



Issue 41, November 2023

Hi Steve r,

Tomorrow morning, I'm going to participate in a neighborhood garage sale. It's one of these things organized by a local realtor. I'll bet you anything "Organize a neighborhood garage sale" is a bullet point on some realtor marketing conference presentation about "how to connect with your community" lol. At any rate, it's a good opportunity to declutter and get a few extra bucks for my effort.

As someone who's been spending the past decade extolling the virtues of living a more intentional, more minimal life, and reducing consumption, I'm frustrated that I have an offsite storage unit filled with junk I don't use, including a lot of tools.

A storage unit is a method for deferring decisions and serves as a purgatory for objects awaiting their final fates. I put things in there that I *probably* don't need, but "I better hang on to them for a while, *just in case.*" I'm literally paying a monthly fee to keep stuff I don't need. However, I'm committed to clearing it out and whatever remains after

the sale will get donated. Nothing I take out will go back into the unit.

While this speaks to my general life philosophy, it has a lot to do with woodworkers and our complicated relationships with tools. It's kind of assumed that woodworkers are supposed to form emotional attachments to our tools. This is especially true for ones that may have been given to us by friends or family members, even if we don't use them.

In my storage unit are two tools that my dad bought in the 1950s and that he gave to me 20 years ago: his lathe and his scroll saw. Long-time viewers of my show will recall a few projects I turned on the lathe and a few decorative items I made with the scroll saw.



My dad's scroll saw

I never saw my dad use those tools as he had stopped using them before I was born, but I always remember seeing them grouped together in a corner of his workshop. I never really knew what they were; they just looked like old machines. It wasn't until he bought a Shopsmith that I even understood what a lathe was. Oddly enough, that Shopsmith lathe was the first woodworking power tool I ever used, giving me the feeling that I was an artist before becoming a craftsman.



Turning on the lathe

For some reason, that lathe and scroll saw held a special significance to him, perhaps simply because he bought them in his late teens. So when he gave them to me in the mid-2000s I felt the weight of their importance. Dad kept these tools for all these years and had bestowed them upon me, so I felt obligated to cherish them, too. I built a workbench on which I mounted both tools, along with a system for swapping the motor and belts between them.

As it turned out, both antiques were kind of clunky and difficult to set up and use (especially due to my inexperience with them), but I kept them in my shop and my dad enjoyed seeing them when he visited. I rarely used them and their workbench collected a lot of other junk, kind of like a Peloton collects laundry lol. A lathe is a very specialized tool that doesn't fit into my style of woodworking, other than the occasional need to make round table legs. I feel like lathes are in better hands with artists who can bring out their full potential turning bowls, vases and other items. The same goes for scroll saws. In my small shop space, they were taking up too much real estate, which is why I moved them to the storage unit. Still, I clung to the *idea* of these tools, rather than their purpose.

But since I've been on this quest for workshop enlightenment over the past decade, I realized that these things are a burden. Tools are, well, tools. They should be used. I'm doing them a disservice when there are people who would absolutely love to fire them up, bring them back to life, and contribute beauty to the world.

This brings me to my embracing of intentionalism: understanding why I am bringing anything into my shop (or into my life) and how it will be used. On the flip side, if a tool is sitting idle for years, it's time to let someone else enjoy it. As a result, my shop is much less full of clutter and my brain is more focused.

I'm not suggesting we all stop buying tools or pare down our shops to a single chisel and a hand saw, but we can learn to be more savvy with our purchases and be smarter about why we are consuming. It's good for our wallets as well as the planet.



Making some kind of dramatic point back in 2018



But wait! You can still park a car in here lol!

In the past several years, there's been an explosion of tool influencers on YouTube, Instagram and other social media, relentlessly trying to convince us that the latest Big Brand tool is what we need. Many of these influencers rarely do any actual woodworking themselves and if they do, it's only in the interest of Brand Deal. And since they don't actually create or produce anything, *their product is you*, for sale to third parties. Even crazier, influencers now earn income *teaching* people how to be influencers. And even less is contributed to the world.

In these final two months of the year, we are going to be barraged with ads, videos, and promotions for very colorful tools with "deals too good to pass up!" No. We *can* pass them up. We have autonomy. A lot of people who otherwise consider themselves intelligent, smart consumers immune to advertising, will gladly dish out \$800 on a new miter saw because of a \$50 Black Friday deal. For more on how Instagram is fueling overconsumption, [watch this video from Cara Nicole](#).

So how can you be a more intentional tool owner and savvy buyer?

1) Understand what you want out of woodworking. The majority of the quarter million readers of this newsletter consider themselves hobbyists, but what exactly does that mean? I posed the question to *Lord GPT*:

“A hobby is a recreational activity or pursuit that an individual engages in for pleasure, relaxation, and personal enjoyment. Hobbies are typically undertaken during one’s leisure time and are driven by personal interests and passions. They provide an opportunity for individuals to explore their creativity, develop new skills, and immerse themselves in activities that bring them joy and satisfaction.”

