



## Issue 49, July 2024

Hello friends!

Update. This year's four tomato plants are exploding.



*Weird flex, but ok.*

## Summertime

As a latchkey Gen-X kid, July represented the freedom to do nothing. With the ritual conformity of school out of the way, I was free to wake up whenever I pleased and imagine a day free from plans or obligations.

Even so, I couldn't escape the sense that I needed some sort of routine in my life, so gameshows became my morning ritual. I would pour myself a bowl of cereal, sit in front of the TV, and watch *The Price is Right* and several other shows back-to-back. No idea why they fascinated me so much, but by August I could reasonably guess the manufacturer's suggested retail price of a Chrysler Cordoba with Rich Corinthian Leather in any Showcase Showdown.\*



*Ricardo Montalban livin' the life*

After Bob Barker's plea to spay and neuter my pets, I would turn off the TV, walk to the public pool and meet up with the neighborhood kids. We never called each other or scheduled to meet at any specific time; that brand of structure was for parents. We just found each other.

Sometimes friends from my inner circle would be there, sometimes not, but it didn't really matter because Marco Polo was the language that turned strangers into friends. At least for the day: we rarely even

bothered to exchange names. School talk was forbidden and there was minimal discussion about family or gameshows or anything beyond the pool. Nobody's class, status, or domestic situation was questioned. Even those kids whose moms insisted they wear T-shirts in the pool were welcomed as equals, although I felt empathy knowing they had to carry such a burden.

Outside of the pool, we invented a game called "Kill the Guy With the Ball." It had a complex, ever-evolving set of rules that accommodated whatever number of kids happened to be present and involved running full speed down a hill, chasing the Guy with the Ball and killing him. I don't remember exactly why you'd want to be the Guy With the Ball, but we all vied for that distinction. It's funny how we felt the need to establish rules and structure in these activities. Even at an early age, we have an instinct for self-governance. As freeform as nostalgia wants me to believe my summers were, they were filled with structured activities such as playing baseball, mowing lawns, and going on family road trips, all of which came with their own set of rules and expectations. We simply swapped waiting in lines at school and responding to Pavlovian bells, for a few months of other structured stimuli.

## **Nostalgia**

How much of our lives are spent meeting other people's demands? Our brains are good at painting the Bob Ross *Happy Cloud* version of our childhoods more often than Edvard Munch's *The Scream* version.



*Somewhere in the middle*

Anyone remember [\*Birth, School, Work, Death\*](#), the rather nihilistic 1987 song by The Godfathers? The chorus is just those four words collectively chanted by the whole band, each syllable sounding as similar and monotonous as the one preceding it. Its message is not subtle about our inability to step outside the rigid structures of life.

But does it have to be this way? We yearn for carefree July days without demands, but we're conflicted because it's unrealistic to live an unstructured life when there are bills to pay. (Besides, those summers weren't quite as unstructured as we remember.) If you're feeling this way, I suggest pursuing a little anti-structure. It's the difference between embracing a lack of structure (unstructure) and actively rejecting structure (anti-structure)...*for just a little bit.*

So for example, scheduling an *unstructured* day at the beach can be relaxing and restorative, but it fits within a structured framework of tried and true beach behavior, expectations and rules we are all familiar with. We know what we "can" or "should" do at the beach: read a trashy novel, write in a journal, sleep, throw a frisbee, build a sandcastle. We all basically conform.

## **Unstructured Woodworking**

Woodworking offers opportunities to explore these concepts. Try this *unstructured* activity: take a piece of plywood and cut it into a random shape using a jigsaw. Make it curved, jagged, or whatever. Just don't give yourself time to think about any particular design. Let the saw flow wherever your hand takes it.

Now take some paint, markers, crayons, or colored pencils and start doodling on the board. Again, there is no structure...let your hand wander until the entire board is a beautiful, colorful work of art. I can almost guarantee you will feel a sense of abandonment and freedom.

Think of it as kindergarten finger painting, activating your right brain by making spontaneous art. You have tapped into your creativity by creating artwork within a familiar parameter. It's a fun, unstructured activity that anyone would recognize as art. Hang your artwork on your shop wall to remind you that it can be healthy to eschew an agenda sometimes.

