



Quality and the Craft of The Good Life

What you Notice Becomes Your Life

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Abstract

“Quality and the Craft of The Good Life” is a personal essay exploring the relationship between work and the pursuit of a fulfilling life. Originally intended to follow the narrative arc of the construction of a table, this work takes a wayward and circuitous route around the life and meditations of a craftsman. The construction of the table takes a back seat to a reflection on the broader significance of craftsmanship as a medium for understanding and articulating Quality, which is a central theme.

I have not set out to reach conclusions, or to provide the reader with a definitive, or even a remote understanding of The Good Life. Rather, in reflecting on the years I’ve spent working with my hands, I’ve sought to meditate on the development of my own understanding of what a Good Life might look like, namely *for me*. If a broad conclusion can be drawn, it is that the elusive goal of a good life is only achieved by elevating the experience of the banal, and by celebrating the commonplace. The narrower, personal conclusion extends from the broader one. It involves the patterns of my character; the restless decisiveness that has delivered me from one ideal to the next, often in disregard of the successes of each.

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“The solutions all are simple... After you've already arrived at them. But they're simple only when you already know what they are.” – Robert M. Pirsig

Introduction

Reflecting on the earliest conceptions of this essay, it occurs to me that I was thinking about it all wrong. Well, maybe not all wrong, but incompletely, to say the least. I set out to write about the relationship of my life as a craftsman to my pursuit of *The Good Life*, an arguable term, if not goal. I decided to design and build a table in order to provide a narrative arc for an exploration into the *quality* I've found in life - "quality" being another term I associate with a life well lived.

Building a table is, technically, a pretty simple task for me. I've built dozens of tables for various purposes and clients over the last few years. The motions have become second nature, and they feel a whole lot like work when it gets right down to it. My mind wanders freely as my body moves with unconscious ease and rhythm, amongst the tools I've spent years learning the intricacies of. The romance has given way to mindlessness, like a musician practicing scales. The practice, the discipline, is significant in the development of a craftsman, but the motions *feel* insignificant now. But to build a table for myself, for my own home, will be a significant departure from the way I've thought and lived to date. On the other hand, metaphorically speaking, I've spent my adulthood searching for the tools to create the best life for myself, and consequently the literal process of building furniture has become foundational to my language of searching.

Craftsmanship has equipped me to experience and relate to my surroundings in ways I never was before. As my craft has developed into a fluid form of expression, I've employed it to

hypothesize and experiment with new ideas, offering something to the world that resonates meaningfully with me. Using the construction of a table as a narrative device for writing about my ideas about life seemed perfect. My progression as a craftsman has become intertwined with my development as a person, and it is through my work that I've come to better understand my self.

Once I'd made that decision, however, what followed was months of procrastination thinly veiled as "design" time, and the writing of a substantial "contextualizing" essay length section, found below, which ultimately has little to do with constructing a sturdy, suitable, and useful table and everything to do with constructing a sturdy, suitable, and useful life.

What I was originally drafting in my mind relied on a nostalgic light cast on my experience of living alone in a converted 16' x 16' tobacco drying barn while I was, of all the lonely ventures, farming for a living. Solitary indeed. And there is much to be nostalgic about. My house, which I reflect on nearly daily, and variously below, was the architectural analog of my self. I built it with help from friends, the perfect home for one. For me. I spent countless nights with my hound dog, Spencer, doing whatever the hell I wanted. What I wanted was to walk the familiar path around the farm, Spencer circling at a wide berth, to make a simple dinner from the garden, to walk up the steep stairs to the loft, and listen to Townes Van Zandt with a generous pour of bourbon in a rocks glass my friend Josh gave to me. Scotch in the winter months, neat. The freedom I felt had little to do with what I was doing, and everything to do with what I was becoming. In the absence of company, I developed a dialogue with myself that had been suppressed by the constant presence of parents and peers and professors and prescribed direction. My house was sparse and neat. I knew all of the boards, which remained exposed and

provided worlds of surface for inquiry and imagination. I was alone, and I reveled in the expansiveness of it.

As I conceived this essay, it was that version of myself who wrote it, the same version of myself who conceived the simple, honest life of a craftsman — perhaps the same version of myself who conceived the simple, honest life of a farmer. That house was good to me. In building it I learned the language of woodworking. In deciding to leave it, I understood the limitations of solitude. Farming was not so good to me; the simple, honest life was punctuated by 12 hour work days, income-less winters and relationships that failed while all of my energy was focused elsewhere.

The fact is that now I am not alone, and I probably wouldn't build a piece of furniture for myself if I were. This essay was to be the solitary account of a solitary craftsman, but the words that came reflected solitude only insofar as the vestiges of my life on the farm remain a part of my experience, and part of the voice that recounts it. When I left the farm, I left because my life as a solitary farmer had run its course. That part of my education had come to an end, and my life with Erin was beginning. There are times when I crave those long winter nights in my loft. But my life *is* better now.

As I began writing, it became clear to me that this is a story of my history of observation, and a reflection on, and of, my moral education. For me, the power of perception, of my observed reality, became central to my understanding of my moral being and my place in the world. The significance of craftsmanship is the shift in perspective, from passive observer to active participator. Tools in hand, I've engaged in the reshaping of the observed reality of

myself, and of countless clients. In doing so, I've engaged my understanding of Quality as it relates to the technical nature of my craft, and as part of my responsibility to the people who trust me (and pay me) to realize their visions.

When approaching the designing and building of any piece of furniture — long before I pick up my tools, or a pencil for that matter — I draw on a history of experiences that have shaped my vision of Quality. The story of building the table that is the subject of this essay has much more to do with thinking about the table and, frankly, thinking about thinking about the table, than the table itself. I was well into that process before I realized that the simplicity of the various lives I've imagined for myself, and indeed of the early drafts of this essay, was largely vacuous and stripped of contexts. Those pages that first appeared communicated a clear message to me, that the context, in fact, was the substance of the story, the context was the story worth telling.

Defining the Terms

Quality is the "knife-edge" of experience, found only in the present, known or at least potentially accessible to all of "us" (Plato 258).

My aim here is to apply the observations of the likes of Aristotle to my own experience. This is not meant to be scientific or categorical, but experiential and, as such, will be told through my own voice, full of contradiction and vulnerability, self-doubt and the occasional, unintended confidence. The concepts I'm grappling with are difficult to define for a number of reasons, but primarily, the difficulty rests in the personal nature of this essay.

I am no Aristotle. I cannot and have not set out to provide the reader with an objective definition of happiness, the good life, or quality. Despite earnest attempts in years past, I don't seem to have become a scholar at all. I even hesitate to call myself a craftsman. If I boil it down, I just think of myself as a guy who builds things, a problem solver. I love books and manual labor. I'm excited by building structures and I cry more than I should. I'm guarded and, at times, abrasive, but I soften up with people I love - or with whiskey. I used to be more introspective. I have more to worry about now, but more to love, too. Whereas I used to *think* about my life and what I wanted to make of it, I now seldom find the time between running a business, keeping up a house, and spending time with people I love. I'm busy living my life and, while I wouldn't advocate an "unexamined life," I'm tempted to favor examining lived experiences, rather than potential ones.

The first and most significant term, for me, is “quality.” Quality is not the table I build, but rather the totality of the experiences, skills, concepts and efforts that I draw on in order to build the table. In Aristotle’s words, “Men become builders by building.” His call to action has been a cornerstone for the foundation of my idea of a Good Life, and Quality is the defining characteristic of those actions that contribute to it.

