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## UA37/11 Let Them Build Their Own Tents

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# ***Let Them Build Their Own Tents***

by James P. Cornette, President  
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### LET THEM BUILD THEIR OWN TENTS

For three long Kentucky summer days four of us little boys labored mightily building the tent against the back fence of the garden. It was to be the most wonderful tent ever built! And as we labored, we dreamed and planned that when we had finished the hard work of building the tent, we were going to have the most wonderful time sitting down and playing in it that four little boys ever had doing anything!

Finally the tent was finished. And truly it *was* a rather wonderful tent for four little boys to have constructed out of sassafras beanpoles and old bed ticking. So, our labors done, we sat down to enjoy the fruits of them by playing in the tent.

But in less than an hour life in the tent had become so dull and boring that we left the tent and went over to the other side of the garden and started digging a hole — a hole that was to be the biggest hole ever dug and in which we were going to have the most wonderful time playing that four little boys ever had doing anything! Never again did we return to the tent except for the purpose of tearing it down one day weeks later when Mother told us that we had to because it was in the way.

Many years went by before I was able really to understand the truth of which I got my first glimpse on that summer day so long ago; namely, that the real fun is in the building of the tent, rather than in the sitting down and playing in it; that the real glory is in the going, rather than in the having arrived; that the real end and purpose of the traveling lies in the journey itself, rather than in the destination; that the "good life" is to be found in hard work and hard play, in success and in failure, in joy with its laughter and in sorrow with its tears, in victory with its sweet exultation and in defeat with its bitter despair; because the "good life" is to be found simply and solely in the living of life itself and in experiencing as fully as possible all of its qualities, both sweet and bitter, rather than in escaping from life through one's own efforts or in being delivered from it through the efforts of someone else.

But finally I did come to understand this elemental truth of human living and to understand that one of the greatest tragedies a man can experience in this life is to arrive at the place where he has finished his tent and has nothing to do except to sit down and play in it — with no new tent to begin, and with not even a good place to start digging a hole.

And I came to know, too, that the tragedy even greater than this, possibly the greatest tragedy of all, is for a man to have handed to him while he is still young a ready-made tent, with the loving admonition, "Here, Son, is a beautiful tent made just for you. Now sit down and play in it and have a wonderful time all the rest of your life." When a man has built his own tent, even when it's finished he has the memories of the building; but when it has been handed to him ready-made, he has not even the memories, and is in about as bad shape as Frost's hired man, who had "nothing to look backward to with pride, and nothing to look forward to with hope."

Now, after close to a half century of "building tents" and "digging holes" of my own and a quarter century spent helping thousands of college students and my own three sons with theirs, I have come to the conclusion that the really dangerous threat to our nation and to that which we speak of rather loosely as the "American way of life" does not lie in the infiltration of Communist agents nor in the growth of "McCarthyism" nor in any of the other frequently mentioned dangers. No, dangerous as these threats may be, in my opinion they do not even approach the danger of the threat presented by our mistaken notion that the "good life" is to be found in sitting down and playing in the tent after it is finished instead of in the building of it, and by the fact that this false idea has become so dominant a force in our national thinking. In such things as the intense and continuing struggle between "labor" and "capital," this false notion is the motivating force; it has furnished the inspiration for our snowballing "protect-the-individual" federal legislation; and I fear that it supplies the oil for the lamps burning on the household altars of most of our American homes.

Perhaps the mistaken concept that the "good life" is to be found in sitting down and playing in the tent would not in itself be so dangerous were it not for the fact that here in our country and in our generation for the first time in the history of the world this false notion is combined with the opportunity for a majority of the people to complete their tents and try sitting down and playing in them, and also for a constantly increasing number of parents to provide ready-made tents for their children as they get grown. Because, although the opportunity is new, the idea is as old as Man himself. Since the beginning of time Man has been picturing the good life as resulting from the situation where, his labors of construction over, he sits down to enjoy the fruits of them. Every Utopia ever conceived by Man, whether it be Sir Thomas More's by that name, or the Garden of Eden, or Bacon's

*New Atlantis*, or any one of the dozens of others, has been characterized by a minimum of laboring on the tent and a maximum of sitting down and playing in it. Even "heaven" has usually been conceived of as a place where, our earthly tent-building labors over, we sit down and play forever in the tent our earthly labors have built — hoping, of course, that those labors will have been sufficient to build the tent into quite a heavenly mansion.