## **Anti-structure**

Now let's go deeper and take it to a place that challenges context by using this colorful doodled-on board to create something undefined, without rules. Gather up some wood scraps and start randomly gluing them to the board. Or screw them in place. What if you attached three legs? Is it starting to look like a chair? Maybe. We all have a notion of what a chair looks like. What if it actively rejects everyone's expectation of a chair because you weren't interested in structural integrity and you can't sit in it? Maybe it's a table, but one that's impossible to set a drink on because the top is a mosaic of bent nails.

People want to define everything. They will ask, "What the hell is it?" Or they will want to tell you it isn't what *they* think it is. "If you can't set something on it, it's not a table." Or better yet, that classic chestnut of structured thinking, "My kid could've made that!" which is a strong indication that they probably don't nurture this sort of exploration with their own kids lol.

This is *anti-structure*. Is it practical? Not in the least. It's about intentionally exploring the spontaneity we had as children in July but with even less structure. We are placing no judgment on our work. It's not "good" or "bad". We approach it without guilt, shame, expectations, definitions, or the approval of others.

If we can bare our souls in such a raw, undefined exercise, think of the pride and confidence we will feel when we build something conventional! Think how those "mistakes" we made with our first coffee table take on special significance as a marker of our uniqueness. Have a compulsion to point out your mistakes? Okay, go ahead. Point them out. Point out the beautiful character marks left by your hand on that coffee table. **Like any art or craft, woodworking is about getting to know ourselves in ways we can only discover *by ourselves*.**

Okay, ya hippie, none of this is to suggest ditching all structure from our lives and living a completely bohemian lifestyle, but it's entirely possible that we can become better craftspeople if we actively address our limiting beliefs. Thoughts like, "I could never build something like that," "I don't have the right tools," "I don't have any experience," "I'm not a creative person," or my favorite excuse to not explore life; "I'm too old to do that." Do me a favor and banish these phrases from your vocabulary.

Sometimes we just need someone to tell us that whatever path we're on is okay, so I'm giving you permission to explore woodworking beyond building furniture and the other amazing things that you are capable of creating. Anyone can learn how to do that. Allow yourself the freedom to use wood as a medium for discovering that curious 8-year-old summer version of yourself who was willing to live in the present. Make up your own rules if you want. Just be sure to break them at some point.

—Steve

*\*Price is Right purists will take issue with this, knowing that a Chrysler Cordoba with Rich Corinthian Leather would not have appeared in the Showcase Showdown because that's the round where contestants spun the big wheel competing to see who would participate in the ✨ Showcase ✨ — the lavish big money finale where you could indeed bid on a Chrysler Cordoba with Rich Corinthian Leather. And for the love of god, always pass on the first showcase! The second one is a treasure trove of jet skis, color TVs, Betamax*

## Cage that Hose

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### Limited tools!

You can build this hose box using just a miter saw and a drill. I designed

this to be assembled with screws driven from the insides so none of them will show. It uses off-the-rack 1 x 3 and 1 x 2 boards readily available at any home center. Obviously, try to select the straightest boards you can. The widths on these may vary slightly, but this is designed in such a way that it won't matter. No ripping boards on a table saw necessary.

[Plans available here!](#)



## Reader Mail

"I opened your recent email and I must say, it felt a little eerie as I finished reading it. Eerie in a good way. I connected with so many of the things you spoke about.

I too grow tomatoes and have always found it a challenge to keep the bushes under control but love the idea you have of using the wire fence as a cage for them to grow inside. Will definitely give that a go when I plant mine again. I live in Durban, South Africa, so it is winter at the

moment.

I am going through all the emotions you described in your email, so it came at a perfect time to reassure me that I am not being lazy and will find my way back to the bench when I am ready.

As I scrolled down and saw your Red X, I remembered that when I was teaching myself joinery techniques, this was an item I too thought about making. I use mine as a Trivet.

Lastly I really enjoyed your mention of using Papyrus and Comic Sans in one picture. (Typography Nerds Unite!)

Anyway, thanks for a great reminder that we are all just trying to get through life as best we can.