My understanding of the terms with which this essay is concerned has developed in the various stages of education I’ve undertaken. If I’m writing about Quality, I’m writing about actions and experiences. As I look back on the decade or so since I was released into the “real world” of employment, obligation, and increasingly consequential decisions, the major shifts in my life have followed my pursuit of Quality via two of the simplest, most fundamental forms of work and action there are. Farming, and then carpentry have sustained me materially and otherwise since shortly after college. These vocations have afforded me the intellectual bandwidth to explore my understanding of Quality, and to manifest those ideas in real, physical forms. My second education began when I decided to dive headfirst into self-employment and making things.

Quality first became a part of my internal lexicon while still in college, when I first read Robert Pirsig’s book, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Quality, in this conversation, is essentially synonymous with the word “good” as in “the *good* life” as a philosophical subject. The word “good” and the term, “the good life” have since become platitudes for me, cheapened by their ubiquity in pop culture and marketing. “Quality,” on the other hand, seems to cut deeper. Quality, too, is cheapened, insofar as it can be found in countless advertisements for products

generally understood to be, well, crap. But Quality has been the driving force for me, the means and the end, and my understanding of it has evolved and grown with me.

I understand Quality as the knife's edge of experience. It is analogous to such personal, subjective concepts as "Truth" and "Beauty," and involves both the visceral immediacy of experience, and the development of familiarity with one's own reaction to experiences. When I look at a piece of furniture, my reaction is intertwined in a labyrinth of pre-existing thoughts and experiences, some relating to furniture, others not, that coalesce at the moment the object registers in my vision. When I set out to build a piece of furniture, I draw on a similar set of experiences. As a craftsman, I attempt to contribute to the body of Quality furniture in existence. If I'm really getting ambitious, I'd say that in contributing Quality furniture, I'm attempting to increase the Goodness in the lives of my customers by elevating the aesthetic surroundings of their lives.

In my life as a furniture maker, Quality has a particularly dynamic form. In most cases, Quality in a piece of furniture involves the future experiences of the customer who commissioned the furniture and how he or she lives with it. The vulnerability of my craftsmanship involves effectively guessing at the right combination of my own vision of Quality and the vision of the customer. In other words, my task is to infuse my own understanding of Quality into the process while still staying within the parameters provided by the customer. I make guesses regarding their taste and about how to incorporate my ideas on how to improve on what I've seen and done before. If I take myself and my own vision out of the process, my work becomes meaningless to me. But if I project my ideas at the expense of the customer's, no matter

how pleased I am with the end product, I will have failed. The process is neither perfect nor predictable. It doesn't always work, but Quality is the defining characteristic when it does.

Using highly subjective terms and philosophical concepts such as "The Good Life," "goodness," and "happiness" are inescapable here, both semantically and as philosophical concepts. Aristotle is to thank and blame for that. And though I will engage these terms and concepts in this essay, I intend to engage in philosophy-speak minimally and only as a way of structuring my personal investigation of the relationship between work and the pursuit of a fulfilling life.

In Aristotle's terms, the Good Life and Happiness are virtually analogous with my understanding of Quality. I shy away from those terms in favor of Quality for reasons that will be expanded on in the sections that follow. In short, I feel that the prevailing contemporary everyday definitions of happiness and the good life are decidedly at odds with my own. In particular, the centrality of labor to my pursuit of The Good Life conflicts directly with the apparent mutual exclusivity of hard work and a Good Life, as understood to be inextricably connected with every conceivable form of leisure. More often than not, the experiences I'd generally consider to be contributing to the Quality of my life do not make me feel happy. Happiness, in modern cultural terms, seems purely reactive and temporary, both subjective and dependent on external stimuli. A snickers bar makes me happy, but a life full of eating snickers bars is decidedly not good.

Obviously, I am not suggesting that Aristotle got it wrong. On the contrary, my understanding of the two concepts in question is largely consistent with, and built on, the foundation of knowledge Aristotle constructed on the topic(s). "Happy" and "good" are simply so

ubiquitous in the popular lexicon that Aristotle's ideas are eclipsed. When referring to Aristotle or the philosophical body of work concerning these ideas, I've chosen to capitalize The Good Life and Happiness. In general, in reference to my own life, I've tended to avoid using the word "happy" and to envision "The Good Life" as a life full of Quality.

Chapter 1: What you Notice Becomes Your Life

Home is Where Everything Happens

January 2014.

As I write, I'm looking out the shop window across the crystalline landscape of my backyard. The overnight low was 4 degrees Fahrenheit, a rare occasion in the North Carolina piedmont, but an occasion I welcome with excitement. The usual steady hum of morning traffic is replaced by glassy crackles and whining gusts. This shop where I sit isn't yet finished, and the two large barn doors adjacent my desk keep catching wind, swinging against the lynch pin and exposing an inch or two of outside. The morning air cuts the relative warmth of the heater beside me before the doors thud closed, quieting, momentarily, the excitement of outside. My two cats are huddled on the cast iron base of an old band saw, the warmth of their bodies absorbed through the long night. Like the cats, I'm appreciative of this shop, and my wandering mind rests on the memories of its construction. This is one of those unexpected free days. I could probably make it the few miles across the icy roads to my business's shop, but I'll take the rare opportunity to stay back, at least for a while, and feel the morning.

I love the quiet. I've always told myself that I want to slow down, but I seldom realize that fleeting ideal of sitting, alone in a quiet place long enough to actually think new thoughts. Sometimes Friday evening comes and I'll be standing in front of my charcoal grill on the cracked concrete stoop, and the mesmerizing flames will awaken me to the fact that another week has passed. My work is full of big, loud, old cast iron machines, employees and clients with endless

questions and problems. I'm self employed, own a small fabrication and design business, and the most prevalent voice on these loud days is my own. I love the bustle sometimes, but the days and weeks and months seem to run together in that banal, blurry hum of adult life. No matter the choices I've made, comfortable rhythms turn to quotidian routine and I catch myself forgetting to pick out those little threads of compassion, recognition, or quiet observation of beauty that collectively weave together my notion of a Good Life. I regret weeks gone by when I've missed all those chances to marvel at the whirring cutterhead of my 1974 Powermatic Planer, or the steam rising up from the earth on my early morning motorcycle rides to work, or the comfort of waking up with Erin sleeping soundly beside me. I spent several years living alone, relishing the comfort of solitude and having time to think and to be alone with my thoughts. But as time goes on I'm constantly confronted with the limits of solitude. Silence in an empty room only goes so far, I suppose.

I'd like to think for a while about my life and about The Good Life more generally. Most of my time is spent making objects and structures, mostly out of wood, that represent my understanding of Quality. I've been extremely interested in the actions that result in those objects, though I've seldom reflected on the actions themselves and their bearing on my understanding and pursuit of The Good Life. Now I've set out to build something for the home I share with Erin, and I'd like to pay attention to what I can discover in the process.

At work my hands often ache. Epoxy and urethane darken the cracks and calluses. My business' shop is unheated, and these winter days drag on. In the dead of the winter, the space will stay below 50 degrees for a month at a time. We don't talk too much there that time of year. We all look inflated in our layers of cotton and wool. Silent, puffy bodies wound down to half

speed and grumbling. The pace of work slows to a depressing trudge, so that we perk up at opportunities for basic manual labor. Last winter we processed a few thousand board feet of heart pine. With space heaters by the planer, my employees and I, wearing only t-shirts, worked up a sweat as the heaters coaxed the smells of pitch and resin from the beams. I took pleasure in it. The real, lasting kind. The stuff of fulfillment. We put on Top 40 music and laughed together.

