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What I did this summer.



Saul Dennis · 5 min read · Sep 9, 2025



This summer, I did a bit of time travel.

Specifically, I took a what can best be described as a summer job. Part-time. Working for a farm on the eastern end of Long Island, NY. Lifting, hauling, heaving, sorting, washing; loading and unloading, driving and delivering.

It's not the first time I've done this kind of fiercely physical labor.

Throughout high school, I worked construction in the asphalt-wilting heat and humidity that are a Washington, DC summer. Then, as now, I sought this employment for very particular reasons. Primary was the workout. For a chunky kid, manual labor finally wrestled my weight to the ground, while getting in shape for high school football.

Pocket money — what, in Yiddish, mother called *pisha* money. The independence of not needing an allowance. The repeat satisfaction when, with the reassuring thud of her inky stamp, the bank teller entered my weekly deposit in the tiny, ruled passbook savings account.

There was another motivation, too. The sheltered son of a successful physician, these jobs allowed me to experience a world far from the familiar, to create a camaraderie all my own. The family of swashbuckling arborists who rode their crane's hook and cable with the aplomb of Johnny Weismuller and his vine.

The ancient Italian elevator mechanic sagely cautioning my eager, naïve self to work slower, *it's a long day*. The fellow who ate sardines tinned in mustard every meal, every day. Or the black kid, my age, who insisted on showing me the scar where a chainsaw almost reached his penis. While he joked about *cracking his nut* and sex, I silently vowed to never wield a chainsaw.

Still, why this kind of summer job now? A half century later?

Friends and acquaintances often react with a collective head-scratch. *Wouldn't it be easier to join a gym?* You can see their point.

I'm 62-years old. My fall, spring, winter employment, as a writer of many things, chief among them marketing communications demands a decidedly cerebral kind of heavy lifting.

Thinking about it, I've come to realize my recent summer employment sojourns are driven by desires that, if not mirroring the past, surely rhyme it.

The physical labor of the farm is a fierce, fun workout. Still a great way to control weight — I'm not getting any taller — while gaining a certain swagger. Worn work gloves tucked in my back pocket just so, I can't help but think of James Dean's wild-cattin cowboy in the 1956 classic, *Giant*. (Swagger. Delusion. Let's not quibble.)

Now, though, the exhausting experience provides something more. Out from behind a screen, opportunities for new kinds of worry — and wonder. The light. The quiet. The way the air smells in the early morning, the way I smell by late afternoon. It's a sensory slash-cut to the carefree summers of my youth.

It's a workout for the mind, as well. Science. Hard-won experience. Logic, luck and logistics. Running a successful farm is basically the Manhattan Project for tomatoes. I'm always learning something.

This season has been a particular leap for a dedicated Manhattanite. Take learning how to maneuver an impossibly large panel van through tiny, packed parking lots. Especially maddening, an inn jammed with Aston Martins as part of a test drive event. (The marketer in me got it. Otherwise, naked terror.) The smartest strategy for loading said van, with an eye towards unloading it later. The best way to negotiate the treacherous basement stairs that defend seemingly every commercial kitchen.



The real lesson? Don't put too much faith in rearview cameras. And there are no unskilled jobs.

The tangible, tactile joys of earning a bit of pocket money ring true across the decades. Even without the teller, the passbook — heck, the bank — the direct deposit slip sends me directly to that feeling of satisfaction.

Then, of course, there are the people I meet. Here. Now. Finally. Thanks for your patience. More than ever, this is what matters. For me as a writer. More important, for me as a human in America 2025.

A grizzled local as much a part of the farm as the land itself. I arrogantly pegged him as another budding VFW fascist, only to learn he's just as disturbed by what's happening in our country as I am, and delightfully vocal about it — along with the general stupidity of *summer people*.

Migrant farm workers whose confidence in their skills; the way they inhabit their space reminds me of nothing so much as the easy-going command of professional athletes.

Once school gets out, high school and college kids abound. They're nice enough. But conversations are brief. Just long enough for one young woman to regale me with tales of her financier-turned-cattle-rancher father. (Another *Giant* fan?) I'm older than their parents, so, who can blame them.

Of course, meeting people is a two-way street. And on occasion, people do wonder what I'm doing on this stretch of road. The way I present myself probably plays a role. A full head of grey hair — think Lawrence Olivier in *Spartacus*. A bandana to keep the sweat from my eyes — think Sam Peckinpah, directing just about anything. (Damn. There's that delusion again.)

After repeat deliveries, a chef flat out stopped me, quizzical. 'OK. *What's going on here?*' I told him much of what I'm sharing with you, adding that now, more than ever, we — you, me, all of us — need to get out and meet each other. Talk to each other. Joke with each other. Come, if only just a little, to see each other as not *the other*.

During a recent heatwave, a line cook eagerly offered a freshly shucked clam that cooled like an ocean mist, insisting I have one more for the road. Another time, a demanding produce manager eyed my delivery intensely, only to reward with fresh watermelon juice. At yet another stop, a group of Latin women paid my Spanish the highest compliment. Not how I spoke. But that I listened — *Escuchan*.

With the season wrapping, I'm already a wistful about my work. The experience. I am, though, buoyed by one thought.

Next summer.

THE END

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