



Issue 31, January 2023

Hi Steve R,

The last week of the year always has a funky vibe to it. That weird, sleepy zone of half-activity between Christmas and the New Year. I mean, technically it's a normal work week, but a lot of people take it off and those that do work, work at a slower, more relaxed pace. (Except for retail workers. 😞) Very few big decisions, business deals, or transactions take place. Nobody's buying homes or getting married. It's almost a non-week, a holding pattern. I think this final week of the year should officially be called "Intermission." The motto should be something like, "Do what you can. Or whatever."

Suddenly, January is thrust upon us and life returns to normal. The universe is restored. We have a WHOLE YEAR to look forward to! Remember this feeling because as soon as the kids are out of school for the summer you will most definitely proclaim, "I can't believe it's June already. This year sure is flying by!" And nobody ever disagrees.

As much as January may feel like the doldrums of the year, it can be the most exciting, optimistic month of them all. It's a natural time to imagine the things we hope to do and accomplish this year. 2023 is a blank slate.

Based on my informal polling, very few people actually set any New Year's resolutions. Most experts will warn you not to set vague goals, i.e. "I want to lose weight" since those kinds of goals aren't measurable and we get discouraged when our expectations aren't met. If you are serious about setting specific goals, "I want to lose 10 pounds in three months," you should begin on the day you resolve to do so and put a plan in place. No need to wait until January.

But we're looking at New Year's resolutions all wrong. In fact, I'd like to *encourage* you to make vague and immeasurable resolutions. It's affirming to proclaim things we'd like to

improve about ourselves and share those desires with others. Setting a resolution is an opportunity to assess our general intentions for self-improvement and share those feelings with others. The act of simply stating these things is healthy.

Personally, I resolve to be a better listener this year and to ask people about themselves. I resolve to make “yes” my default response and I resolve to not worry about things I can’t control. I resolve to project a positive, happy image to every stranger I meet and initiate conversations.

There are no tape measures for happiness, but that doesn’t matter. Go ahead and think of traits you’d like to improve and keep them in mind as you meander through the year. This is a personal affirmation.

Time to declutter our shops

In the meantime, let’s get our shops tidied up. This IS achievable, something we can all do, and it will be finished whenever we declare so. It’s also measurable: take before and after photos. **Oh! If you do this, send me those photos!** I’m planning a minor makeover for my shop this month and I’ll be sure to make a video with a shop tour. It’s been a minute since I’ve done one of those. Hopefully, you will find some of what I’m planning useful for your own space.

I would be remiss if I didn’t plug [The Weekend Workshop](#), my online course dedicated to setting up a complete workshop no matter how much space you have. It’s perfect for those of you starting from scratch and equally useful for those of you who already have a shop and want to reorganize and make it more functional. It includes videos and plans for all the storage cabinets, tool stands, and work tables you see in my shop, along with a ton of practical tips and advice for setting up a good workflow, lighting, organization, storage, and air quality. I guarantee you will love this course.

A workshop is a constantly evolving space and after more than two decades in my shop, I’m still making changes and improvements. A continual source of frustrating disarray for me is The Horizontal Surface. If there’s a place to set something down, something will get set down. (Feel free to quote me on that pearl of wisdom.) The problem isn’t in the act of setting a thing on a work surface, that’s an inevitable part of a normal workflow. Work surface clutter accumulates when those items have no homes.

A big part of the solution is finding forever homes, a dedicated spot for everything. For instance, if I need to put away my random orbit sander I don’t have to think about it; there’s a specific spot on the top of my sanding station. Boom, it’s put away. Where organization goes astray is when we don’t know exactly where to put something, so we shove it into a storage cabinet or on a shelf, just to get it out of the way. It sort of feels like we tidied up, but really we just transferred the clutter to a different space and actually made the problem worse. Out of sight will not be out of mind the next time you need to find your torpedo level and have to open and close every drawer and cabinet to find it.

Decluttering and organizing are related, but not the same. You can declutter by shoving junk in cabinets or on shelves, but we've simply transferred the mess to a less visible space. Your first solution to decluttering *shouldn't* be adding more storage. If we don't address the reasons why clutter gets the best of us, it will be a continual problem. And no, "Oh, I guess I just get lazy" isn't a valid excuse.

To begin transforming your shop into a clean, tidy, efficient workspace, do NOT start with the visible clutter. Don't touch it. Leave it alone for now, otherwise you're likely to sweep it under your metaphorical shop rug. Begin with the storage spaces you already have. Do this systematically and work your way around the shop. Here's my official...