Work doesn't make me happy too often this time of year. Nor in the summer, really. When we finish a piece of furniture at the shop, especially in these harsh winter months, we often say to each other, "well, this is all really terrible, but that piece is amazing". No sooner than it's finished, it's gone. Like climbing a mountain in the bitter cold. What makes it worth it? The momentary view of beauty at the top before forging on again? I'm not sure what it is, but I've spent a good long while climbing, and I've never spent too long taking in the view.

Erin

This shop we're building in the backyard of our home is for my girlfriend, Erin. For her livelihood, Erin restores old books for Duke University's rare book library. She works with leather and glue and wood and thread and performs precise handwork that makes me feel altogether uncoordinated and impatient. She spends her free time blacksmithing, and that is the impetus for this new building in which I am now sitting. Her old shop burned down on this site around Thanksgiving two years ago. Sparks from the forge found their way to the charcoal bin and managed to ignite. I got word from the neighbors as I was on the way home from a

particularly late day of work. “Fire in the shop.” By the time I arrived, only a few minutes later, the flames were 20 feet above the roof and fire trucks were pulling up.

Erin and I watched with horror and excitement, awe and embarrassment as the firefighters calmed the blaze and, with only the slightest hint of suspicion or condescension, questioned us on what had happened. My dog Spencer anxiously circled the firefighters and kept a distance from the building. At this point we’d been together for nine years, Spencer and I, and the two of us with Erin for a year and a half or so. We had only recently moved in with Erin. She bought the house, which is now *our* house, and the few acres on which it sits about six years prior. Before moving here, I had lived in a tobacco barn I’d turned into a house for Spencer and myself. We were happy there, mostly, but we wanted to live with Erin.

As we watched the building smolder, my mind jumped straight to the task of rebuilding. I was keenly aware of my lack of nostalgia, and my capacity to be insensitive as a result. Erin was attached to that building in a way I’m not sure I’ve ever been, to any building. The old shop told a story of this place, and I wish I could have overlooked the sagging roof and sloping floors enough to appreciate that story more. Erin spent years worth of nights and weekends improving that building and forging tools and sculptures in it. She was ashamed and heartbroken at the loss, and I stood with her silently until the commotion was all over. I fell asleep that night with the image of the flames and the flickering shadows from the big red oak.

We’ve been building the new shop, with help from my old friend Ben, for a while now. Ben is a carpenter who frames houses in Boone, NC. We met when we were both in college there. He was building houses and I hadn’t the faintest idea that I’d become a carpenter in the

years that followed. While we work together, he is staying in my 1976 Airstream that sits on the top of a south-facing hill behind our house. I own a wood and metal fabrication business of my own now, and Ben and I have joined forces on the construction of Erin's shop. Thinking back to those early memories of getting to know Ben, I recall how I marveled at his tool belt and its contents. The leather belt and bags ranged from amber honey to dark brown, exposing the motions and contact points of thousands of hours of wear. The head of his hammer was held on by several ad hoc pins and wedges to its hickory handle, a replacement with many houses under its belt. The pouch on the right side was smeared with finger prints in caulk and paint, and the pockets had been sewn back together countless times. Like a good old pair of jeans, his tool belt told the story of Ben's life as a carpenter. At that point I hadn't the slightest notion that I, too, would build my life with tools in hand. I was drawn to his belt aesthetically, but without any real sense of what it meant.

The 1200 square feet of less-than-simple construction overlapped with my leaving the house I had built for myself, as well as the first year of my business. I struggled to enjoy the aggregate of too many wonderful experiences, and I see in hindsight that I spent a lot of time feeling weighed down by the increasing presence of obligation and accountability.

The shop is dried in now. No siding yet. We got this far before winter and decided to take a break until spring. The building is taller than we had first envisioned, and a bit more modern looking than the other structures on our property. A north-facing clearstory stands proudly towards the road, filling the interior with a soft, diffuse, indirect light. We framed in a room for me, about 15' x 18' (or so), where I'm sitting now. Part woodshop, part storage for the contents

of my old house, part motorcycle shop, and part thinking / writing space. I've not yet decided what to do here, but it already offers respite from the house.

The House

The house we live in lies just north of the shop, which is uphill and toward Pleasant Dr, the road we live on. It was built in 1931, an era of post-Victorian architecture limited by a struggling US economy and flawed building materials. The ceiling tiles bear enough resemblance to asbestos products that we've acquiesced to their permanence. The foundation is an amusing amalgamation of, well, hard things, ranging from cinder blocks to unidentifiable pieces of metal. It's a low lying, sort of ranch-y farmhouse. Neither well-built nor especially well kept up, it is rife with issues in need of energy that neither Erin nor I have — or are inclined — to give. We've been chipping away at roof leaks, worn out floors, stuck windows, and sundry other annoyances big and small. My de facto adoption of this house was not entirely welcome, and passive protests on my part have contributed to protracted renovations and an underlying tension that I could do a better job of preventing. When I can, I overlook the problems, which Erin would say is next to never. The house has a sort of humble charm, and as we continue to make improvements, we're unearthing a character long hidden beneath cosmetic failures.

We installed a wood stove two years ago, and we've addressed the cosmetics of the main living spaces enough to be able to enjoy the hot stove and a glass of bourbon with each other on these cold nights. This main room is more sparse now than it was when I moved in. The split logs, mostly oak, to the left of the stove impart a dank earthiness to the room. Hardwood scraps

from my shop are piled in an old wooden milk crate I found in the packing shed of a defunct farm. Maple and walnut and cherry strips in the weathered pine and steel crate are mementos from my furniture making over the last year. I stare at those scraps, attempting to recall the projects they came from. In this room I usually have a book on my lap. Cormac McCarthy or Wendell Berry or Faulkner, lately. I read a couple of pages, gaze at the hatchet Erin and I made together, sip bourbon, read, sip again. Erin had forged the head of the hatchet before we met. I had seen it once or twice before, and silently took an interest in the unfinished project. I was visiting the shop of a friend of mine when I saw an old, broken hickory axe handle sticking out of the trash can. I pulled it out and, although starting from scratch may have been easier, I noticed a section that would lend itself to a hatchet handle. I shaped a bottom, curved so that it rests easily in the hand, and carved the top to fit the eye of the hatchet head. The head is angled just a bit off from the handle, not enough to impact its functioning, but enough to be a reminder of the process of assembling it.

I become aware of the book I'm reading, *House* by Tracy Kidder, as an object among these others. I look at Erin, absorbed in her own book, a collection of Joyce Carol Oates' essays, and seemingly free from distraction. What would that be like, I wonder? My restless mind is capable of only snippets of hyper focus, and I've set up my life to be able to constantly shift between tasks, avoiding the inevitable distraction that sets in when facing work that is utterly uninterrupted. She seems content, and I become aware of how unfamiliar that state is to me. I'm troubled at the thought of it, kind of restless, discontent with my discontentedness. I wonder if Erin cultivated that quality. I'm learning that solitude can be shared.

