



Issue 61, July 2025

Hi Steve R,

July exists in the liminal space of the year. The optimism of January still lingers, but it's fuzzy now, softened by six months of distraction, unpredictability, and grinding through largely forgettable weeks. I keep thinking how recent January 1 feels. The long summer days I longed for back in the winter are here, yet I feel a vague sense of nostalgia for the low angle sun of winter. I find comfort in anticipating the cozy nights and holiday music coming in December. I love romanticizing the past and the future but have such difficulty with the present. What kind of neurosis is this?

I just got back from VidCon, the big, bloated video creators (let's be real, YouTubers) conference in Anaheim that somehow keeps growing while getting a little less relevant every year. I say that with affection and fondness for those halcyon days of 2017 and glorious 1080p resolution. Hmm... I still shoot videos in 1080p. 🤖

For new creators, VidCon is certainly a great place to learn about making videos. You can attend a panel on how to craft better thumbnails (a horrified expression with "I lost \$20,000 making this table!") or how to write clickbait titles (99% of Woodworkers Don't Know This Trick!).

In all honesty, if you're just starting out, these panels can be super helpful to grow your channel. But for me, the real value has nothing to do with the conference itself, it's about the peop... wait, I'm feeling a recurring newsletter theme coming on. Didn't I talk about this recently? Let me check.

Yeah for sure. Yup. I said the same thing in March's newsletter about WORKBENCHCON lol. Nothing new here; conferences are about community and meeting people. Yawn.

Okay, I'll talk about a funner/cooler part. This was the second year I rented a ridiculously large and monstrously grotesque suburban AirBnb and invited a bunch of other creators to stay. Twenty-one people officially paid and a few unofficially crashed wherever they wanted and donated whatever they could to the cause. Oh! One of the rooms had a ball pit. A ball pit! It turned out to be the highlight of the house and acted sort of like a hot tub with 5 or 6 people hanging out in it at any given time having conversations about algorithms and burn out and politics and philosophy.

Ball pits gross me out. I'm certain those balls never get cleaned and are basically petri dishes of bacteria and dried mystery fluids.



Virus Village

We somehow became known as the "Canadian House" due to the high representation of my Canadian friends staying there. On Friday, we threw a party that attracted creators from all over, many of whom I only see once a year, and many I met for the first time.

We stood around the kitchen, lounged on the backyard furniture, swam in the pool, ball-pitted, and talked about everything from music to art, to existential dread to whether any of

this still matters. It was beautiful. As the only woodworker in the bunch, I'm always amused by people's reaction upon hearing I make things. Less than 1% of people ever build anything, so they are always fascinated by the craft. I totally made up that 1% figure. YouTube has infected me more than a ball pit.

A number of the people staying with us and visiting the house never bothered to buy a pass to VidCon. The conference has become more of a location on the calendar where we can all orbit the same place for a few days and remember that this isn't something we're doing alone. I attended the actual conference twice for a couple hours.



We're starting a boy band

I love online spaces and my communities, but we're not meant to exist solely inside screens. We need to remember what friends look like in real life, not just in 4K resolution. (Or 1080p in my case.)

Did you know there's this whole trend now of people shooting videos with vintage cameras and camcorders? Like 480p 4:3 format cameras from 2005. And the renaissance of shooting film continues to explode. It's like people are instinctively seeking greater distinction between real life and virtual spaces. It reminds me how 19th century Impressionist painters were partially responding to the burgeoning tech of photography by depicting what a camera couldn't. Art is often a reaction.

Perhaps this is why people are fascinated by woodworking and more and more people are discovering it. Still, probably not more than 1% of the population. Again, I'm just making up figures out here, but one in a hundred people actually feels high.

I like to attend art and craft fairs and it's fun to see the kinds of woodworking people are drawn to. Now that digital woodworking is firmly established, people seem to expect that particular "look" of CNC and laser cut things at these events. I'm not sure how to fully describe it. It's sort of the uncanny valley of woodworking. You know, those "Bless this home" signs, digitally carved mushrooms, and laser cut boxes with mushroom designs on the lids. (What's the deal with mushrooms?)

These items are beautiful and perfect and made by people with a passion for creating them. But out of all the people displaying woodworking, the guy often drawing a crowd of interested patrons is the guy who has hand carved or otherwise made things by hand, with analog tools. People seem to connect with the imperfections and personalization of things made without a computer. He's probably making the fewest sales though haha.

