



Issue 63, September 2025

Hi Steve R,

## Projects, Systems, and Lifestyles

My personal trainer Chris recently recommended a book called *Atomic Habits* by James Clear. (*It's available free on Spotify.*) I've only read (listened to) the first couple chapters so far, but I couldn't help notice how neatly it describes the ways I've been integrating woodworking, fitness, and art into my lifestyle over the past decade. We all want a way to sustain the things we love: and it's not about setting goals.

Back in 2014, I was six years into my YouTube career and I was in lousy shape. As YouTube was entering its "Golden Age," I was tired, sluggish, unhealthy, and felt old. One day I wanted to test myself to see what kind of shape I was in (face it, we all know when we have let ourselves go), so I tried running around the block: a quarter mile. I couldn't do it. I guess you could call it a wakeup call that just confirmed what I already knew.

I decided to change everything. I retired my shop's beer fridge, quit drinking, and started eating like an adult. (I still sometimes miss those late-night nachos!) And I started running. I felt ashamed that as a man in my 40s I couldn't sustain a quarter-mile run, so I got up every morning, without exception, and ran. Not with the *goal* of a marathon, not even a 5K. I just wanted to feel better. My "system" back then was simple: move my body every day. Sometimes I ran 30 minutes, sometimes longer, sometimes it consisted of mostly walking. **My only goal was to be healthier than yesterday.**

And since I am prone to deep-diving into everything I take on (to the point of obsession), I started reading blogs and watching videos about running. All the training programs emphasized, "You need to set goals." I came to believe my "get healthier" goal was wishy-washy and not concrete enough. So I set better ones: 5K fun-runs, 10K races, and countless half-marathons. I worked my way up to competing in two full marathons in 2019. Achievements unlocked. Wow, look at me.

It took a while for me to see the problem. Running a marathon didn't make me healthier. In fact, it's not a very healthy thing to do at all; each one wrecked me. Sixteen weeks of unpleasant, brutal training, only to have my body destroyed after the race. When I crossed the finish line of my second marathon, I basically stopped running altogether. It was a weird feeling. The system I had in place was temporary scaffolding to reach a finish line. Once I completed it, the structure came crashing down. I had no real structure.

Now, five years later I'm running again, but differently. I'm not tracking pace or mileage. (Runners *love* to obsess over recording *everything* on Strava lol.) I have no rigid plan. Some days it's 20 minutes, some days an hour, sometimes I do sprints, other days I do stair runs. My only goal is to get my ass out the door a couple times a week for some cardio. Running is now just a component of a bigger system: health. The thing I instinctively tried to set up in 2014. Now it's about weight training, strength training (not interested in PRs), paying attention to my diet, supplements, regular health checkups, taking care of my physical appearance and my mental health. It's not about training for a race. It's about living a lifestyle of health.

I think this is the difference between goals, systems, and lifestyles.

## **Woodworking and the Project Grind**

I see this same trap showing up in woodworking all the time. Almost all of us start out with a project-based mentality: build a stool, a dining table, or a charcuterie board. The entire model of learning woodworking and nearly every woodworking video on YouTube (mine included) is based on this limiting belief. Each project follows the same general rules, kind of like a training program: design or buy a plan, gather lumber, cut boards, assemble, finish. Then...well...that's it. Okay, now reset. Next project. Do you see the potential (and common) problem here?

I mean, it works fine at first, but after a few projects this whole treadmill starts to feel like, well, a treadmill. Project, done. Project, done. Project, done. It's no wonder some people burn out and build fewer and fewer things. It's not because they don't love woodworking anymore, but because they never built a strong structure (system) beneath it. You were woodworking on a temporary scaffolding.

## **Systems Beneath the Projects**

Here's where it's worth considering a shift: Don't define yourself only by the projects you complete. Define yourself by the system that sustains them. Ultimately, you can sustain

what you love by making it a lifestyle. For instance:

- A **goal** is: "I want to build a dresser."
- A **system** is: "I want to spend time in my shop every week."
- A **lifestyle** is: "I am a woodworker."

So by reframing how we look at woodworking, projects stop being finish lines and start being ***expressions of who you already are.***

## Practical Ways to Build a Woodworking Lifestyle

So how do you actually do this? How do you keep woodworking from becoming "project, burnout, abandon ship"? Here are a few things I've found helpful.

### 1. Make a shop routine.

Pick a rhythm that works for your life. Maybe one evening a week, or Saturday mornings. Don't tie it to finishing a project. The point is to simply *show up in the shop.*

### 2. Always have a side build.

Keep a small, ongoing project that doesn't carry the pressure of being a masterpiece: a box, a jig, making a collage out of scrap wood. Shop projects are great "background builds." It's like musicians practicing scales. Low stakes, but they keep your hands in the game.

### 3. Focus each project on a skill, not just an object.

Instead of thinking, "I'm building a table," think, "This is the project where I improve my rabbit joinery." That way, the system becomes *ongoing skill development*, not just a bunch of finished furniture.

