



## Issue 33, March 2023

Hi Steve R,

If it feels like winter has been dragging on, just remember that spring begins on March 20th! Of course, that's just a date; your winter mileage may vary. I've been slowly decluttering my shop and moving the furniture around a bit, but mostly I end up with the big power tools right back where they've been for a long time. With over 20 years in the same shop, I guess I've settled into the optimum placement of my tools. Right now, my mission is to clean out and organize my storage cabinets. I was surprised by how many cans of dried-up paint and expired finishing products I had. That, and how many unnecessary tools and odds and ends I've accumulated.

As I mentioned in a previous newsletter, it's important that I find permanent storage locations for all of my tools and supplies and to keep them with similar items. Are you thinking about doing some spring cleaning? It's a great way to start fresh for an active project-building season.

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I was recently at [Green Apple Books](#) in San Francisco (if you know, you know) looking for my next monthly novel. The internet and technology have not rendered this bookstore obsolete the way they did B. Dalton, Waldenbooks, and other bland chain bookstores. On the contrary, Green Apple seems to be thriving just as it did in 1967. Why? Because it has a soul. A vibe. There's human energy among its narrow passageways, rickety staircases, and stacks of new, used, and rare books. Like a funky local cafe, it's not a location, **it's a place**. A location is somewhere you have to go, like a hospital or a grocery store, or somewhere you go without attaching any special meaning. **A place is somewhere you want to go**. You can grab a bite at Olive Garden or go to that "cool little Italian *place* on Columbus Avenue." You get the idea.



eBooks

Green Apple has a magazine section specializing in mostly small, independent, and local publications. Dead-tree versions of major newspapers and magazines may be on life-support, but niche magazines are blossoming. Why? Because they seem to have a soul. You sense that these are put together by passionate young people who have something to share with the world. It's almost radical. These internet-age periodicals are typically ad-free, exquisitely designed, and beautifully bound items meant to be savored and saved. They might only be published quarterly or semi-annually and readers are happy to support their missions by paying \$20 or more per issue. I bought an issue of [The San Franciscan](#), a newish magazine sort of like *The New Yorker*, but less pretentious (lol jk NY, I still heart you). After getting home and reading it cover to cover, I subscribed. It just feels so cozy and handmade and written with a love for The City.



## Everything old is new again

Those of you who are around my age will remember having to learn to write in cursive as children in the second or third grade. We just called it “handwriting.” Some children struggled with learning to make those weird loopy letters that all connected while others embraced its inherent fussiness. The capital Q looked to me like a 2, and I wondered why

the lowercase m had three humps instead of the two I was familiar with from my experience with “printing.” That’s what we called writing with disconnected block letters like you are reading here. I thought printing was for little kids and handwriting was for big kids. As an adult, I write in block letters, all caps. It’s a clear and effective means of handwritten communication. But let’s be real, I rarely need to write anything by hand these days, other than the occasional note to myself.

Sometime in the past couple of decades, we stopped teaching kids cursive. This is a sensitive subject to some people who lament the swift demise of a common skill within the course of a generation, but to me, it’s quite sensible that children today aren’t expected to learn and become graded on their proficiency in a font-based art form. We literally had a category on our report cards called “penmanship.” I feel bad for kids who were dinged for their poor fine motor skills.

Cursive writing (as written by most people) is notoriously difficult to read, to the point where we usually compliment the rare individual who has “beautiful handwriting.” Not surprisingly, people with good handwriting often have an artistic disposition. The purpose of written language is to communicate ideas, so I’m not sure why we would want to write in a form that slows down the reader. The trade-off is that by lifting the pen less, writing cursive is faster than block letters, though recent studies have found it only marginally faster at best.

This form of scriptwriting all began for practical reasons. A quill filled with ink wrote smoother and was less likely to leave blobs of ink if you kept it in contact with the paper or parchment. This even extended into the 20th century with steel dip pens that also benefited from less frequent lifting from the paper. In short, cursive wasn’t as messy as block lettering.

