Hey Mike. Look, I don't know if your brain is interested in this sort of thing or not, but do you realize you've shot in every state? You've worked in mining, you've worked in fishing, you've worked in steel, you've worked in every major industry. You've had your back shoulder to shoulder with these guys that our politicians are desperate to relate to every four years, right?"

I can still see Hillary doing the shots of rye, dribbling down her chin, with the steel workers. I mean, these are the people that I work with every single day. And if you have something to say about their thoughts, collectively, it might be time to think about it. Because, dude, you know, four years. You know, that's in my head, testicles are on my chin, thoughts are bouncing around. And, after that shoot, Dirty Jobs really didn't change, in terms of what the show is, but it changed for me, personally.

And now, when I talk about the show, I no longer just tell the story you heard and 190 like it. I do, but I also start to talk about some of the other things I got wrong, some of the other notions of work that I've just been assuming are sacrosanct, and they're not. People with dirty jobs are happier than you think. As a group, they're the happiest people I know. And I don't want to start whistling "Look for the Union Label," and all that happy worker crap. I'm just telling you that these are balanced people who do unthinkable work. Roadkill picker-uppers whistle while they work, I swear to God, I did it with them. They've got this amazing sort of symmetry to their life. and I see it over and over and over again.

So I started to wonder what would happen if we challenged some of these sacred cows. Follow your passion – we've been talking about it here for the last 36 hours. Follow your passion – what could possibly be wrong with that? Probably the worst advice I ever got. You know, follow your dreams and go broke, right? I mean, that's all I heard growing up. I didn't know what to do with my life, but I was told if you follow your passion, it's going to work out.

I can give you 30 examples, right now – Bob Combs, the pig farmer in Las Vegas who collects the uneaten scraps of food from the casinos and feeds them to his swine. Why? Because there's so much protein in the stuff we don't eat his pigs grow at twice the normal speed, and he is one rich pig farmer, and he is good for the environment, and he spends his days doing this incredible service, and he smells like hell, but God bless him. He's making a great living. You ask him, "Did you follow your passion here?" and he'd laugh at you. The guy's worth – he just got offered like 60 million dollars for his farm and turned it down, outside of Vegas. He didn't follow his passion. He stepped back and he watched where everybody was going and he went the other way. And I hear that story over and over.

Matt Froind, a dairy farmer in New Canaan, Connecticut, who woke up one day and realized the crap from his cows was worth more than their milk, if he could use it to make these biodegradable flower pots. Now, he's selling them to Walmart. Follow his passion – the guy's – come on.

So I started to look at passion, I started to look at efficiency versus effectiveness, as Tim talked about earlier, that's a huge distinction. I started to look at teamwork and determination, and basically all those platitudes they call successories that hang with that schmaltzy art in boardrooms around the world right now. That stuff – it's suddenly all been turned on its head.

Safety – safety first is me going back to, you know, OSHA and PETA and the Humane Society. What if OSHA got it wrong? I mean, this is heresy, what I'm about to say, but what if it's really safety third? Right? No, I mean really. What I mean to say is I value my safety on these crazy jobs as much as the people that I'm working with, but the ones who really get it done, they're not out there talking about safety first. They know that other things come first – the business of doing the work comes first, the business of getting it done.

And I'll never forget, up in the Bering Sea, I was on a crab boat with the deadliest catch guys, which I also work on in the first season. We're about 100 miles off the coast of Russia 50 foot seas, big waves, green water coming over the wheelhouse, right? Most hazardous environment I'd ever seen, and I was back with a guy, lashing the pots down. So, I'm 40 feet off the deck, which is like looking down at the top of your shoe, you know, and it's doing this in the ocean. Unspeakably dangerous.

I scamper down, I go into the wheelhouse and I say, with some level of incredulity, "Captain, OSHA."