The Old Table

Erin built the dining table. She made it five or so years ago with old barn wood from one of the outbuildings on the property. It, like the house, is charming from a distance but on intimate terms, is neither ideal nor particularly functional for its intended purpose. Its form is thoughtful, a classic shaker-ish style farm table. The top is constructed of five unjoined pine boards, about 5.5" wide, each running the length of the 8' table. The center board visually balances the long and narrow table, and the proportions, though unusual, work quite well in our dining room. I tend not to build tables with perfectly centered boards. I'm not sure why. I'm not even sure I ever made that decision, but looking at this table has illuminated that tendency of mine. I don't dislike the center board, per se, but it stands out as decidedly different from what I would have done. The five boards are nailed to lateral supports and skirt boards that span the four sides of the table. The internal supports are about 3/16" proud of the skirts, resulting in the two end boards slanting down towards you as you sit. When a cup is placed on an end board, it will tilt down just enough to spill a bit of, say, hot coffee onto an unsuspecting lap. Plates will rock back and forth, clanking ceramics against soft wood as one attempts to cut food silently. The surface has completely absorbed the oil finish Erin once applied to it, and is covered in dings and scratches from use. The result is a sort of endearing patina, but the nagging critic in me can't seem to rest on the charm. The legs mimic a traditional tapered table leg. Each is made of two pine boards, cut with a taper on one side, and nailed together at the corner. The angle works, and the table stands sturdily on all four legs. I don't notice the functionality nearly as much as I notice the flaws of the table as well as the house and some other of its contents. I pay for that, emotionally,

and, no doubt, so does Erin. And I wonder what bearing that attentiveness to shortcomings rather than merit has on how I build furniture, and, more generally, how I move through the world.

Erin is practical to the bone. She has always worked in the arts, studying art history and book conservation. And her work restoring old texts has strong aesthetic components. But, at home at least, her approach to most house projects starts with available materials and minimal monetary investment. The boards used for this table were found in the shed behind the house when she bought it. There's an old adage, one to which I've subscribed in varying degrees over the years: *Available materials dictate design*. I still subscribe to this notion, but it occurs to me now how non-specific the word "available" is. Available in what way? As a furniture maker I have access to any kind of lumber imaginable, even old growth heart pine or rare rainforest lumber if I want it. As an individual, availability is limited by the amount of money I have or am willing to spend on a particular project. For Erin, availability is often more immediate, more literal. The materials she draws on for all of her house projects is on her property already. And the materials on the property are available because of someone else's interpretation of the same principle. The outcome of this, Erin's process of passive material procurement, means she uses pine for almost everything, as did the previous occupants and builders of our house.

Yellow pine is not a material I'd have chosen for a dining table. This is not the same pine that once covered the majority of the Southeastern United States and was nearly ubiquitous in furniture building in the south. Old growth Longleaf Pine grew very slowly, yielding an extremely dense lumber with tiny, tight growth rings and a resin content that makes it particularly durable. These trees lived up to 500 years, and grew only a single inch in diameter over thirty years. Today, only about 3% of those old trees remain standing. Beginning in the 20th

century, other species of pine were cultivated and modified for rapid growth, and the pine felled and milled for lumber now is completely lacking in the resin and golden red coloration of its ancestors, not to mention the density required for furniture-making. It is an excellent answer to our growing consumption of lumber for building and paper. Fast growing and sufficiently strong for stick-framed buildings, the modern Loblolly Pine reaches maturity in just 25-40 years. It's difficult to argue with such a renewable resource, but the lumber has effectively been removed from furniture shops.

About the old table, I never did mention replacing it, both because there are other pieces of furniture we lack entirely, and because Erin built it. But, when a recent guest set her glass down on the uneven, un-joined boards and it spilled (this was not the first time this happened to a visitor), Erin suggested we think about another table. After she spoke the words, we exchanged knowing glances. Erin knows I've disliked this table, and she also knows it will likely take me a long time to getting around to building another one. Her smile and rolling eyes encapsulated both of those emotions, but for my part, I'm delighted by the open door. I've learned to wait for Erin to come around of her own accord to something that I think needs to happen rather than pushing my point. I don't always heed that lesson, but when I don't, I know exactly what I'm walking into. It's hard to say which of us is more stubborn, but things are easier this way. I've been practicing the art of the bitten lip.

Chapter 2: The New Table

Thinking

Sitting in our new shop now thinking about a new table, I'm struck by the realization that both Erin and the previous homeowner most likely worked with the material from which the old table is constructed *on this exact site*. I wonder if I could build a new table here. I have a brief vision of building a table with hand tools, embracing the image of the traditional craftsman that seems so foreign to my own experience. Gazing out the steel clad windows at pine trees and garden, I indulge in that thought momentarily. I pretend to have that capacity of patience and skill it would require. As it turns out, I know that I don't. I could never spend hours shaping a single board. I'm obsessed with efficiency, and my interest in long, slow mornings like this one, sipping coffee and contemplating furniture ideas, is totally dependent on things like prohibitive weather that keeps me from going to work, or being sick and unable to work. So, in light of this, I have to ask myself: what *is* it about solitude and quiet that resonates with me as integral to happiness? Or, perhaps the better question: why, for me, isn't happiness a priority?

Thinking about this table makes me realize how much this new table project is wrapped up in this house, and how much this house is the physical manifestation of my life with Erin. Happiness is starting to seem cheap for me, the easy way, shallow and more like a hotel room than a well built house. If I wanted solitude/quiet/happiness, above all, I'd not likely get too far in the arduous process of furniture construction, not to mention creating and maintaining a relationship.

Designing

When I've lived alone, my living spaces have been what some would call "minimalist." Functional, but unadorned. A bed, a counter, a chair, shelves, a wood stove, a hook on the wall and not much more. I found beauty in the openness. Empty spaces lend themselves to contemplation for me, and the house I built and lived in before moving in with Erin was decorated by the exposed structure and the window or porch framed view of the forest. The Quality and the aesthetic were built into the construction, and the experience within it was a reaction to the very bones of the house.

I've never built a piece of furniture for myself. There are pieces I have that I've built — a side table, an end table, and a bench — but I didn't build any of those with the intention of keeping them or the idea of true ownership. I think I've always felt that I wasn't there yet as a craftsman, that I wanted more experience before building something that I'll see every day. I once worked with a carpenter who said, "I'll never build my own house because I don't want to live with my mistakes." He was an excellent craftsman, and he was at least partially joking, but the sentiment rings true to me. Each piece I build is better, in certain ways, than the last. Each piece is a stepping stone in my education as a craftsman, and as a consequence, I'm interested in what comes next rather than dwelling on what I've just completed.

Furniture is the mechanism by which my hypotheses about Quality are put to the test. I'm driven by the *pursuit* of Quality rather than the question of defining or measuring it. There is something final and conclusive to me about a finished piece, a way in which that particular part

of my pursuit has run its course. The conversation is over for me and the piece now exists outside of me, in the world, for someone else to experience. But the comfort of quiet empty rooms can grow lonely. Maybe my vision of perfect emptiness was missing something. Maybe I needed Erin and this house we share to persuade me to build a piece to keep.

There are no craftsmen in a perfect world. Craftsmanship and imperfection go hand in hand. When I look at most of what I've built, I'm drawn to the imperfections. This is not a negative reaction. I'm not disdainful, but I'm not attached, either. A cantilevered bench may teach me that I could counterbalance even further, extending the cantilever much further than I'd thought. A full-extension drawer mechanism, while undeniably impressive in its function, might teach me that the extension is not worth the compromise in appearance, that a passive wooden track is mechanically sufficient and aesthetically superior. Showing the finished piece to the world, I can attract prospective customers to the idea of the cantilever, or the drawer, and I'll often find myself revisiting the design soon thereafter for a new customer. The great fortune of this funded education is not lost on me, and perhaps it won't last forever.