Today, there appears to be no clear need to write in cursive other than tradition. Knowing how to form 26 capital block letters has served me just fine for 40 years. However, there’s a growing community of people who spend a lot of time learning and sharing their cursive writing skills. Handwriting has shifted from necessity to art, whether in the form of journal writing, calligraphy, or even graffiti. And it’s more beautiful than ever. Technology caused the commonplace to become special. To expand on my earlier metaphor, cursive writing used to be a location, but now, it’s a *place*.

### **Technological change tends to inspire people in unexpected ways**

Whenever technology revolutionizes something, we see a rebirth of interest in the “old ways” by very passionate people. Film photography and traditional darkroom printing is seeing a resurgence and there are even groups of ham radio enthusiasts keeping Morse code alive.

In the early 20th century, power tools revolutionized the way woodworking had been done for centuries. At first, these tools were big, expensive, and meant for professionals in production environments. By mid-century, homeowners could afford circular saws and power drills, and a couple of decades later table saws were common in hobby shops.

There is no longer any need to rip a board with a hand saw, hand cut joints, or flatten a board with a plane. Yet hand tool skills are being practiced today by a large, growing number of passionate people who are producing handmade furniture just as beautiful as anything from the past. Perhaps even better in some cases because these projects aren't made out of necessity, but out of the joy of craftsmanship.

We are now well into the digital revolution of woodworking. CNC machines and laser cutters are becoming more and more affordable and have moved from production shops into home workshops and yet, traditional power tool woodworking is more popular than ever.

Perhaps the biggest revolution knocking at the door is AI and robotic woodworking, which will reduce the need for direct human involvement. We will have the capacity to build exquisite, perfect furniture with very little physical effort. And what does this mean for the hobbyist woodworker? Will it destroy your hobby and everything you love about it? Not in the least! It means that there will be more types of woodworking available for people to practice, not less.

Some people will love having a robot to cut and assemble their projects, while old-timers passionately cling to their CNCs and continue sanding, gluing, and clamping by hand. Others, like me, will find contentment in making jigs for a table saw. And probably more people than ever will find personal fulfillment in building projects with chisels and draw knives.

It's just as easy to get excited about new technology as it is to get horrified at its implications. Just like printed magazines, calligraphy, and hand-cut wood, the human spirit always tends to find a counterbalance to technology in beautiful new ways. As woodworkers, finding this balance is easy because our own unique and quirky shops—whether in cramped basements or garages—are *Places*.

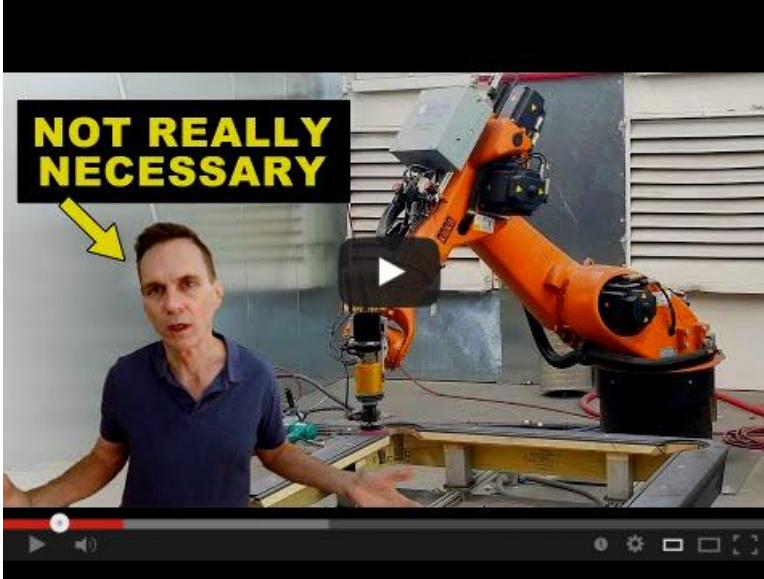
— Steve

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## **Our Obsession with Perfection**

As a companion piece to this issue's intro note, I recently made a video about the changing landscape of woodworking technology and where we go from here. Is it time to pack up our table saws? I find this a very compelling discussion and there have been a lot of thoughtful comments.

