



Issue 59, May 2025

Hi Steve R,

Happy May! I love this period where spring blends into summer. Volunteer poppies are springing up sporadically in some places while painting entire fields orange in other places. Behind my art studio is a rose garden that's just beginning to bud. I hope to share a full explosion of blooms in next month's newsletter. And yes, I have four tomato plants already in the ground.



My dad used to pride himself on being a "creature of habit." It was his comfort zone. He placed a lot of value on routine and consistency, and treated them as human virtues. Every day had its rhythm and every chore had a pattern to follow. He liked predictability, a sense of order, and knowing what to expect. And for a long time, I admired that about him.

I grew up thinking that consistency was one of life's highest achievements. It felt like Dad had his whole life mapped out before I was even born. I don't recall him ever changing his opinion on anything. His political views never shifted, nor was he particularly spiritual. He enjoyed watching the same movies on DVD year after year. He took me to see *Star Wars* in 1977 and that's about the only time I recall seeing a movie with him in a theater. He loved classical music and insulated his ears from any new music. He refused to listen to "my" music, even out of curiosity.

Looking back, I see how much that shaped my early years. I was brought up to believe that establishing routines, staying steady, and holding firm opinions were signs of character. Changing your mind about something, admitting you were wrong, or even just trying something new felt... risky. Maybe even a little shameful. Life seemed to be centered around risk-aversion.

My dad had many wonderful qualities. He was intelligent, witty and kind. And I'm grateful for everything he taught me, including woodworking. But I also regret how rigid his worldview was, and how long it took me to recognize that in myself.

It's only been in more recent years that I've felt free enough to fully explore my own beliefs, my creativity, and the idea that change isn't something to be feared. It's something to be embraced. I don't need to concern myself with the opinions of others if I want to explore something new. And I can allow my opinions to evolve without worrying about someone calling me out for heresy of thought. I think men in particular have a cultural fear of a friend pointing out, *"You've changed, man!"*



Me and Dad in my shop in 2013

In general, consistency is a good thing. It would be hard to connect to someone who has wildly inconsistent actions from day to day. You don't want someone buying your furniture and wondering if it will collapse. Consistency builds trust. It can also be the foundation that allows real craft to grow.

The quest for consistency can slide into something else. You might start establishing routines to be more efficient. (Put those clamps back on the rack when you're done using them.) Great! But eventually, routines can become rituals and start to feel sacred, even if we've forgotten why we started them in the first place. (Those clamps need to be in a *specific order* on the rack.) Both routines and rituals can become *rules* we dare not break. (*"I don't allow anyone to look at my clamps, let alone borrow them."*) At some point, you might not be choosing how you work, but just following a script that you didn't consciously write.

I've been thinking about how these concepts differ and how they fit on a spectrum. There's no clear line between establishing healthy routines for efficiency and blindly following rules. And most long-established rules on safety are critical.

In practical matters, routines make sense, but in creative endeavors and how we approach life, they can be taken too far, telling us, *This is the only way*. And nothing stifles creativity faster than believing there's only one way.

I recently posted a video about the tabletop spray lacquer technique I've been using for the past year, contrary to years of teaching people the "correct" way. It's nothing huge, but a slight modification from the rule you see on the label of every can of spray finish: "*Spray light coats 8-10" from the surface.*" You know the drill. I've made videos stressing this.

I now advise ignoring the "light spray" rule for horizontal surfaces such as tabletops. Ah yes, it seems rules can have nuance. I've achieved stunning finishes by being aggressive with lacquer and spraying it on HEAVY. At any rate, [watch my video](#) for my full process and logic behind it. (And understanding why spray can labels give the light-spray advice.)

Similarly, I experienced this clash when I began my [woodburning](#) interest obsession last year. Even though I have often discussed and written about how precision is overrated and to embrace flaws in our projects, I was facing an artistic medium that demanded I fully release this internalized compulsion for precision – letting go of the pursuit of perfection I had been told to expect from myself when I was a child.

Art doesn't live in perfect lines. (Well, maybe if you make laser-engraved art lol.) But here's what I discovered about pyrography:

- Wood is not paper. (You'd think a woodworker would already know this.) The grain affects how the woodburning pen burns. It wants to follow the grain. Trying to burn a straight line along wavy lines of grain is an exercise in futility.
- Trying to make a straight line against the grain is even weirder.
- The pen will randomly burn deeper in some spots.
- There's no erasing burn marks.
- There are a lot of different tips for woodburning pens, for all different purposes. After lots of trial and error, I pretty much stick to one tip now.