PS: you spoke about doing a simple project to get oneself back on the horse. I attached a picture of a Tapping box I made for my espresso grounds. Pretty simple and looks good. Feel free to share it if you like.”  
—Warren D.



*Everyone needs a Red X in their life lol. Yes, Comic Sans and Papyrus are retro-ironic chic now. —Steve*

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“Aloha! I really enjoy all your YouTube videos and have certainly learned a lot! I’m 80+ and have been making stuff and repairing things forever. Out of necessity or for the pleasure of it, I just enjoy making stuff. Right now (for the past 5 or more years – who’s counting?) it’s small boxes – again, your videos are great!

I especially like your “vision”: Do it because you like to do it, not to impress anybody, or sell stuff (I give my boxes away), but because you like it. And you like what you create. I will admit I was in the “I can’t make anything without making any mistakes” mode for years. Then I saw your comment about the thousands of boxes you made, each with at least one mistake that only you knew about. And you advised us to accept the fact that perfection will probably never happen. That changed my whole outlook on what I make and made it more fun, too. The challenge is still there, and that’s what makes it all worthwhile.

Last – I was surprised that in one of your videos about finishes, you recommended Deft lacquer spray. I was happy, I had been using that when lacquer was needed for a long time, and always pleased with the results!

I went to my local Ace last week – no more Deft :(

I was told they sold out to another company – It’s a PPG subsidiary. On the can of the new stuff, called “ProLuxe”, it says “same formula as Deft”. But I don’t know. Seems like it’s not the same – is the spray different? Anyway, I’m a little disappointed – probably all in my head. What do you think? Do you still use it?” Mahalo —Frank J.

*Oh yeah! I’m disappointed in the disappearance of Deft lacquer too. I’ve been using Watco, which I picked up at Ace. It works well! —Steve*

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“Long time fan, first time writer.

I enjoyed this letter very much, thanks for writing it. I wanted to ask if you could share your thoughts on a more specific aspect of this: balancing woodworking as a hobby and a job. I felt the same as many when I was making woodworking a hobby, and this article speaks to how I was feeling a few years ago. Currently, I'm in a new stage of transitioning to full-time woodworking and custom furniture making. There's plenty on the business side that I am schooling up on now and getting prepped for, but something happened to me recently that really made me stop and think about my priorities.

I was working on a series of conductor batons and having fun with it. I was trying to find ways to make these with high quality, quickly, and efficiently regarding cost and time. My first one took 2.5 hours and my 12th took about 50-60 minutes. I'd call this successful R&D and I'm still on the path to make this even more efficient. There was a step in the middle of this, however, that took some time to figure out. I was trying and trying, messing up, ruining materials, and there was a point where I felt I was getting nowhere and wasting time and money. It was more stressful than it should have been. On another project, I was practicing marquetry. It started off great until I hit a rough spot and again wasted material after material trying to get something to work.

I caught myself thinking “Well this will never sell. I'm not good enough at it. I need to make money so I need to find something else that I can make money with.” While logical and a good thought for a business mindset, I could see myself digging a grave for the part of my brain that likes to have fun and be creative with woodworking. While there are business practices that I'm working through and trying to find my niche, the thing I'm most worried about is not if my business will fail. I'm extremely persevering and maybe a bit stubborn. What I am concerned with is making sure I have the right balance between making money to provide for myself and a family along with having fun, enjoying my craft, trying and learning new things.

Have you ever experienced this feeling when you went full-time to

YouTube?

I'd very much enjoy hearing back from you. Thank you for your time." — Robert S.

*Yes, this is a big topic and one that I wrestle with all the time. It also helps explain why I don't post YouTube videos as often as I used to. We all need to find that balance ourselves, but I can certainly recommend the value of compartmentalizing art & creative pursuits. It's very easy to feel a need to monetize everything we do. Schedule time to create new crafts or try different techniques without the goal of incorporating them into your business. Spending time for your own personal curiosity might not make money, but ultimately our mental health is good for business.*  
—Steve

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***Thoughts on this month's newsletter? Got a story to tell? Just want to say hi?  
Drop me a line by simply replying to this email.***

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## Member Projects

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"Yesterday I made a smaller version of the Harmony Garden Bench. I've been taking the online woodworking class with Steve Ramsey. This is his design. He's a fabulous artist and teacher!"  
—Nancy H.