Dig deep and ask yourself what exactly brings you the most pleasure from your hobby and actively take steps that will increase this joy. Consumption will rarely fill that need, but production will. Make things.

2) The most common “yeah, but” I hear when I talk about the overconsumption of tools goes something like this:

“I buy the best tools I can afford because they offer greater precision which leads to projects that are cleaner and fit together better. This allows me to better enjoy my time in the shop with less frustration.”

That sounds like a sales pitch! Here’s what woodworkers, especially new woodworkers, need to hear: Most consumer-grade power tools are pretty similar and yield quality results. The differences between a \$500 tool and a \$1000 one might be too minuscule for hobbyists to even notice. As for the second part, you will *always* have frustrating moments in the shop! Usually, we can blame them on a bad day, not the tools. You can’t buy your way to a smooth woodworking experience.

3) Your woodworking is not defined by the tools you use. Avoid comparing your collection of tools to what other people have. I’ve

mentioned this in previous newsletter discussions: nobody who uses your furniture or other projects cares what tools you used or even how it was made. The expensive tools that people flex on social media are no reflection of your set-up. Flex your skills. Your work is already 100% better than the majority of people who never build anything in their lives.

4) Brands are largely irrelevant. Building a “tribe” around a brand is a powerful marketing strategy. We love to be in a camp with like-minded Milwaukee or DeWalt owners and get into heated debates over which large corporation we love more, but there’s not a whole lot of meaningful quality differences between brands of, say, similar impact drivers. People often ask why I paint my tools rainbow-colored. Since a single factory color isn’t important for me to display, I’d rather show them all. Plus, bright colors make me happy.



De-influenced tools

5) There’s nothing wrong with limitations. It’s a trap to assume that the tools we have are inadequate. Sure, sometimes they are junk and produce completely unacceptable results and need to be

replaced, but that's only one end of the spectrum. Almost any tool will have some sort of limitation you wish it didn't have, but that doesn't automatically warrant an upgrade. Even people with the highest-end tools quibble about their machines. The more you use a tool, the more you'll develop a natural rapport with those quirks. Indeed, your workflow will become even more personal.

6) If you see someone promoting a tool online, investigate a little deeper to see if they actually use it in their shop on a regular basis. Tool companies hand out free tools to influencers like candy. Most tool "reviews" are also promotions. No influencer is going to bite the hand that feeds them.

7) "If it ain't sparkin' joy, ditch it." I'm pretty sure that's a direct quote from Marie Kondo. There are a number of reasons we all hang on to tools we never use. We like to tell ourselves that we "might need that dovetail jig someday" but that day never comes. Plus it's the sunk-cost fallacy...we spent the money so we can't just get rid of it. We might even look at that tool with regret, so wouldn't it bring you more happiness to give it to someone who would actually use it?

Or maybe this is the universe asking if you want to learn how to hand cut dovetail joints (or hold your head up high using pocket screws 😂).



8) Avoid emotional attachments to objects. My dad's lathe is a machine designed to turn wood, not give me the feels—people should fulfill that role. Having a personal story behind a tool is awesome if you're getting a lot of use out of that tool, but if it's not getting used, it may be time to let someone else create their own stories with it. Prioritize the function and utility of a tool rather than its history. When deciding whether to keep or part with a tool, ask yourself whether it serves a genuine purpose in your current stage of woodworking and if it aligns with your woodworking goals.

9) Don't feel pressured to buy something because it's on sale, especially during the upcoming holiday season. There is no need to rush into a big purchase. If it's a tool you are genuinely going to use a lot, it will be worth every penny of its full price. Avoid succumbing

to FOMO; sales occur all the time.

10) Invest time in developing your woodworking skills. Sometimes, a lack of proficiency in using certain tools can lead to the misconception that you need better or more specialized tools. Improved skills can reduce the desire to constantly shop for tools.

Take from this whatever resonates with you. This is my personal perspective at this point in my woodworking journey. Everyone is different and will find fulfillment in their own way. Some people absolutely love shopping for and acquiring tools. Other people find great comfort in collecting tools, even if they aren't being used. And you know what? These are completely valid reasons to enjoy woodworking. Find your own path, even if it leads to a garage sale.

Quick reminder!

If you're thinking about making holiday gifts, now is the time to start. It's always crazy how fast this last part of the year flies by. I'm looking forward to making a number of Christmas projects to share with you over the coming weeks.

— Steve

P.S. [My Halloween video this year](#) had a little to say about influencer culture lol.

Monthly Project Feature

I recently made what I'm now calling the Personal Dressing Stand. I think. But I might call it a dressing stand. As of this writing, I haven't fully decided. At any rate, it's a cherry and maple stand designed to complement the nightstands I made recently.



Plans for both projects are available at [Shop WWMM](#). In fact, through the end of the month, readers of Notes from the Shop can get **both for the price of one**—just use the code **NFTSNOV23** at checkout.