Basically, woodburning (well, all art) demands shedding perfectionism and releasing all expectations of consistency. In the beginning, I was disappointed that my illustrations didn't look realistic enough or that I couldn't shade the way I expected. Human faces looked ridiculous and random blobs of burned wood would happen in the worst possible locations. I could not achieve consistency.



Embracing sketchy work

Eventually, I came to understand the sketchy look I was achieving was an emerging style. I let go of all pretensions and expectations and let the art reveal itself as it wanted. I don't try to fix the blemishes. Like building a table, I still strive to make the best piece I can, but understand that the weird flaws are what make arts and crafts so human. Now all of my pieces have a hazy, sketchy look to them. Ironically, these inconsistencies are starting to look...consistent.

I guess the challenge now is to avoid letting this new consistency harden into another routine or ritual. It's something I'll have to stay mindful of. I don't want to erase what's working. I want to keep enough looseness and curiosity, that the work stays alive.

If you're new to woodworking, you already know what it feels like to break away from old patterns. Starting woodworking often *is* the moment where people decide to try something entirely new, to stop watching and start building. It changes lives. I've seen it over and over again through the people who have taken my courses or watched my videos.

Early on, routines and good habits matter. And of course, safety rules matter a lot. You'll naturally want to establish routines to make this crazy new hobby and its tools feel more comfortable. You need a strong foundation to build anything sturdy, whether it's a building, a bookshelf or a creative life.

But don't wait too long to start exploring. Don't let the comfort of routines turn into fear of trying something different. If you always build practical projects, try something decorative. If you've ever said, "I'm not artistic...I can't even draw a straight line," try some woodburning lol.

Keep stepping a little outside your comfort zone, not just in woodworking but in how you think, how you move through the world, and how you allow yourself to change. Question patterns and rituals in your life. Do they make sense?

Being open to new ideas, even ones you used to oppose or misunderstand, is not weakness.

Think about the silly things you might have ritualized and try breaking them. It doesn't have to be a permanent change, but it will help you to question beliefs and break from bigger patterns that might be holding you back.

- Load your dishwasher differently. It might feel wrong. It's not.
- Take a different route when you're going somewhere familiar.
- Order something you've never tried at the coffee shop. Ask the barista to surprise you.
- Listen to a genre of music you *think* you don't like. Find its beauty.
- Rearrange your workspace just for the fun of it. You can always put it back.
- Try a new tool or technique, even if it feels clumsy at first.

I'll bet you can come up with other routines you never question. (*Do you really always put your pants on before your shirt?* 😄) None of these things will dramatically change your life. But they will start to break the invisible walls that rigid consistency builds over time. Small shifts in your day can ripple out into bigger shifts in your thinking. It's about staying flexible, in your workshop and in your heart.

Creativity doesn't live inside straight lines or rigid routines. Consistency is a tool, not an identity. It's meant to build your skills, to build your character, and to help you find your footing. But it's not meant to wall you in.

You're allowed to evolve. You're allowed to make a mess, cut boards the wrong lengths, to try something new. Write a poem. Nobody has to read it. Burn a crooked line right across the grain if that's where your curiosity leads you.



One of my last photos with my dad

Lately, I've been thinking a lot about my dad. He found strength in his habits and his routines, and for much of his life, they served him well. But I also wonder what he might have discovered if he had allowed himself a little more flexibility. I wish he had known that changing your mind isn't a weakness. Trying something new doesn't erase who you are. It adds to it.

Maybe that's part of what I'm trying to make amends for now. To live with more looseness and empathy. To stay open to change. To keep building a life that shifts and grows along the way, instead of one that tries too hard to stay the same.

I'm still figuring it out. Maybe that's the real work: not trying to build a perfect life, but always building.

– Steve

Monthly Project Feature

If you use spray lacquer, don't be afraid to apply it heavily on horizontal surfaces like tabletops. You'll get a better, more beautiful finish without having to spray on a zillion light coats.



Reader Mail

I really enjoyed reading your thoughtful responses to last month's newsletter about how we want to define ourselves by how we earn money!