If you prefer to *read* this essay, you can [download a PDF here](#). Print it out if you want to feel oh-so retro.



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## Spring project

Looking for a project to jumpstart your spring building season?  
*Really! Spring is on the way!*

Here's a new version of a step stool I was prototyping last year. It's fun to make, super useful, and will give you a chance to work on half-lap joinery.



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## Podcast Updates

[The WTS Podcast](#) is a bi-weekly podcast all about the many, sometimes unexpected ways people express themselves through art and making things.

*If you enjoy the podcast, consider [supporting it over at Patreon](#)! Membership includes access to the video version of each episode.*

In the latest episodes, I spoke with **Basia Adamiec** from [The Art of Metalsmithing](#) about silversmithing and the process of creating fine jewelry.



Most recently, I had a conversation with **Morgan Eckroth**, from [Morgan Drinks Coffee](#). In a sea of angry videos, cynical videos, confrontational videos and noise, you really need to check out Morgan's short-form videos for a delightfully radical breath of fresh air.



*Be sure to check out The WTS Podcast every other Friday on [Apple Podcasts](#), [Spotify](#), or any other podcast app. Or visit the [WTS website](#).*

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By the way, if you're interested in discussions on culture and media, check out (or revisit) my other podcast, [Chad and Steve Have a Podcast](#).

Chad and I are in this ever-changing show's "2.0" phase. We get into topics such as how AI is coming for us all, how "adding value" is the new justification for clickbait, decluttering, and even a rant in defense of Madonna.

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## Reader Mail

### ***Building projects and building confidence***

"Morning Steve,

Once again, appreciating the unique voice of your letter within the online woodworking space. Today's letter feels especially relevant for me, as I was just thinking about how the time I spend woodworking has really expanded my view of the skill sets I'm working on.

Layout and joinery, the habits of different wood species, and the finer points of using various tools are things that I knew I would develop, but I'm finding that getting better at making things has also required me to level up skills and traits like patience and planning and impulse control. (Also, I feel called out with the whole thing about going to the store for a screwdriver and coming home with a new drill & driver set).

I also appreciate you highlighting the self-reinforcing nature of this kind of work- you have a need, so you build up your tool set and your skill set to do that job, and then you are soon able to meet greater needs (with new tools and skills, of course), and so on. I'm feeling gratitude for that cycle (and for your veneration of the humble box), as a good friend of mine just asked if I would build an urn for the ashes of his recently deceased father. A year ago I would not have felt up to the task, but now I'm feeling up to the task, and honored to be able to do it.

Cheers,  
- TJ"

*Thanks, TJ. It all starts with a screwdriver! — Steve*

### ***Working with a small space***

"Hey Steve!

As many before me have already stated, your website and videos have been incredibly helpful for me as a new woodworker. Not only do you provide a ton of useful information, as well as easy-to-follow project videos & plans, you strive to make woodworking approachable, and you've absolutely NAILED IT. (yasssssss woodworking pun)

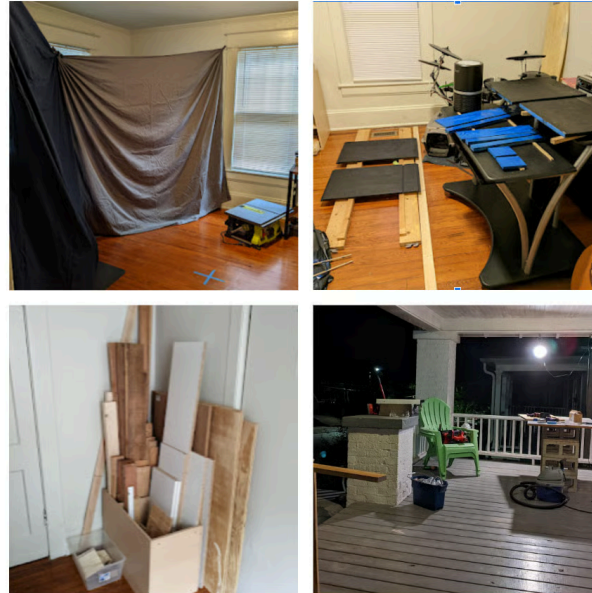
Anyway, I'm sure you get a ton of questions & requests, and you can't realistically address them all. Nonetheless, I humbly submit my own.... This newsletter made me think of one of my top challenges: my "shop." You've stated multiple times that you don't need a ton of space to get started, and you can setup a workshop "even if you have to share a garage." I have to admit, that last part always makes me laugh, because I would KILL to have any garage space, or even a shed! I am a renter, and I am incredibly fortunate to have a too-big-for-me house with a large front porch - but I'm still left storing things in two different rooms and lugging it all outside. Luckily I live in the South and I don't mind the heat, so working outdoors is fine for most months - as long as we ignore the issues caused by the temperature and humidity differences in and out!