Actually, maybe it's not just the imperfections that draw people in. Maybe it's the evidence that a real person was there. That someone cut a curve by feel, rather than plotting it. Or that a hand held a chisel rather than a mouse.

That's part of why these real-world gatherings matter so much. When we talk in person, we stumble over our words, we forget what we were going to say, we repeat ourselves, and we laugh at the wrong moments. It's magic!

In digital spaces, we fine-tune our words and crop out the awkward bits. No matter how much we try to be authentic, it's all curated. I spend hours writing these newsletter essays, trying to express my real voice, but those of you who have met me in person will know that I'm a hot mess of verbal blundering. And my woodworking videos are highly crafted to appear as if I really have my shit together.

The act of gathering in person is a form of creative expression. There's a vulnerability to being willing to be seen as you are, just trying to connect.

Handmade work is symbolic of what we are all craving: handmade moments. Something with texture and nuance. Imperfection is just a delightful byproduct. Something that reminds us we're all still figuring out life together. For all the incredible things we can make with our hands, the most human thing we ever build is connection. Maybe even in a virus-laden ball pit.

Have a wonderful July!

—Steve

Half Price Woodworking Plans!

July newsletter special! Take 50% off all premium woodworking plans at [ShopWWMM!](#) This discount is only available for readers of Notes from the Shop. Use discount code **BALLPIT** at checkout. Offer ends on July 31st.

Monthly Project Feature

I moved the smaller one of these Adirondack chairs to my deck at the studio. The large one wouldn't fit through my weird narrow entrance and I really didn't want to disassemble it lol. Anyway, this is a great project. A little challenging, but nothing you can't handle. Plans come in two sizes.



Plans are available at [ShopWWMM](#). (Don't forget to use 50% discount code: BALLPIT!)

Reader Mail

Thanks for all your responses to my essay on Father's Day last month. Our relationships with dads can be complicated and sometimes difficult to understand. Here's a few of your letters that struck a chord.

Hi Steve,

Per usual, your words stir my heart and bring tears to my eyes: "Maybe "fatherhood" is providing the space and trust for people to discover what they are capable of."

That's such a beautiful sentiment and I think it's very true.

I too hung around with my dad as he pattered at his work bench in our basement. He was often fixing something. Sometimes he was building something. He's built four sheds over his lifetime (that I know of). Two are at his house and two are at mine. I was really young when he built his tool shed in the back yard, and I guess I was in college when he built his wood shed to keep all the cord wood dry for burning in the wood stoves in his living room and basement. I didn't help him build either one. When my husband and I returned home to NH, after living all over the country, we bought a house about 10 minutes away from my parents and within the first year, my dad was helping me build a tool shed in my backyard. A few years later, along came the wood shed. (We too have a wood stove in our living room.)

I've worked on a lot of home improvement projects with my dad over the years, but the last big one was redoing our sunporch back in 2017. After that, he wasn't able to do the physical work necessary on these types of projects. Like you, I'm so grateful to have had this time with him, watching him work and learning by osmosis, and the occasional instruction. These moments are fleeting which makes them precious.

I'm so incredibly sorry to hear about your dad's struggle with dementia. My paternal grandmother had dementia and it's been my greatest fear that my dad would succumb to it too. He just turned 81 the other day and still is as sharp as a tack. I would never claim to fully understand what another is experiencing, but I know how painful it is for family and friends to navigate the complicated reality that is dementia. I am truly sorry.

Well, this email ended up being a lot longer than I intended. Thanks for all the beautiful emails and the practical wood working tutorials you've provided over the years. I'm grateful for your wisdom and expertise.

All the best,
Jill

Thanks for your beautiful note, Jill. There's something magical about hanging around a dad who does things...fixes stuff, builds things, whatever. These become core memories that tend to rise above the more complicated aspects of our relationships. —Steve

Your newsletters always make me think. I've been teaching for over 20 years; some in Alaska and now in Oregon. My dad was a tinkerer and my brother a carpenter. Learning from the 2 of them at different times of my life has shaped my career. I now teach woodworking at a middle school. I was inspired by your YouTube videos and the Weekend Woodworker class to start the woodshop. It has taken me 10 years and lots of grant writing to make the shop functional for students. My design class won a prize that

allowed me to purchase a SawStop table saw my first year in Oregon and I haven't looked back.