I built a walnut credenza last year that has become one of my favorite pieces of furniture I've made. The process of designing and building it was an exercise in patience and compromise with a particularly fickle and demanding customer. The design, dimensions, proportions, mechanisms, and just about everything else changed continuously over the course of countless sketches, emails, and phone conversations. Eventually my mind began to conflate the many design ideas and the piece became an incohesive, incompatible jumble of ideas. I ultimately pulled the plug on the conversations. I told the customer that I was confident that the discussions we'd had would yield a design that would more than satisfy the parameters he'd set: midcentury

modern, walnut, sliding doors, hidden, full extension drawers, tapered legs, and the list goes on. I spent somewhere in the neighborhood of 60 hours on the piece, constructing it entirely without fasteners. The four sliding doors glided across waxed grooves, and the grain was continuous across the doors. When I applied the last coat of finish on the credenza, the feeling of relief and satisfaction was prominent but accompanied by a keen awareness of a couple of missed opportunities. The grain between the two center doors was off by a differential of about $\frac{1}{8}$ ". Unless the doors are closed you'd never notice, and even when they are, it looks neither wrong nor particularly problematic. But, in retrospect, I realize I could have offset the differential caused by the thickness of the table saw blade with which I crosscut the door, by offsetting the rip along the grain direction of the panel by the same $\frac{1}{8}$ ". The differential isn't necessarily a flaw, as I'm sure I'm the only one who'll notice it. But it presents an opportunity to refine. There seems to be something there, in my relationship to those flaws.

The New Table

May 2015.

Many months have passed now since I thought of replacing the dining table. We're still eating off of the same old pine table, and my ideas about a new table have developed a bit in the background of an otherwise very busy spring. I don't recall a slow morning since I last wrote. The home shop is nearly completed now. My side of the shop has mostly become my tinkering space. My 1995 Harley FX Dyna is the centerpiece, sitting on a lift and partially disassembled after my fork seals gave out on a long ride in the mountains. A group of about eight friends

trailed our motorcycles to a hillside house outside of Asheville and clocked about a thousand miles past endless rhododendrons, cattle fields, and vistas. We stopped at a little country gas station and my pants were covered in oil spatter. I had noticed a little bit of sloppiness in my front end, but was too caught up in the landscape to think much of it. With failed fork seals, the fluid in the forks that provide the pressure to achieve suspension leaks out, in this case on my pants. The fork tubes travel more freely, bottoming out on small bumps in the road and greatly diminishing the responsiveness of a cycle. At high speeds, the malfunctioning forks would present real danger, so I limped back to the house at about 40 miles per hour.

The bike has been sitting here now for a couple months as one thing has led to another. Working on motorcycles is a lot like building furniture. And riding motorcycles has a lot in common with living well, as far as I can tell. Robert Pirsig says it best in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* when he describes how, when you're on a motorcycle, the entirety of your experience is consolidated into sharp focus. You are of the landscape, living within it instead of passing it by. In Robert Pirsig's words:

“You see things vacationing on a motorcycle in a way that is completely different from any other. In a car you're always in a compartment, and because you're used to it you don't realize that through that car window everything is you see is just more TV. You're a passive observer and it is all moving by you boringly in a frame. On a cycle the frame is gone. You're completely in contact with it all. You're *in* the scene, not just watching it anymore, and the sense of presence is overwhelming. That concrete whizzing by five inches below your foot is the real thing, the same stuff you walk on, it's right there, so blurred you can't focus on it, yet you can

put your foot down and touch it anything, and the whole thing, the whole experience is never removed from immediate consciousness.” (Pirsig 8)

Living well, to me, seems to have a lot to do with being active in my own experience. Riding motorcycles, like building furniture, puts me in direct contact with the world. Riding through familiar landscapes demands an awareness of my presence in it. Building furniture offers an opportunity to shape the world around me, heightening my presence by deepening the integration of myself and my surroundings.

The dining table I’ll build will have a similar form to Erin’s. The narrow shape worked well in the space, and I think she’ll take the gesture as a sort of nod to her design. Essentially I’m thinking of a Shaker-style piece, minimal but elegant, easy to look at, but not particularly memorable, either. A table that will blend in and integrate, contributing to the feeling of comfort and thoughtful appointment, but not standing out as distinct or commanding. It occurs to me that if I didn’t feel I needed a table, I wouldn’t have one. It occurs to me further that I’m not quite sure I need one, but I’ll leave that alone for now.

Tapered legs, mortise and tenon skirt. Initially I envision a breadboard end, which is an end cap of sorts, constructed of a single board on each end running perpendicular to the table boards and concealing the end grain of the lumber. Bread boards, when done correctly, are “floating”, in that they are attached by open, or slot, mortises with tenons of much smaller dimensions. Fastened tightly only in the center, the breadboard end prevents the boards, or the tabletop as a whole, from cupping, warping, or bending in a vertical plane. But the loose mortises also accommodate the natural expansion and contraction of the wood, an imperative detail. One

can surely picture the widening gaps in wood floors in winter or the sticking of wooden doors in their jambs in the summer to grasp that necessity. Wood, each and every board absorbs ambient moisture, expanding laterally and, inevitably, cracking or warping if that expansion is inhibited. Aesthetically, the breadboard detail can be quite pleasing. The variation of the breadboard I've described is considered "blind" in that the joinery is concealed and the joint between the table boards and the breadboard appears to be a simple "butt joint." Other variations abound, but I'm fond of the "blindness". For our new table, I prefer that the integrity of the joinery be integrated into the endurance of the table as a whole, rather than called out specifically.

Shakers furniture is thoughtful, well-made and modest. It's an overall approach to furniture that I admire. They tended to construct furniture out of yellow pine, hard maple, or cherry, and with liberal application of stains. Yellow pine is out of the question. The floors in the house are yellow pine, and in general the space needs something brighter and contrasting. I've never been a fan of stains. Though many craftsmen have used it with beautiful results, they feel artificial to me, topical and an assault on the natural elegance of properly selected materials. And, besides, I'm not a Shaker.

The front of our house faces north, and a large oak and a hickory tree obstruct what little passive sunlight would otherwise make it to the three windows on the front of the house. The East wall is our best source of sunlight, owing to the some hundred feet of open space between the house and a fairly dense forest of pine and young hardwoods. In the winter, the low sun pierces the naked trees and warms the dining room, which is situated between the living room and kitchen. The two large windows in the center of the room are the only real source of natural light in the entire living space of the house. I've often lamented the relative darkness of the

house, and I'm hoping this table, and the broader re-imagination of the room will help to magnify and accentuate the available light we do have.

I'm thinking I'll build the table of hickory or oak, both of which seem appropriate given their representation on this property. I like the appearances of both, in tree and in lumber form. Hickory, however, is excessively difficult to work with, and my sawmill buddy doesn't have any at the moment. The commercially sourced hickory I've worked with has been too uniform in color, like a hard maple, though harder and less pure white. All the difficulty without any of that speckled character of air dried hickory. Hickory and pecan are indistinguishable as lumber, and most of the great hickory I've come across has come from old timers who called it pecan.