Throughout the centuries, for Man "building the tent" has meant the providing for himself and his family the basic essentials of human existence — food, clothing, and shelter —, and with relatively few exceptions here and there the providing of them has kept Man busy all of his life, so that he has died more or less happy still building on his tent and dreaming of the wonderful time he would have playing in it if only he could ever finish the hard labor of building it. But here in the United States within the last half-century, Man has been suddenly catapulted into a situation where those basic essentials of human existence can be provided with a relatively small expenditure of effort and time, and where it is therefore possible for even a majority of men to have a lot of time and energy left over for the sitting down and playing in the tent, and where — what is proving even more tragic — it is possible for many parents to provide their children with ready-made tents under the fond delusion that they're thereby providing them with shelters in which their lives will be lived securely — and therefore happily — ever after.

Yet even here and now, certainly for this generation and for many generations to come, the building of the tent is going to mean for most men what is generally referred to as "work" in one form or another. Decreasing the hours per week, or the years per life, devoted to work is not necessarily carrying men that much nearer the heavenly Utopia of idle pleasure of which they dream, but is more probably taking them that much closer to an earthly hell of ennui, boredom, and frustration of which they have little idea until they're already in the middle of it, no more than did we four little boys when we sat down to play in the tent on that hot summer afternoon — and most men caught in that spot are not lucky enough to have a good place to go and start digging a hole.

Moreover, from my own observation of the thousands of college students with whom I have lived for twenty-five years, the efforts of parents to provide their children with ready-made tents to shelter them from the rigors of life, especially from anything like hard work, do not result at all in the security and happiness which the parents fondly hope for their children, but result rather in robbing the children of the most glorious part of their living as they're growing up, and at the same time render them largely unfit for the living that most of them are going to have to do after they're grown, whether they like it or are good at it or not, and regardless of how big a ready-made tent the parents have attempted to provide for them.

I have been sometimes amused and sometimes exasperated by the attitude of my friends toward my attempts to let my own three sons find the good life as I conceive of it, and particularly toward my efforts to allow them at an early age to discover for themselves the satisfaction and pleasure to be derived from hard work.

For example, when I saw that each of my three boys had the out-of-door experiences along with me that resulted in his catching his first small-mouth bass in swift water by the time he was six years of age, and in his killing his first quail on the wing with his little .410 gauge single-shot by the time he was ten, I was approved of by my friends as a fine Dad — I was being "a pal to my boys" in teaching them to play.

But those same friends seemed to think I was either cruel or crazy when I permitted (and I use the word "permitted" advisedly — boys like to work if they get half a chance) those same boys at eleven years of age to face a Texas Panhandle winter before daylight on a paper route; and at twelve to start "hiring out" to drive tractors and combines in the plains wheat harvest; and in their early teens start borrowing money at the bank over their own signatures and leasing land and raising cattle and hogs as they went through high school. From the standpoint of my friends, who were concerned particularly with protecting their children from the hard times which they themselves had had, such cares and responsibilities as those which my boys were allowed to have, and especially the long hours of hard labor that went with them, were onerous hardships against which boys should be protected if their parents' economic circumstances would permit — and mine would have.

But I know that to my three sons those experiences were not hardships, they were adventures; and that through them they learned that there's just as much adventurous romance in work as in play, and a great deal more besides. They weren't *slaving* on those days and nights my friends felt sorry for them: they were *living* — living gloriously, building the tent in great ways. And along with their building, they were getting the best "social security" there is: that which comes from a feeling of being *needed* in the world — needed because one can do a good job of something that is important in the lives of other people.