Hi Steve,

Excellent newsletter. I always struggle with sharing my passion. I build dioramas, mostly horror related, for my own enjoyment and I find that everyone I share it with just wants to tell me how I should monetize it. I don't want to do that because having to do something is the best way to lose your passion for doing it. I love hearing how it should be about the passion, the art or the work itself instead of how it can be profitable. Thanks for your words of wisdom and your enjoyable videos. Keep doing it for the passion!

– Tim

Wait. Horror related dioramas??? You're speaking my language! —Steve

Is it your intention to become the Bob Ross of woodworking? 🤖

Love your messages, sir. Keep your fingers,

– Martin

A happy little tablesaw exists in my world. —Steve

Hi Steve,

Thanks for your newsletter. I always find it interesting to read your perspectives on things inside and outside the woodworking world.

What you said about "What Do You Do?" struck a chord with me. I grew up in the Bay Area, and then moved east at 40 to the DC/Baltimore area. The intent of that question is very different on the different coasts. In SF, it was intended to find out what you do for a living AND what you do in your spare time. In the east, it's much more judgmental. People are trying to determine your ranking based on education (ivy league vs state school) and job titles. I've actually had people walk away from me at a gathering after I said that I went to Sacramento State!

I like the idea of leading with "I'm a woodworker" or "I'm an artist." That tells them WHO you are, rather than how you feed your family.

Personally, I think I'm more of an artist than a woodworker even though wood is my medium. I sent you a pic of one of my California pieces before. Here are some others. I call them wooden mosaics (made of upcycled pallets).

– Misha



It's so interesting (and weird) how we want to define ourselves and others in very narrow ways. Cool work, Mosaic Guy!—Steve

Steve, thank you for that. I worked in tech and now, increasingly, I work in wood. After taking your beginner course a few years ago – starting with a simple workbench – I built this. I figured if I could build this, using the same set of skills from your course plus a lot of hand tool exploration, I could probably build anything. That turned out to be true. Thanks for your beautiful approach to teaching.

– Garth



I love the "I'm in wood" response to the question! Ain't nobody not gonna follow that up with another question lol. OMG the boat is amazing. —Steve

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.

Member Projects

I did a little woodworking before we had kids and then stopped. We are now empty nesters and I started again before the pandemic. You taught me so much and your words still ring in my head at the table saw. "If it feels sketchy, it is, so stop" and

"Rehearse the cut before you make it and think about where your body is" are 2 that come to mind the most. And my fancy dancy Inca miter gauge. Who could forget the awesome gripper commercials.

While my skills have grown having built things for the grandchildren (crib and pickled towers) to salt and pepper cellars for the family my latest had a WWMM vibe. A built in spice rack!

All that said and done I feel the daily videos during the pandemic not only helped me as a woodworker but made me feel like I was hanging out with my buddy in his garage.

Peace and happiness my friend and keep the sawdust flying!

– Stel



Love it! BTW, someone made a [supercut of all those Grr-ripper spots](#) a while back! — Steve

Steve,

I have been following you for a while now and made the BMW, the high top chairs with a table, whistles, grrriip.....wait no I bought that one. Anyways one thing that has stuck is "if you can make a box, you can make anything", so when my wife asked for a mantle over the fireplace, I thought why not? I can make a box!

– Andrew



Great looking mant... Hey, two mentions of the Grr-ripper in one newsletter! —Steve

Dear Steve,

I wanted to thank you for the influence you have had on my woodworking journey. Back in 2019 I wanted to start woodworking. I had done a few little projects but nothing of any size or any furniture. It was your channel on YouTube that helped me gain common sense about tools and approach amidst all the noise about types of woodworking. I loved the simple truth you spoke that if you make something with wood you are a woodworker.

Although I never took your online courses, your videos taught me common sense skills

and gave me encouragement along the way. The first big project I did was making a Headboard, off of an Ana White plan. The other two pictures are my latest effort of a coffee bar and shelf made from my own design.

I credit your encouraging words and common sense instruction with giving me the frame of mind to keep working when I got stalled. I love the common sense in your emails too.

Thanks again for all you do to help people launch into woodworking.

– Mark



Thank you so much! Love the coffee bar. The drawer is such a cool addition! —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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