I've been drawn to white oak lately. Quarter sawn white oak, in particular. White oaks are about the pinnacle of the forest in this region of North Carolina. Spreading wide and proud, white oaks stand with a grandfatherly magic in what little bit of mature forest land remains. Downtown Raleigh, the city of oaks and my hometown, is lined with ancient white oaks. Gnarled roots turn up sidewalks and the branches have been cut away from power lines for so long that some trees have fifty-foot wide gaps between branches on either side of the center. In thinking it through, I decide I do not want the headache of sourcing and working with hickory. I've elevated white oak in my mind enough to convince myself: "The City of Oak?" "Yeah!"

I've said a lot about furniture and thought a lot about this table but not said or thought much about my life. Sometimes I wonder if my relentless approach to work and furniture making is a way to avoid all that life stuff. It does work as an escape, occasionally, but there is more to it. Making furniture has put me in contact with the world in ways I never was before. If my idea of

the Good Life before becoming a woodworker was a glass of bourbon and a fire, then making furniture has coaxed out a broader vision, an interest in contributing to that world I spent so long separating myself from. Craftsmanship — by its nature — is a process of simultaneously crafting work and crafting the self that produces the work. For me, craftsmanship has become a language, the medium between my solitary thoughts and my self in the world. Prior to this phase of my life it was not unusual for me to spend entire days circling in my mind anxiously with no release. After years of learning the tools and materials of woodworking, I'm able to move fluidly enough through the process of building a piece of furniture, and that cultivated skill has become an extension of myself. The pieces I build now, especially when left to my own designs, represent a theory of how to live the Good Life, of that amorphous concept of Quality I've been chasing. Making furniture hasn't made me an entirely different person, or even a good person, but it has given me a way to interact with the world that is compatible with my vision of Quality.

Chapter 3: Memory

For a long time I resisted the weight of ownership. My first real, thorough investigation of Quality began when I was about twenty-three. I'd been farming for a couple years at that point, cultivating little plots of land here and there in the interstices of Raleigh. Then I had the opportunity to live and farm on twelve acres of land about a half hour North of Raleigh. Surveying that acreage, I caught a glimpse of a half rotten tobacco barn through blackberry brambles and muscadine vines, and I was immediately determined to make it my home. In hindsight, I'm not sure what compelled me and, even more so, what gave me the idea that I could possibly build a house out of the remains of a rotting old barn. It seems I sensed in that old structure an image, or the possibility, of Quality (of life) that I'd never known before.

In the years immediately following my college graduation and the conclusion of my first education, I was confronted with the fact that the versions of life I'd been exposed to up until that time did not seem to resonate with me. Having arrived in this essay to a point in my story at which Quality presented itself in the form of a home that was mine to build and mine to inhabit, I'd like to step back and take note of where I'm from and the literal environment that shaped my earliest ideas of how to live.

During the 1990s, I grew up in a sort of cultural crossroads. My parents were early settlers in the suburbs of Raleigh, NC, that by now have taken over the landscape in every direction. As a kid I was bussed from these suburbs to rural schools. The school bus picked me up on top of the hill, the one the neighborhood kids would race down — on anything we could

find with wheels. I walked past big houses being constructed and new families moving in every week. My neighborhood friends and I would build forts from lumber and nails left on the construction sites, and we never thought twice about what might have been there before. I'd climb up onto third story rafters, peering out over the pines to clear cut tracts and old farmhouses. The school bus took me through neighborhoods of 5000 square foot McMansions and out to trailer parks, small family farms, and run down ranch houses before reaching our school. Spending time with my classmates, with the range in accents and dialects, was something of an education unto itself. I was a transplant, but I'd been there long enough, and assimilated well enough to not stick out. Show-and-tell was a veritable cross-section of society. Early model cell phones, taxidermy ducks, straw hats from trips to Hawaii and arrowheads found in the freshly tilled land were displayed by the sons and daughters of corporate executives and tobacco farmers alike.

It wasn't until the glorious bike trails my friends and I built in the woods surrounding our homes were leveled for a new health center that I became conscious of the sort of *before* and *after* that so much of the scenery of my childhood would undergo. A rag tag group of young misfits, me among them, spent countless summer days, over a more than a couple of years, digging dirt, clearing brush, and smoking stolen cigarettes in the forts we'd built back there. We called it Honda Hill for reasons I don't remember, except maybe that it has something to do with my friend Jamison's Honda dirtbike, the one we took turns flying through the trails on. Mostly we were innocently having fun, though the secret space felt like home to all kinds of mischief and prohibited activities. We'd light fires, kiss girls, stockpile candy we'd stolen and occasionally fight each other. We pretended to be tougher than we were and, in hindsight, I

wonder how much of that sweet stolen bounty was simply “shoplifted” from home kitchen cabinets. But the place was ours. We built it ourselves and we cared for it. People knew about Honda Hill, and specifically identified the group of boys, which included me, who built it.

When the bulldozers came we stole the keys at night. We drained the gas, blocked the entrances and pleaded with our parents to stop them. Nothing could be done, of course, and we watched in horror as our paradise and the woods concealing it were transformed into a clear cut and leveled patch of red clay. Soon thereafter a health club was built where trees and trails had formerly been and I suddenly became aware of the fact that my home, and the homes of most of my friends, hadn’t been there forever. That burden deepened as I watched the evolution of new home construction from the school bus window on my rides to school. And saw the student body gradually become a much more homogenous and much less Southern group of kids.

I must have been around 13 years old when all of this was happening. Hitting puberty. My stomach tensed at the site of clear-cut forests, or when my poorer friends moved away, their homes sold as part of large tracts to developers. I was saddened to learn that the lake I’d grown up fishing in was manmade, and that the old paths and fence lines leading into it were likely markers of lives and ways of living that had been displaced, and displaced by the likes of myself.

Slowing Down

At the age of 23 in 2009, I worked on a farm. This was after about a year’s attempt at a desk job. That year I lived in a huge old farmhouse on a couple hundred acres about 15 minutes outside of Carrboro, NC, a small, hip town connected to Chapel Hill. Dairy farms surrounded us and the

five twenty somethings who shared the house passed the time cooking and gardening. Three of us worked together on a farm further out of town, about a 30 minute ride through the small, historic town of Hillsborough, and out into the rural, post tobacco fields of Northern Orange and Caswell counties.

Outside of work we rode bikes everywhere. I got a second job as a bicycle mechanic in town. I'd ride the eight or so miles to work, slowly observing the transition from farmland to town, more often than not excited to spend the day fixing bikes. The reason I mention this here is that the farm and the bike shop were the formal beginning of my education in Quality.

The farm was owned and run by Ken Dawson, a 60 year-old post-hippie who had embraced the business of farming diversified organic vegetables. He ran the operation well; proudly and seriously, and also with reverence for the land and a deep sense of stewardship. He introduced me to the poems of Wendell Berry, rudimentary carpentry, and peanut butter and tomato sandwiches. We called him Uncle Ken, and any complaints about him were precluded with assertions of respect and appreciation. He was often just barely in our sight, tilling or bush-hogging or plowing up potatoes and, occasionally, just sitting and watching all the life around him.

The pace of his farm was fast and slow in turns. On the days we'd collect bales of hay, I'd jog along the truck, stopping at each bale and, in a single motion, spin around to accelerate it around my body enough to clear the rails of the trailer. On Fridays we'd harvest and pack for market. The day seemed like a prolonged panic of picking, washing, packing, picking, washing, packing. We'd call it Uncle Ken's Tomato Farm in late summer. Green resin would pour out of

my skin and hair when, at the end of epic summer days, I'd rinse in the outdoor shower before heading inside. Other days were slower. Sometimes I'd get to drive the tractor. I'd settle into the rhythm of the laps, back and forth, turning soil and imagining the transformation of the field in the coming weeks. We'd walk the 30 acres in search of evidence of deer activity or groundhog dens. We'd sit by the river and drink beers after work and Ken would read poems aloud or reminisce about the early days on the land.