Always I shall remember with gratitude the expression on the face of Bill when at eleven years of age he said to me, "You know, Dad, I have the streets all to myself when I go to get my papers in the morning, and the houses are all dark, with the people all asleep. Then by the time I get my papers folded and loaded onto my bicycle and start my route, a few lights are beginning to come on, and in the east the sky is getting light. Then as I make my rounds, *I get to see all the town wake up and have breakfast.*"

A big pole went up in Bill's tent on the morning he first became

aware of these things. I had introduced him to the beauty of mallards wheeling against the sky at sunrise as seen from a duck blind; but all by himself he had discovered the beauty of a sleeping town waking up against a gray sky as seen from a moving bicycle. His discovery was better than mine; especially when there went with it a developing awareness that what he was doing was really important to the lives of the people turning on the lights in the houses as he passed.

And always I shall remember Jim's face on a July day of the summer he was fourteen when he informed us that he just couldn't go with us on the family vacation because, as he said, "Well, you see, we're through combining and the wheat's all in. But we've still got almost three more sections to plow, and Mr. Byrd *just can't get along without me until the plowing's done.*" A big strip went up on Jim's tent on the day he felt that much needed in the world, and the vacation he missed wouldn't have been for him nearly as glorious living as were those days spent driving a big "M" tractor and turning a sixteen-foot swath of the golden wheat stubble under the dark prairie soil as he went.

Nor shall I ever forget Marvin's sixteen-year-old face on the day he came in from the Tri-State Fair with his arms full of grand champion banners and blue ribbons after his swine had won more prizes than those of any other breeder showing in the open competition at the big fair; and neither shall I ever forget the vibrant excitement in his voice that night when he telephoned from the Fort Worth stockyards and said, "Dad, guess what! Our load of steers topped the Fort Worth market today at 38 cents."

There is no more satisfying or glorious living on earth than that to be found in working hard at something worth doing, and there is no sense of security for a human being on this earth that even approaches that which comes to him as he feels the honest reward of long, hard, painstaking labor performed in open competition with others. Marvin's tent went up at least a foot on the day his swine carried off the top prizes at the Tri-State Fair and another foot on the day his steers topped the Fort Worth market, but more important, those days of final triumph had been preceded by months and years of glorious living as he worked hard in the building of the tent.

During the quarter century I have spent helping college students with the building of their tents, I have seen six college generations come and go, and each generation has been definitely better than the last. Every September for twenty-five years I have shaken hands with several hundred eighteen-year-old boys and girls just graduated from all sizes and varieties of American high schools, coming from all kinds of American homes, usually having just left those homes for the first time.

Each fall these American youth have been perceptibly better — better fed, clothed, and groomed; better poised and better mannered;

yes, and better educated, too, including their reading, writing, and arithmetic, as their entrance examinations indicate, certain current writings to the contrary notwithstanding. I have felt proud of them each fall as I have watched them come down the receiving line, the hopes and aspirations not only of themselves but of their parents shining in their eyes; and I have felt proud not only of our American youth but of us American parents for having produced them. In general, we have done a good job and have a right to be proud.

But along with this pride has been a steadily mounting fear as I have seen even in these eager young faces the gradual growth of the blight which I fear will destroy us, because along with all the good things we have done for them, we have done the bad thing of indoctrinating them only too successfully with our own false ideal that the good life is to be found in some kind of playful activity to be indulged in after the labor of constructing the tent has been completed rather than in the constructive effort of building on the tent itself. Furthermore, in our anxiety to protect our children from what we sometimes refer to as the "hard times we had," we have gone to such lengths in providing them with various kinds of ready-made tents for protection that they themselves are hardly aware that there *could* be any ideal except that of playing in the tent after the hard labor of constructing it has been done — preferably by someone else.

No wonder that one can see in the eyes of a constantly increasing number of those boys and girls each fall a quiet expectation of being well taken care of by someone else all the rest of their lives — one is tempted to call them the "kept generation." And no wonder that out of the ennui and boredom which result from their "kept" status come sporadic eruptions of juvenile delinquency, whether it be in the form of the relatively innocuous "dorm raids" on college campuses or in that of the more serious teen-age gang wars in the big cities.

We Americans of this parent generation need desperately to shake ourselves awake and discover the falsity of Man's long-cherished Utopian dream of finishing one's tent and sitting down to play in it; if we will not do it for our own sake, we *must* do it for the sake of our children. The formula is very simple: Let them build their own tents.

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