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Woodworker\*

CRAIG MOSHIER

As my hands press the plane forward, a smooth shaving curls up from the keen edge, filling the air with the tangy scent of fresh-cut pine. There is a soothing rhythm to the strokes of the plane and a delightful uniqueness in each spiraled shaving.

My chisel and mallet seek some more-organic form hidden within a block of Hawaiian koa wood. The power saw that cut the block is no respecter of the flowing lines of light and dark that mark the pattern of growth. Sometimes, when my efforts at seeking the life-lines in the wood succeed, the form seems to take on a liveliness reminiscent of the forces that shaped the once tall and supple tree.

Now, as I seek to shape my life in more flexible, natural ways, the schools and offices that claimed so many of my years seem like a buzz saw that cut me into blocks irrespective of the life forms hidden within.

There are so many joys in my new vocation I wonder that I did not find it sooner. Perhaps, my life had to be cut into blocks in order for me to know that was not the form I sought. Yet, there are connections, too. The enjoyment I once got from organizing ideas and programs and peace matches I now find in planning the sequence of tasks and gathering materials to build a table. It is satisfying to see my hands transforming boards and glue into functional and even beautiful objects.

Working for myself I have a flexibility and a discipline that is rarely found in offices that structure work into eight-hour days and fifty-week years. I find freedom within my work, not just during my "time off." Even when I choose to discipline myself to eight-hour days, I feel more free knowing that I am choosing that schedule, either as self-discipline or so I

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can conveniently work with others. I struggle, when working for myself, to find a balance between demanding regular eight-hour days of myself in order to earn money, learn new skills, and do quality work, on the one hand, and taking time to play with my family, on the other.

I have time between jobs for other activities. I can take a day off each week to build projects for my own pleasure. In fact, the line between work and play blurs because I have such fun at my work. Tools become toys when I go to play in the shop.

As a free-lance woodworker I work for myself or for a client with whom I have some personal contact. The client knows that it is I and not some impersonal factory or machine creating the product. Both praise and criticism come directly to me. Expectations for the form and quality of the job are set by me, alone or in dialogue with the client. In either case I participate directly in setting expectations for my work, and thereby find myself committed to them. This brings pleasure when the product meets the standard and anguish when I sometimes fall short. As in any demanding personal endeavor, part of myself becomes invested in my work, so that I am happy when it is going well and sometimes depressed when I do poorly.

I am also learning more about my relationship to authority. I find it easier to use external authority—like a foreman's or client's expecting me on the job at 8 A.M. each morning—to motivate myself to work. Yet, I find greater satisfaction when I can internalize the authority and muster the self-discipline to go to work regularly in my own shop when only I know how many hours I work. I learned such self-discipline as a student, but then it was under the external threat of grades and disapproving teachers, which I came to internalize as guilt. The wide range of available jobs, from wood carving in my own shop to framing houses on a crew or even working in a factory, provides many levels of internal and external authority, so I have some flexibility to choose the level at which I feel comfortable at any given time.

There is clarity and concreteness in the woodworking craft. I work with materials rather than ideas or personalities. Most of my work is sequential, orderly, and structured. Work proceeds step by step. Foundations must be built before walls, wood cut before being finished. Progress is easily seen as walls are raised and rafters set. Sometimes work goes fast and sometimes slow, but at the end of every day I can see what I have done. I find this continually rewarding.

These rewards are immediate and "self-bestowed." I need not wait for a teacher or boss to tell me whether a cabinet is square or a floor level. Once I have learned the standards of high quality for a particular type of work, I decide for myself whether the job is properly done. I enjoy the freedom to judge my own work and also the challenge to my integrity that is implicit in every decision I make about quality.

I find satisfaction in discovering the direct link between the form and the function of the things I build. There is pleasure in erecting a house that will warmly shelter a family and provide spaces that facilitate their particular living patterns. The same is true of a child's pull toy, which both evokes laughter and withstands considerable knocking about. When I understand and observe the direct relation between the form and the function of a project, I get a sense of clarity that makes the work flow more smoothly.

Every job seems to pose new challenges to my growing skills. There is such variety in the types of work available that when I get bored I simply choose a different area for my next job. When I tire of framing houses, I build furniture. When I get lonely in the shop, I seek bigger jobs with other workers. The range of skills that can be developed is so broad that I know I will spend many years as an active learner, enduring the frustrations and cherishing the joys of that process.

The many different woodworking skills can be generalized and transferred, so I rarely feel completely at a loss about how to solve a new problem. Relevant past experience is usually available to guide new learning. This range of transferable skills also gives me the secure feeling that I will likely be able to find work in almost any place at almost any time. The work is not always steady. There are seasonal fluctuations and changes dependent upon the state of the economy, but there are so many kinds of work that something is almost always available.

The key to finding plenty of work seems to be developing a reputation for quality and efficiency (that is, reasonable cost). I am encouraged by an increasing demand in the nation for quality hand craftsmanship. Perhaps it is a passing fashion, or perhaps it is a real trend away from the dreary uniformity of mass-produced goods, large factories, anonymous, alienated employees, and concentrations of power and wealth in the hands of a few capitalists.

A client once told me that he felt guilty asking me to remodel his garage for him while he sat in his office, since he was capable of doing the job himself. I realized that I was very happy it was he and not I going to his office every day in a suit and tie and that I was glad he had the money to pay me to do work I enjoy.

Most of the skills I have were learned on the job—what John Dewey and his followers called "learning by doing." Sometimes I learn slowly by my own trials and errors. I learn more quickly when I work with someone more skilled than I who can offer advice and answer questions. Apprenticeship is one of the oldest and most effective teaching-learning strategies. This teacher-apprentice relationship has, in my experience, also been an opportunity for forming friendships that make the work flow more smoothly. My woodworking teachers shared their skills and knowledge so that together we could do the work more quickly and accurately

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—quite unlike some authoritarian teaching styles I experienced in classrooms.

I am intrigued by the possibilities for cooperation inherent in the crafts and trades. Their variety, flexibility, and lack of officially determined credentials make for fewer barriers caused by specialization and less emphasis on hierarchical measures of status, all of which should make it easier for people to form cooperative work groups in which they can share their tools and skills, as well as themselves. The friendships and group cohesion that can develop in such a cooperative endeavor make the work all that much more enjoyable.

I now find myself with a set of useful skills that contribute to a sense of identity based on concrete work and achievements. These skills and the work I can produce give meaning to my life, meaning that is tangible, self-renewing, and growing—and very personal. To the extent that my craft becomes art my individuality is expressed through work that others can use and enjoy.

It is, after all, more healthy, both personally and socially, for me to gain pleasure and self-esteem through the quality of my craftsmanship and the beauty and functionality of my work than through struggling for a position of wealth, authority, and power over other people. And it is certainly more fun.