Ken had worked as a carpenter when he was much younger, an invaluable skill on a farm. I had absolutely no carpentry experience at the time but when he'd pull his tools out to build a table, fix a barn, or build a roof, I gravitated in that direction. He was slow and measured — decisive, but seemingly redundant in his planning and measuring. I remember thinking it was silly at the time, a sort of prolonged ritual and preparation. All this trouble before turning on the tools, I thought. And all for such a utilitarian piece — a table to hold an outdoor sink, for example. I have a different interpretation now, but it's cost me the chagrin of a lot of premature cutting and necessary redoing in the intervening years to get there. Ken comes to mind when I recite what has become a familiar refrain to my employees, "let's spend as much time as we need to on layout. Little mistakes today become total failures tomorrow." Years later, that table Ken built still stands outside the packing shed, and thousands of pounds of produce have been washed and packed — thanks, in part, to the enduring quality of the table.

Ken had a vision of what was right, and it seems he never lost sight of it. He was clear with his expectations, and unwavering when they weren't met. He'd send us back to the field to pick more tomatoes if he felt we hadn't been thorough enough. Or he'd have us take the squash back out of each individual bag to wash them. But he'd also skip a planting, opting to let a field

lay fallow another season if he felt it was becoming tired or deficient. I was always surprised when he'd make decisions based on the quality of the soil at the expense of profit. There were other subtle actions or gestures. If he noticed he'd shorted a restaurant a pint of blueberries, which they'd never notice, he'd get back in the truck, drive the 25 minutes to Hillsborough, and deliver them directly. He'd stop midway through plowing up potatoes to adjust the plow so it wouldn't dig so deep. He'd pull me aside to show me the early signs of blight or to talk through his ideas about crop rotations. He always seemed interested in making things, and he always appeared to take great pleasure when things turned out the way he anticipated. Ken also would pull us aside to read us a poem, or to relive memories of working on dairy farms in his youth, his reverence suggesting an undeniable "goodness" in the farming tradition we'd all gravitated toward.

Ken was the first person I'd met who had so directly curated his own experience, and impacted the experiences of others. He built his home and farm. He was recognized in the community as a good farmer and a good man. Ken's life was surrounded by the direct results of his actions, guided by an ever stronger vision of what good living meant to him. Ken taught me to make life *personal*, which is exactly the opposite of what it sounds like. What I learned from Ken is that we are all, individually, at the very center of our own universe, and our individual perspectives necessarily emanate from that truth. While significant, that platitude, in and of itself, is ultimately not all that interesting to me. In fact, the passivity that often results from that perspective is precisely what Ken taught me to question.

My unconscious default is to feel that I'm passing through the world and everything that happens is happening to me. It is easy to feel that I'm just an observer, a victim, a customer, an

anonymous one among billions, but also the anonymous one to whom things like the frustration of traffic jams or leaking roofs is happening to. It is so easy for me to presume that in every situation I am the passive, helpless character in a story someone else wrote, unable to change the setting or circumstances. But Ken wasn't satisfied with that. He made life, by which I mean the landscape of his experience, his own. He grew food for himself and hundreds of others. He built his house and farm from the ground up. He surrounded himself with people whose knowledge and needs and capabilities and vulnerabilities coalesced with his own in order to deepen the satisfaction of his life. Ken moved actively through the landscape of his life, building and changing and editing and, perhaps most importantly, taking a moment here and there to genuinely appreciate it. Ken seems to have cultivated a default that takes ownership in his role in the world, involving a responsibility to affect the quality life he imagines.

The lessons of that 2009 farming season at Ken's have accumulated and deepened over the years. I learned a lot about when to slow down.

The bike shop was a different kind of education in quality. Jason, the owner, had a superior air about him, like a condescending barista. But he had a problem with condescending baristas, too. At times, Jason was an unbearable matrix of contradictory assertions, and I'd have to tiptoe around to avoid unleashing the next soap box sermon on anything from wheel building to the Iranian Revolution. But he knew his trade and was a good teacher most of the time. "Back Alley Bikes" was a different sort of bike shop, a kind of anarchist, "fist in the air to those corporate chain bike shops" kind of place. We didn't sell new bikes. Jason's philosophy, which he'd proselytize effusively, was that the steel frames of the past were superior to the mass produced aluminum or carbon fiber frames found on the sales floors of most bike shops. All the

politics and philosophy manifested in a wonderful business model, a bike shop for the every person. I was drawn to the idea of recycling the old bikes that sit in so many garages and basements, unused. People would bring their old bikes and sell them to us, usually for around \$100. We'd fix clean, repair, and replace old parts and sell them, usually for well under \$500. Many of the bikes were over thirty years old, but I grew to appreciate the form and patina of those old steel frames. And our customers were enthralled by the prospect of owning a high quality, perfectly serviceable bike without being pressured to upgrade to carbon fiber forks or an aerodynamic helmet.

A new understanding of beauty accompanied my embracing the communitarian philosophy of Back Alley bikes. The lugs connecting the tubes of bike frames are embellished in a variety of ways, and I developed the habit of recognizing the lugs of different manufacturers. Soon I was able to identify frames whose paint or markings had disappeared over the years, and thus hasten the process of diagnosing issues and sourcing compatible parts. I had a relationship, a dialogue, with those old frames. The craftsmanship, specific and unique, and the level of disrepair were all indicators of the life of the frame. Someone designed and built those frames, and someone else, perhaps many people, rode and crashed and traveled with and stored them. And then they showed up on my stand, and, during the time I worked at Back Alley Bikes, I was afforded the time and tools to observe and diagnose and cure the impacts of those individual lives. Working on those old bikes was my first experience physically interacting with the work of other craftsmen. It was clear on many of those frames that I wasn't the first person to appreciate and take care as I serviced the bike. I distinctly recall stopping myself when I was tempted to loosen a head-set with a channel lock, rather than a proper head-set tool. The channel-

lock would have worked, but risked marring the lock nut, or worse, the frame. I was keenly aware of the disservice to the frame makers, and my shop ethic developed as a result.

Chapter 4: You Live the Good Life –

You Don't Arrive There

The most direct lessons I received in Quality had to do with the work I was doing. Coming from a background in social sciences, building and fixing bikes was an abrupt introduction to the objective world — to the physical reality of working mechanisms. A bicycle's derailleur either performed its function or it didn't. I was initially apprehensive about subjecting myself to such a determined scale of evaluation. My mind had been trained to analyze subjective, relative concepts, and to meditate on similarities, tendencies, and contrasts. In this world of bicycle mechanics, errors in judgment or technique manifested in gears grinding, binding, or simply failing to shift. And, in those cases where such unpleasant outcomes occurred, the blame was undeniably on me. As a bike mechanic, doing a good job was an observable reflection of my actions. Goodness was not about making bikes *look* good, nor even about knowing how a bike works. Doing well at my job was the cumulative result of employing knowledge and action to make bikes work well. My initial terror at my exposed vulnerability yielded to an eagerness to amass a history of bikes fixed well. The increasingly common sight of a customer commuting through town on a bike my hands had attended was reaffirming, and my hands grew increasingly confident with tools in them.