THREE-STEP PROCESS FOR DECLUTTERING

1. Go through every item stored in these cabinets or shelves; I think it's worth actually touching everything, *a la* Marie Kondo, because sometimes we have certain items for so long, we don't even see them. Establish two collection piles somewhere. The first pile will be for items that **NEED TO MOVE ON**: dried-up wood putty, used hacksaw blades, a broken hand plane you've been meaning to fix for 10 years. You'll have to decide for yourself if you'll *realistically* ever use certain items, but try to be honest with yourself. *Letting go of things is the most important, but also the most difficult part of decluttering.*

The most common cliché I hear that leads to hoarding is, "As soon as I get rid of something, I'll need it the next day." Or, as creative people we like to think that, "I could do something with that someday." There's no way I can set a hard and fast rule as to how long you should keep things that will never serve any useful function, but it's pretty unlikely you'll use something you haven't used in 5 years. You just have to be honest with yourself, break emotional attachments to things, and imagine what it will be like to work in a clean, well-organized shop.

2. The second pile will be for **HOMELESS THINGS**. This will be all of the stuff that seems to be in the wrong neighborhood. If you have a cabinet that's mostly finishing supplies, maybe extra glue doesn't really belong there. (I keep glue with my clamps.) Your table saw push sticks probably don't like being stored in the sandpaper zone. As you're doing this, you'll begin to discover what each space *should logically* contain. While you're pulling out the oddballs, you'll naturally start arranging the stuff intended for those cabinets.
3. Once all the storage spaces have been rummaged through, look at your two piles and marvel at them. Remove the **NEEDS TO MOVE ON** pile from your shop. Say your tearful goodbyes, but get it out of there right now. Donate what you can, and throw away the rest. Once it's gone, you won't miss it.

Introduce all the **HOMELESS THINGS** to their new homes. You should have a pretty good idea of where most things belong by now and established zones of similar items.

If at the end of this process you have some things left over that don't seem to belong in any particular area, you've identified your **ORPHANS**. This is the stuff that will end up sitting on your workbench. I'm not opposed to establishing an orphanage, a *single* space you can *temporarily* put this stuff for you to deal with later. An orphanage isn't a permanent solution, but avoid placing anything in a home that's not a good match. And whatever you do, don't open up a second orphanage! The goal is to have an empty orphanage.

Finally, avoid thinking that every storage space needs to be filled. Rejoice in any empty shelves you may end up with. Now start making things. Spring Cleaning is right around the corner.

Have a great 2023!

Steve

Basic Woodworking Reboot

One of my intentions this year is to reboot my Basic Woodworking series. I've published many of these videos over the years, and they are still valid resources, but I want to cover the basics in a more comprehensive, structured, and detailed manner. Woodworking for Mere Mortals needs to be a one-stop shop for beginners to get oriented in a hobby that can seem overwhelming.

I kicked off the series with [Safety Basics](#), which I mentioned in last month's issue. The next video is a comprehensive look at the Basic Tools new woodworkers will need to set up shop. We'll explore the use of individual tools and techniques as this series progresses.



Along with Basics videos, I've begun a new series of detailed project videos that seem to be well-received by viewers. In these videos, designed for woodworkers of all skill levels, I'll take you through every step of the process of making wood projects, all with an eye on simplicity. Every video contains tips and tricks that everyone can benefit from.



Will AI take over woodworking?

Artificial Intelligence has been a hot topic for the past few months, especially with the release of ChatGPT which can write entire essays with nuance and intention, based on any prompt. DALL-E can produce art in any style you like and everyone has tried out Lensa. I predict that soon, woodworkers will combine AI with digital fabrication machines to design and build projects that will require very little human intervention. Simply describe the dresser you want, in your preferred period style, and let the computer design and build most of it.

Of course, this stuff is still in its infancy, but it's moving fast.

I recently had my friend Jon Grim on The WTS podcast to talk about AI art and what it means to human artists. It's an interesting conversation.



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This Month's Member Projects

Here are a few of the awesome projects made by course members this month.



Cool Santa Cruz Bed

I think the Santa Cruz bed is one of the coolest beds you can make.

Here's one that [Powered Up](#) course member, Stephen, made for his daughter for Christmas. The lighting and footboard details are fantastic!

Beautiful ornaments

I love these delicate tree ornaments that Ash, a member of [The Weekend Woodworker](#), turned.



Scrap wood for the win!

I'm always interested in the ways people use scrap wood. Check out this cool trivet Casey made.

P.S. If you are new this month, you can read last month's issue of Notes From the Shop [here](#).

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