You've mentioned that you once lived in an apartment and went up to the roof to work on projects. I would love to hear more about that, and I'm sure I'm not alone! For many people, the biggest barrier is not buying the tools - it's figuring out where to use and store them! I will say that I've taken inspiration from your shop tour videos & the projects listed for your Workshop course. I would happily enroll in the latter, except I have no place to put all of that shop furniture! 😊 However, I appreciate the modular design and having everything on wheels. I have started on a rolling cart for my table saw, which will actually fit under a shelf in my big closet - once I build a modified BMW with storage for all the

other tools currently sitting there. (Modified to also fit in the closet, of course. Thank goodness for large closets!!)

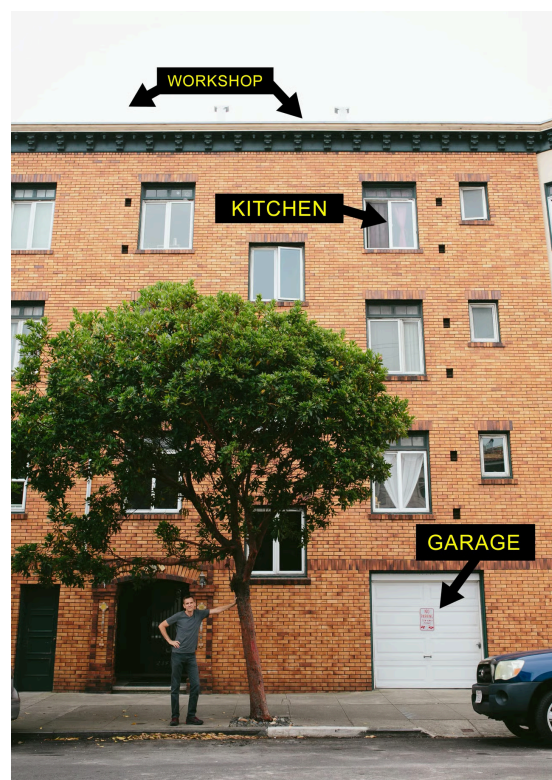
Thank you for all that you do!!!

Your fan,  
Pi”



Click [here](#) to see the full-size images.

*Yup. I built stuff on the roof of my apartment at Cabrillo and 25th Avenue in SF. I used handheld power tools with a long extension cord running out my kitchen window. As for storing the tools, we were lucky to have a tiny garage where we HAD to park the car. (Street parking was a challenge.) There were no outlets in the garage of this 1915 building, but it had a small area where I could store my tools. It was a lot of stair-climbing to the roof above the 3rd floor! — Steve*



## This Month's Reader Projects

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### Sonoma End Table

Here's [Weekend Woodworker](#) member Kai's take on the Sonoma Coffee Table. He scrunched it down to end-table size and added casters. By the way, shoutout to everyone who puts wheels on coffee tables. It just makes sense!

### Home Hardware Store

John's Home Hardware Store from [The Weekend Workshop](#) course. If you like making lots of tiny drawers, this project is perfect! The question when you're done is if you're going to label the drawers or just hone your memory, as I do with mine. 🤔



### Noteworthy Nightstand

Here's Claude's beautiful version of a [nightstand I made](#) quite a while back. There's something so nice about having small, very personal drawers on a stand next to the bed. Hey, you can keep your analog books and handwriting samples there!

*Made something you want over a quarter million people to see in this newsletter? Send me a pic!*

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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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