I just wanted you to know that you don't have to be a dad to inspire others. But you probably already know that from the comments of your followers. I show your videos in class and reference you regularly so my students can branch out on their own. Keep doing what you do and enjoy the process knowing you are a "woodworking father" who influences thoughts, perceptions, and skills.

I hope you don't mind that I still have my students make Harmony Garden Benches from your plans. Last year's grant was called "Benches for Bend" where my students build the benches (lesson in following plans) and then delivered them to assisted living homes for the residents in the facilities (lesson in connection and community).

Greg W.

Thank you. It's so heartwarming to hear that your students are making Benches for Bend for assisted living homes. Please keep doing what you're doing... the world needs people like you. —Steve

Steve,

Thank you so much for your newsletter this and every month! ❤️ I see similarities between my Dad and yours. He never let me help him, other than watching, being the extra set of hands, or holding the flashlight. (I was always holding it in the wrong place, by the way.) And rather than teach me how, he just expected me to know how to do everything. That was frustrating to say the least. But after Dad being gone for 32 years I sure do miss him. Thank you for bringing back some memories of our time together, even if most of them were less than stellar. At least we were together. 😞

Gary M.

OMG, I forgot about the flashlight. I swear, no matter how I was shining it, it was always in the wrong spot, too! 😂
—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

Hi Steve, I just completed my best project that I would like to share. My wife has always wanted a Little Free Library in front of the house for our kids and the

neighborhood.

I started my woodworking journey in 2020 with the first course. Before I started, I had no skills at all working with my hands in the physical world.

Fast-forward to 5 years later of projects on and off. I built a Little Free Library that matches the garage. Much easier shape than the house.

Thanks for the confidence to take on this project.

Paul



I love this! There's a Little Free Library a block from my studio that is always overflowing with books. I love to see how it is constantly refreshed. I've been wanting to make a Little Free Art Gallery where people can drop off arts and crafts projects. Someday! —Steve

Hey Steve,

When I started getting interested in woodworking only five or so years ago, I discovered your site and got a MAJOR boost in valuable information and inspiration.

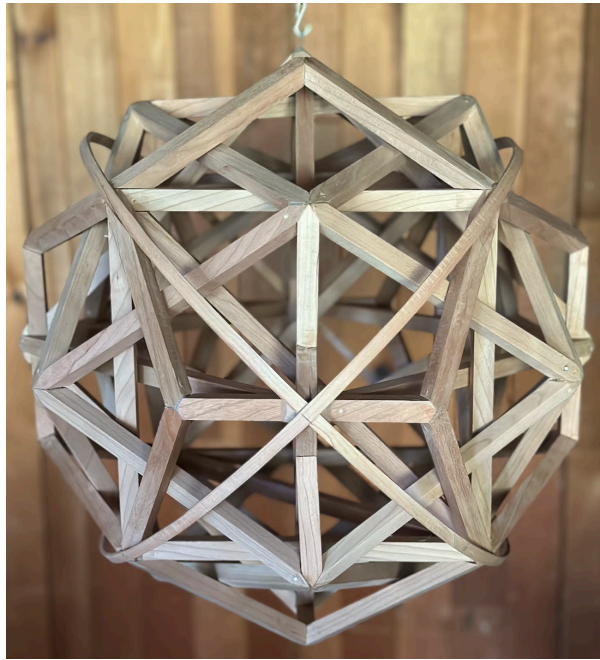
At your invitation for a photo or so of what I have done, here are a few samples.

The geometric pieces are the five Platonic solids nested into one sphere (based on the final propositions of the great geometry text by Euclid, *Elements*).

The ukulele was a project I thought was clearly impossible, but your consistent encouragement to "go for it" when feeling doubtful about what I could accomplish, pushed me over the edge.

Lastly, I couldn't help think of you when I rescued a project, turning a mistake into a work of "art." I screwed up a baritone ukulele body and I tossed it – not in the bin but in the "not sure what to do with it" pile. Then one day I was looking at a Picasso painting featuring one of his guitars, and I said, "Aha ...!" (My Picasso uke actually plays quite nicely.)

Thanks,
Alexis





- 1) *The geometric thing is amazing and hurts my brain thinking about making it.*
 - 2) *Cats in photos are given newsletter priority. lol not really. (but kinda?)*
 - 3) *The Picasso uke is cool and also has Dali vibes*
- Steve



Coat rack by Todd B.

This is so clever! What a sleek design! —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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For Mere Mortals, 448 Ignacio Blvd. #237, Novato, CA 94949, United States