Power Tools Market to grow by \$11.43 billion



Source: <https://www.prnewswire.com/>

Speaking of buying tools, I ran [across this \(rather dry\) article](#) about how the power tools market is booming and expected to grow by a whopping \$11.43 billion from 2022 to 2027.

The report looks at about 25 companies in the power tool game and how more and more people are using them, especially for home improvement.

The article cites a key trend driving the market is the adoption of cordless power tools. Wait, is this something new? Haven't we all mostly been using cordless tools for almost 20 years? 🙄

BTW, do you know what tool is the most competitive? The drill.

Creative Culture

This newsletter falls at an awkward time between podcast episodes because we're just coming off of Halloween. But if you just can't let go of the holiday, you'll love my annual Halloween episode with Ethan James. Lots of fun and scary movie recommendations. Also don't forget, I'm now posting complete video versions of the podcast on YouTube!



Listen to Creative Culture on all podcast platforms or the [Creative Culture website!](#)

Reader Mail


“Thank you Steve, for another excellent newsletter. A lot of years ago I watched you making a bandsaw box out of a block of timber and I have not stopped making things since, including building all our kitchen units from pine in a shaker style. Keep up the good work...thank you.”— Barry

I'm always fascinated by how a single spark of woodworking can lead to amazing things. Thanks for watching for so long! — Steve

“Steve—Because we all get more emails than we can humanly consume, I resort to “non-human” consumption methods. Here are the key takeaways from your recent email (according to AI). This one was particularly interesting so I thought I would share it with you:

- 1. Seasonal Reflection:** Steve Ramsey reflects on the transition from summer to autumn, drawing parallels between the changing seasons and the journey of a woodworker. Steve claims he does not do drugs.
- 2. Woodworking Journey:** The growth of a woodworker is likened to the life cycle of trees, emphasizing the importance of rest and reflection in one's woodworking journey. Again, Steve claims he does not do drugs.
- 3. Philosophy of Intentionalism:** Steve introduces his woodworking philosophy of "intentionalism," which focuses on deliberate choices in tools and materials. He plans to discuss this in more detail in a future newsletter. Like most woodworkers, the more they can emphasize tool selection methodologies, the more tools they can justify. This is a wonderful philosophy. [...]

In essence, the email touches on the themes of reflection, growth, and intentionality in woodworking, and provides updates on Steve’s recent activities and offers—all without doing drugs.” — Chet S.

 *This is too funny! Maybe your AI email reader is just being sarcastic, because I don't recall saying anything about drugs or justifying more tools in that newsletter! — Steve*

In response to my new bandsaw:

“The smaller ones are great. I picked up a 10” a while back. It is well made, but the tires were horrible and the blade weld was very poor so the blade rattled back and forth, and side to side, constantly. Noise and

vibration. New aftermarket tires and blade made a world of difference. It is now very smooth and quiet. Nice! Wouldn't want anything larger. It is the same as a number of saws under other brand names.” — Gordon

Agreed. I've been using this Wen 9" saw for a couple of months now and absolutely love it. I have experienced no problems beyond its size limitation for certain cuts, but there are always workarounds. — Steve

“Hi, Steve. I enjoyed reading about your bandsaw. I've been bandsawing in my garage/workshop for over 40 years. I have two now!!! Less blade changing. Every year I make lots of hearts to give away and little Mickeys to pass out at Disneyland. It is by far my favorite tool. I'm new to the lathe and enjoying that too. Long time subscriber, my daughter and I have made several of your projects and will continue into the future.” — Bob



I love the idea of giving out small handmade things in public places. I want to do that now. — Steve

“Thanks for this Steve. Great images of those beautiful aspens! You know, you write quite well; the paragraphs above are really well put together making for an enjoyable read. But maybe you have a writer working for you? I don't know. I found this one particularly fine (but that's

just me).

I've been considering a bandsaw but this one you've highlighted hasn't crossed my path. I'll be looking out for it as I venture into my tool sources.

Enjoy the autumn months!" — Bruce

Thanks for the compliment, Bruce. I do indeed write the monthly essays myself, over the course of a few days, and usually to the point of anxiety and obsession lol! — Steve

Thoughts on this month's newsletter? Drop me a line by replying to this email!

Reader Projects

Check out these awesome modifications of a few projects included in [The Weekend Woodworker](#) course!

Dennis didn't need a coffee table, so he modified the Sonoma Vineyard Coffee Table into an outdoor dining table to complement two Harmony Garden Benches. Love this!



One of the best parts of gaining woodworking experience is being able to adjust plans to suit your needs. Here's another great example from Ralph, who transformed the Parlor Bookcase!



Lisa also didn't need a coffee table so she converted hers to an end table with a spring lift! (For what it's worth, I eliminated the need for a coffee table from my living room a number of years ago and highly recommend the freedom of movement without it!)



Have you made something you want over a quarter million people to see in next month's newsletter? Just hit reply and send me a pic!

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