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Steaks and Chops

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This issue's theme brought to mind two of my favorite authors. Neither is connected to horticulture, but try not to hold that against them. Or me.

The first is Annie Dillard, masterful crafter of fiction, poetry and non-fiction. I'm most enamored of that last category. No mere tabulator of facts and artifacts, she transports readers into a place, a time, a situation with phrasing that seems effortless but is, trust me, the result of great effort. Easy writing makes hard reading, but luckily the reverse is also true. Dillard's prose flows with a lean, clean grace informed, not needlessly adorned, by her poetry.

I like to think my writing is better because I've read hers and maybe it's so. I know for a fact that I do one thing better thanks to her: She taught

me to chop wood.

In "The Writing Life," Dillard recounts a winter spent cloistered in her rented writing retreat, a drafty, uninsulated island cabin. The only heat source was an inefficient potbellied stove, fed with alder logs that she struggled to split by hand, swinging the axe time and again only to chip off little pieces that flew away in all directions.

Finally, a revelation: She was doing it all wrong. She'd been aiming at the top of the log to be split—a logical, but ineffective, strategy, because that's not where you want the blow to land, finally. The real goal is for the axehead to arrive at the chopping block. The log is just something in the way.

This sounds like a mind trick, until you try it. I'd often had the same struggle, flailing and failing, feeling lucky when it worked. The next morning, I propped up a log and aimed through it. Bam! Done. It's analogous to the advice given to those learning to drive on ice, maneuver a canoe through rapids or start a business: Don't look at the obstacles you might hit, look where you want to go.

For years, I've bridled at pundits who insist that we in the plant business don't sell plants. We sell solutions, excitement, decor, lifestyle. And I'm not making firewood with my axe, I'm creating coziness, romance,

security, ambience. Sorry, can't quite embrace that concept. It gets too cold where I live. And I, for one, sell plants.

It bears mentioning that nearly all my sales and marketing experience is in wholesale, not retail. And I'm not even saying the pundits are wrong, just that it's risky to carry the idea too far.

It's useful to think a process through all the way to the desired end: The problem solved, the pollinator or fire fed, the deer turned away, the patio perfected. But don't neglect the tangible, saleable means to that end: The cleanly-cloven, stove-ready billet, the perfectly-grown gallon, the right plant for the job. That's all we can really control.

The punditry reminds me uncomfortably of that hoary marketing cliché: Don't sell the steak, sell the sizzle. All well and good. You can get me to the table with sizzle and scent, but when I sit down, there had bloody well better be a steak. I can't eat sizzle and our customers can't plant it.

Which reunites us with the theme of this issue and my second writer, humorist Dave Barry, who wrote that people do what they do for one of two reasons: It makes them feel good or it makes them money. Touché.

We are fortunate people: Our chosen profession, executed properly with the right aim, the right touch and the right stuff, does both. Let's sell some plants. **GP**

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