### 4. Give yourself permission to play.

Not every shop session has to be "productive." I don't even like using that word; there's so much baggage and guilt associated with it. Sometimes just sharpening your tools, rearranging your shop, or experimenting with finishes *is* the system.

Think of these like beats in a song. Each one keeps the rhythm going, even if the song never really "ends." Keep dancing!

## My YouTube Grind (And Escape from It)

I've lived through this very cycle. For years, I posted woodworking videos to YouTube every Friday. One build after another, one post after another. For a long time, it was exhilarating, but eventually it turned into the same kind of grind as marathon training. The unsustainable system I had was "get a video out every week." And when the joy started to fade, that system felt like a cage. My weekly "goal" was about satisfying an algorithm more than anything.

Eventually, burning out led to burning wood.

## **Art as Renewal**

When I picked up a woodburning pen and began pyrography, I had no plan in place other than to supply my burning (lol) desire to express myself in a new creative way. I like weird, witchy, and esoteric things, so I started illustrating tarot cards. I didn't set out to create all 78 cards, but one design led to another and after 15 months, I'd burned them all. For the first time in ages, I had stumbled into a long project without ever declaring a goal. I just kept going because I loved the process.



I put the whole deck up on [burningdarkart.com](http://burningdarkart.com) if you want to see where that journey took me. And now the site's growing right alongside me as I add new interpretations and art. The task of building a website is technically complete, but the system is still going. I've started a new series of woodburnings featuring hyper-local San Francisco scenes. Unlike YouTube videos, these don't feel like, "finish one, reset, start another." Maybe because I'm trying to allow the art to be the thing instead of producing "content." There's no end point, just an open door.



## Multiple Identities are Okay

Whenever I share something new I'm working on, I often hear: *"I thought you were a woodworker."* Or my favorite: *"Just stick to woodworking."*

Apparently, the idea of having more than one interest is confusing. But the truth is, I'm not just a woodworker. I'm also an artist, a content creator, a writer, a movie critic, and a fitness enthusiast. It can sometimes feel very compartmentalized, but I'm learning to reframe all of it. These aren't distractions or hobby-jumping. They're all parts of my identity.

The bigger shift for me has been asking, *"What brings me joy?"* For too long, I believed everything I invested time into had to earn an income. I had to be "productive." If I couldn't monetize it, it felt like a waste of time and energy. The "hustle" mindset is destructive and one of the most limiting ways to live life because it leads to missing out on the real value of things.

I go to film festivals and I write movie reviews. The first question people ask is: *"Do you make any money doing that?"* Hardly. It costs me money. I think I'd enjoy it less if I were chasing deadlines and income. The value is intrinsic: the joy of watching, traveling, writing,

socializing, sharing.

If we can imagine exercising for health without expecting a paycheck, why can't we imagine making art, or writing reviews, or building furniture in the same way? Lead with joy.

## Lifestyle, Not Finish Lines

This is the mindset I'm leaning into now:

- Health isn't a goal. It's a lifestyle.
- Woodworking isn't a checklist of projects. It's a lifestyle.
- Art isn't a tally of finished pieces. It's a lifestyle.

Don't get me wrong: Short-term goals still matter. They give us bursts of energy and momentum. But they're not the point. The point is to build a life that sustains you. To build an identity that doesn't evaporate and reset once a project is completed.

If you're new to woodworking, don't wait until you've built ten projects before calling yourself a woodworker. If you're in the shop, making sawdust, experimenting, and learning, you already are one. Claim your identity.

So I'm learning not ask, "*What's my next goal?*" but "*What kind of life am I building?*"

Projects will end. Goals will be reached and forgotten. But the systems you create and the lifestyles you choose are the things that will remain. Build a life where making isn't something you do, it's who you are.

—Steve

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## Art and Obsession

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Here's a video I made showing a little of the woodburning I mentioned. (It's a new YouTube channel if you want to subscribe, and you can be assured of new content whenever the mood strikes me lol.) Also, [check out the new website](#) where you can see all my pieces. Building this site taught me way more about CMS and dynamic pages than I ever wanted to know.

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## Reader Mail

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*Last month's issue on AI in woodworking and art generated some very thoughtful responses. Here's some of what you had to say.*

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In all honesty I feel like AI has a place in woodworking. Especially the planning stages. The design stage in my opinion will continue to be reflective of the maker. Even if he/she designs with AI. Our ideas come from humans. Machines do what we tell them to do. With what little time I have left as a woodworker, I don't see AI building projects unless a billionaire has a robotic shop. Lol

In the end, what good is technology if we don't find a proper way to use it. And purists will continue as purists. I like your thoughts on this, Steve.

—Glen V.

*I envision a day where woodworking purists will live in harmony with clankers. 🤖 — Steve*

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Steve,

You don't know me, but I've been a big fan since I first started my woodworking journey during Covid. Although I don't do as much as I'd like to, I'm always inspired by you... especially your words and newsletter.

