



## MY SKILLS, MYSELF

BY CHRISTOPHER BORRELLI

Find a quiet space. Somewhere putty-colored. Your dentist's office should work. Your woodshed is another good option, though I suspect you don't own a woodshed, because you don't know how to chop wood. Your grandfather knew how to chop wood. I point that out because I would like you to think hard about what you know how to do. I want you to make a list of your unique skills, and frankly, you will need a quiet space to sob at this harsh realization: You don't know how to do anything. ■ You don't know to chop wood. Forage. Or talk to Comcast without crying. ■ Sorry, but ask yourself: What do I know how to do better than anyone else? Is there anything I do for mankind that someone who doesn't know how to do that thing at all would need me to do? ■ You say your talent is tying sailing knots? You can do the fabled poacher's knot or more ubiquitous running bowline in four seconds? Congratulations! You can count tying sailing knots!

The downside is you can't tie sailing knots.

Who are you kidding?

You don't know how to do anything.

Certainly, I don't know how to do much.

I'm fairly useless and good for extremely

I don't know how to gauge if the temperature of the dryer is hot enough. I don't know how to pack a suitcase. I own several video game systems but have never learned how to hook up a single one.

Accuse me of incompetence, but it only took me three tries before I spelled "incompetence" correctly, and I like to think of this problem as a dawning 21st-Century recognition that there are only a handful of people who know how to do anything at all. Because those people understand their talents better than you do, hire them. My mail, for instance, is awash in people promoting services I should no longer bother learning how to perform. This morning alone I have been emailed by people who can tell me how to eat a soft shell crab, raise a biracial child and/or master the art of embroidery.

I could learn how to do this stuff. But I prefer not adding to redundancy. How will I know what I can do and my place in the world if I learn to do what others already know how to do? I need to be me. Which means I don't need to know how to load a dishwasher properly or read anything in German.

Perhaps the problem here is I am not encouraged to learn to do anything anymore. A byproduct of the tech age is the disappearance of many instruction manuals — if you can't set up an Apple product, you shouldn't own one. Likewise, a cell phone doesn't fix itself, a new one is as good as saying "I agree to extend my service plan by 25 years." I used to think my grandmother was nuts for keeping the unnecessary instruction manuals still provided — likely for legal reasons — with a handful of easy-to-grasp consumer goods such as table fans and reusable water bottles. But now I get it. She is ahead of the curve: Someday the people who write these manuals will be dead and someone will need to know how to work a beer cooler.

That said, maybe usefulness is in the eye of the beholder. Like Liam Neeson, I, too, possess a particular set of skills acquired over many years.

I know how to identify clam shells.

I know how to watch "Saturday Night Live" on fast-forward without missing anything.

I know how to arrange myself on the bus so that no one can see the title of the book I'm reading.

I know how to spot another writer — as I write this, a woman across from me thinks she is being surreptitious and catching glimpses of me and writing details in her journal but I know that game.

I know how to enrage tailgaters.

I know how to eat milk chocolate and cause my earlobes to bleed (sorry, a nontransferable skill).

And I know how to end a story so unsatisfactorily that I wonder if I can do anything at all.

Yes, I know how to do that.

Let me know if I can help. ■

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