*Hey Nancy, thanks for showing how easily you modified the size of the Harmony Garden Bench to fit your needs! These look great.* —Steve

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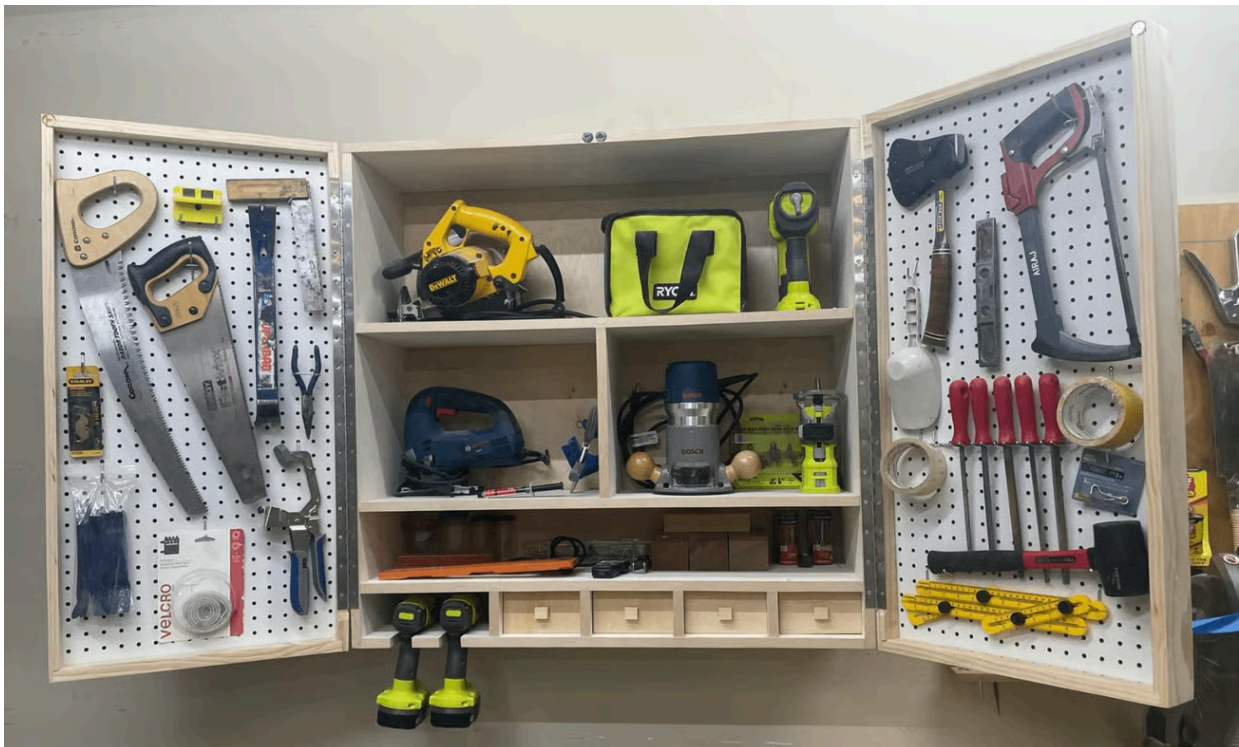


“Here’s another adaptation of the marvelous, multi-talented handi-cart for use in our counter-space-challenged kitchen.

Very useful for loading groceries and oven. (Tile top design and execution by the talented wife.)” —Dan G.

*The Half-lap Handi Cart has never looked handier! What a great look for the kitchen with the tiled top! —Steve*

“This thing was full of lessons. It ain’t perfect, and it filled me with hate along the way, but now that it’s done, I can like it. 😊” —Jenna J.



*Haha...that storage cabinet is such a beast. I’m glad you stuck with it! So organized! —Steve*

“Final class project, completed and installed.” —Mel



*I love the hardware placement and the clean look of your Catalina Cabinet! Nice. —Steve*

***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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