As someone who is immersed in AI — and has a daughter who is not a fan — I found your most recent newsletter especially thoughtful.

Keep up the good work.

—Rich B.

*I'm fascinated by how young people are rejecting AI more than the olds. I haven't been able to draw any concrete conclusions. Lemme ask Chachi PT. —Steve*

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Hi Steve,

I hope you're well!

I've been following your YouTube channel for several years now and always look forward to your newsletter landing in my inbox. Your latest topic, "Will AI kill woodworking as we know it?" really caught my attention. Personally, I don't believe AI will negatively impact woodworking. If anything, it'll just offer us new tools and inspiration — but the craftsmanship, creativity, and personal satisfaction we get from woodworking will always remain human. I think AI will find a way to integrate itself seamlessly into the creative process, improving productivity, assisting makers of all kinds of visualizing designs, and even helping with detailed planning tasks. For instance, I was recently designing a box with a lid that sat on an internal lip and wanted to ensure the lip didn't impede access. Using AI allowed me to quickly plan out the necessary dimensions and parameters, taking out much of the guesswork and streamlining the entire design phase. Far from replacing human creativity, AI became a supportive partner in the project.

[...]

On a lighter note, I have enjoyed many of the video series you've put out, particularly your Lockdown Woodworking series during the pandemic. I also greatly enjoyed your knitting box and shoeshine box videos, and I hope to make those projects myself soon. As a fellow servant to an elderly feline companion here in the UK, I always smile when Cobra and Bubbles make an appearance. I hope they're both keeping well!

Thanks again for all the inspiration you've shared over the years; your work is hugely appreciated.

Warm regards from across the pond,  
Tom

*Cobra and Bubbles are about to celebrate their 6th birthday! Lately, I'm trying to teach Cobra to say, "please," but he's being stubborn. —Steve*

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Hi Steve,

Thanks for your thoughts on AI and the creative process. Your take on how the internet has blandified what constitutes "art" is spot-on, and AI is only accelerating that. I can't count the number of posts I've seen in woodworking groups with AI-generated images of, say, a flawless armoire, where everyone comments "great skills" and "how beautiful" when a) there's nothing interesting about the piece and b) it's obvious it was created by AI. I think art stops being art when people delegate the hard and very human work of generating and recognizing inspiration to a non-human. Technology, including AI, has created many tools that provide invaluable assistance in the creative process and make wonderful art possible. But they are just tools: the paintbrushes, the 3-D printers, the spell-checkers, not the artists and craftspeople nor the creative process. The true creativity has to come from a person for it to be considered art. Sometimes that distinction is fuzzy, but usually we know it when we see it. Thanks again for your insights!

Meanwhile, here's a pic of a recent creation of mine: a trivet made from scrap cutoffs (walnut, hickory, cherry, padauk, purpleheart, maple). Certified AI-free.

Best,  
David F.



*I feel like we've reached the point where my first response at seeing anything online is to assume it's AI until proven otherwise. I'll take your word that your clean trivet design is Certified AI-free. (That's exactly what AI would say.) —Steve*

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Hi Steve,

Timely topic – I asked ChatGPT to recommend a design improvement for more robust folding legs for some cornhole boards. Conversationally it sounded like we were on the same page, but then I asked for a sketch:



"Can't make this stuff up" 😊

Thanks for what you do, Steve! Long-time fan here.

—Matt

*Inspiring! I sorta want to actually build a series of AI designed projects like this. —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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I know you'll get a kick out of this one. My son had an excellent English and Language Arts (ELA) teacher last year. She pushed him to step up and do the work he didn't

want to do. Over the course of the year, we found out she's a huge horror fan. Well, we live about an hour away from where they filmed the original Friday the Thirteenth movie in NJ. She was jealous that we got to go to that still-active camp for Scouts and stay in the cabins used in the film.

As a way to say thank you to this amazing teacher, my wife and I made her a custom Camp Crystal Lake sign for her classroom. Thankfully the kids are all around age 11, so they likely haven't seen the movie!

—Jeff  
A Mere Mortal

P.S.: Thank you for your videos. You were the reason I started making things. Your no-pretense style made it easy for me to start creating awesome things!



*Jason Lives! (Part 6) —Steve*

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Never has a bench made me feel less harmonious. First thing I've ever put a fancy finish on and probably the last! But awfully proud of it 😊 —James



*I'll bet you finished that after assembling it lol. Yeah, that's sure to induce stress. I will always default to a coat of purple paint in these cases. The Harmony Garden Bench looks stunning though... great job! —Steve*

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*Speaking of painted projects, I really like the way this moody color looks on Zachery's California Casual Side Table. I really like painted furniture! —Steve*



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Note: The project instructions for both the Harmony Garden Bench and the California Casual Side Table can be found inside [The Weekend Woodworker course](#).

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***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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