And he says, "OSHA? – ocean." And he points out there. But in that moment, what he said next can't be repeated in the lower 48. It can't be repeated on any factory floor or any construction site. But he looked at me, and he said, "Son – he's my age, by the way, he calls me son, I love that – he says, "Son, I'm a captain of a crab boat. My responsibility is not to get you home alive. My responsibility is to get you home rich." You want to get home alive, that's on you. And for the rest of that day, safety first.

I was like – So, the idea that we create this false – this sense of complacency when all we do is talk about somebody else's responsibility as though it's our own, and vice versa. Anyhow, a whole lot of things. I could talk at length about the many little distinctions we made and the endless list of

ways that I got it wrong. But, what it all comes down to is this. I formed a theory, and I'm going to share it now in my remaining two minutes and 30 seconds.

It goes like this – we've declared war on work, as a society, all of us. It's a civil war. It's a cold war, really. We didn't set out to do it and we didn't twist our mustache in some Machiavellian way, but we've done it. And we've waged this war on at least four fronts, certainly in Hollywood. The way we portray working people on TV, it's laughable. If there's a plumber, he's 300 pounds and he's got a giant buttcrack, admit it. You see him all the time. That's what plumbers look like, right? We turn them into heroes, or we turn them into punchlines. That's what TV does. We try hard on Dirty Jobs not to do that, which is why I do the work and I don't cheat.

But, we've waged this war on Madison Avenue. I mean, so many of the commercials that come out there – in the way of a message, what's really being said? Your life would be better if you could work a little less, if you didn't have to work so hard, if you could get home a little earlier, if you could retire a little faster, if you could punch out a little sooner, it's all in there, over and over, again and again.

Washington – I can't even begin to talk about the deals and policies in place that affect the bottom line reality of the available jobs because I don't really know. I just know that that's a front in this war.

And right here guys, Silicon Valley I mean, how many people have an iPhone on them right now? How many people have their Blackberries? We're plugged in, we're connected. I would never suggest for a second that something bad has come out of the tech revolution. Good grief, not to this crowd. But I would suggest that innovation without imitation is a complete waste of time. And nobody celebrates imitation the way Dirty Jobs guys know it has to be done. Your iPhone without those people

making the same interface, the same circuitry, the same board, over and over. All that – that's what makes it equally as possible as the genius that goes inside of it.

So, we've got this new toolbox, you know. Our tools today don't look like shovels and picks. They look like the stuff we walk around with. And so the collective effect of all of that has been this marginalization of lots and lots of jobs. And I realized, probably too late in this game – I hope not, because I don't know if I can do 200 more of these things, but we're going to do as many as we can. And to me the most important thing to know and to really come face to face with, is that fact that I got it wrong about a lot of things, not just the testicles on my chin. I got a lot wrong.

So, we're thinking – by we, I mean me – that the thing to do is to talk about a PR campaign for work, manual labor, skilled labor. Somebody needs to be out there talking about the forgotten benefits I'm talking about grandfather stuff. The stuff a lot of us probably grew up with but we've kind of – you know, kind of lost a little.

Barack wants to create two and a half million jobs. The infrastructure is a huge deal. This war on work, that I suppose exists, has casualties like any other war. The infrastructure's the first one Declining trade school enrollments are the second one. Every single year, fewer electricians, fewer carpenters, fewer plumbers, fewer welders, fewer pipefitters, fewer steamfitters. The infrastructure jobs that everybody is talking about creating are those guys. The ones that have been in decline, over and over. In the meanwhile, we got two trillion dollars, at a minimum, according to the American Society of Civil Engineers, that we need to expend to even make a dent in the infrastructure which is currently rated at a D minus.

So, if I were running for anything, and I'm not, I would simply say that the jobs we hope to make and the jobs we hope

to create aren't going to stick unless they're jobs that people want. And I know the point of this conference is to celebrate things that are near and dear to us, but I also know that clean and dirty aren't opposites. They're two sides of the same coin, just like innovation and imitation, like risk and responsibility, like peripetia and anagnorisis, like that poor little lamb, who I hope isn't quivering anymore, and like my time that's gone.

It's been great talking to you and get back to work, will you?