The necessity for action became central to my relentless pursuit of the best life possible, and the idea of happiness I'd grown up with started seeming less attractive. I'd spent some time resenting what felt like a prescriptive definition of success during my first education. I was, am,

one of those devious, attention-deficient outliers. I resisted what felt like a funnel directing me to what looked like a sort of sleepy, middle-class American corporate trajectory. The resentment has subsided, and I've grown to appreciate those few teachers who ignited, or glimpsed, the little sparks of curiosity and intelligence that shone through my boredom and deviance. Ultimately, I made it through those years with more-or-less average performance, and emerged equipped with a largely untapped well of enthusiasm for my next education.

My understanding of Quality and the "happiness" I've experienced exist in two very different realms for me. I grew up with the understanding that happiness is an achievable eventuality and the prevailing portrayal of happiness in American culture throughout my lifetime has largely been associated with the illusive image of pleasure over the next horizon. This is the trajectory I resisted in my first education. As I've spent more and more of my free time engaged in physically strenuous activity, outdoors, or with people that inspire me, I have increasingly questioned my relationship to this so-called pursuit of happiness. "The Good Life" seems like an undeniably worthy goal, but something in this postulation, as it is popularly understood, isn't sitting well. Quality keeps coming up in my meditations on what has kept me going. Hard work and glasses of bourbon, those empty spaces, mountains, Erin. All flawed and difficult and wonderful and, ultimately, what I've spent my life pursuing.

As I consider this, I'm reminded of the t-shirt company, "Life is Good," which depicts a smiling stick figure engaging in various activities, presumably associated with the "good life." A quick perusal of the Life is Good website presents me with multiple interpretations of the concept they are selling: a happy-stick-figure-man on a hammock, on a sailboat, fishing, golfing, wearing flip-flops, camping, sitting on the beach, etc. While I don't intend to take up the

unenviable position of promoting anti-leisure, I would like to point out the conspicuous absence of anything having to do with work, that work in this scenario is apparently a pesky obstacle, between now and the weekend, and between now and retirement, that one must endure in order to enjoy the good things in life. I like hammocks and sailboats as much as the next person, but I can't stop feeling like I don't want to be a "happy stick figure."

September 2015.

I'm at work, sitting in my business's shop. The guys have gone home and I'm sweeping the little curly q's of steel that cascade off of the drill press and onto the floor like hairs being cut. Walnut sawdust darkens the floor around the table saw, meeting with a spray of lighter maple dust from the miter saw. Wood and steel are, afterall, malleable forms and combined with a vision of Quality become new forms. My work is spent exercising that capacity, but I've spent far less time putting words to my understanding of what I do and the Quality that informs it. This meditation is, after all, about Quality, but I'm starting to think that it won't result in anything specific or intellectually graspable, won't yield any definable characteristic. If Quality and fulfillment are, for me, lived and felt rather than sought or achieved, I'd do best to reflect on the experiences in which I've felt closest to those evasive concepts.

Aristotle emphasizes action as a primary component to goodness, "...men become builders by building, lyre-players by playing the lyre..." (Aristotle 1733). If, in contemporary culture, we are instructed and conditioned to be always in pursuit of an unattainable end, the perpetual working for the weekend, then, as the saying goes, "...our desire would be empty and vain" (Aristotle 1729). Aristotle does not categorically dismiss the value of an end (telos) as a

legitimate justifier for action, suggesting; “the end of medical art is health, that of shipbuilding a vessel, that of strategy victory, that of economics wealth” (Aristotle 1729). However, to the notion of “happiness” as a universal end, to which one can subscribe and aspire, Aristotle offers a more critical position. Aristotle defines the Goodness of something in relation to its proximity to inherent goodness. So from that argument it follows that if we only work so that we can enjoy leisure, we remove from work its potential for inherent goodness.

Subscription to the one-size-fits-all version of pot-at-the-end-of-the-rainbow happiness carries the risky possibility of never actually arriving at the end of work at all, or of arriving there to realize that there is no pot of gold and getting there wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. I never had faith in that gamble. Aristotle discusses a personal happiness which, “...we divine to be something of one’s own” (Aristotle 1743). The Life is Good t-shirt company presents the illusion of a universal definition of attainable happiness, and what Aristotle describes as, “...very general agreement; for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness, and identify living well and faring well with being happy” (Aristotle 1743). There is a troubling vagueness in this description. For how is it that we determine what specific activities will actually make someone, a specific someone, happy. If goodness involves virtuous activity in accordance with reason, as Aristotle suggests, it would seem that spending one’s life doing one thing, namely work, in order to eventually arrive at this other thing, namely happiness, is neither virtuous nor reasonable. What Aristotle suggests, and what I have felt, is that Happiness is, in fact, not an end, but an accumulation of the actions of one’s life. Craftsmanship, in particular, offers the potential to spend life engaging with inherent goodness; it is an activity that can serve as both the vehicle through which goodness is communicated and the medium for

understanding and experiencing Quality. Aristotle's thoughts on happiness are much more compatible with what I experience as fulfillment, an enduring state of being rather than a momentary reaction or response to stimuli.

Now, my work as a craftsman does result in something specific and tangible, a piece of furniture, which at times may produce feelings of happiness. But my life is not punctuated by the individual pieces of furniture I've constructed, nor does my feeling of fulfillment depend solely on them. My fulfillment has a whole lot more to do with the totality of my experience of being a furniture maker. The Quality of my life is as entwined in the sweeping and the trips to the sawmill as it is with the romantic moments of applying the final coat of finish on a completed piece. The Quality of a finished piece of furniture is part of my experience, but it is more like a snapshot representation of the Quality I'm experiencing more generally at any given time. As such, my work actually requires that I exercise the building blocks of Quality — good action. The individual pieces I've made are testaments to that action, but they are not the action itself.

Chapter 5: Building

A few weeks ago, in the humid haze of a North Carolina August, I left the business shop for Jack's sawmill. The trip to Jack's takes about 45 minutes, traversing a cross-section of landscapes reminiscent of my childhood bus trips. In a couple of quick turns on neighborhood roads, I'm soon on Holloway St. on the east side of downtown Durham. I'm driving through housing projects and the apparently unemployed population saunters to and fro, pants tentatively tensioned by spread, waddling legs. Men are drinking. It is morning. There are brown paper bags and cigarettes. Disheveled hair and the sort of half-masted, sweaty eyes of addicts in the reckoning of late morning. The August heat strikes early this time of year, beaming down from the sun and doubling back from the pavement with a humidity that seems to defy even weeks without rain. Prostitutes and big chrome wheels and basketball courts full of shouting and promise. Adolescents on dirt bikes cross the center line and wheelie past my truck and trailer, their helmetless heads hollering, eyes darting to the intersections in search of obstructions or police. So many paces. I lumber on.

I pass the park and old millhouses line the streets, Pleasantville in decades of disrepair. Front yards with fences made of pallets contain little, barking dogs, colorful trash and cars. Latino women walk three and four chubby, smiling children. Most of the working aged men are gone this time of day. Grandparents sit on the porches and a few corn plants grow before them beside concrete stoops and dirt yards. Old men watch the truck drive by with tired eyes and worn out cowboy boots and I wonder how they got here. About half a dozen younger men are sitting,

unemployed, on a masonry retaining wall that, yielding to gravity, leans toward the street, both man and masonry evoking a tired, weathered strength. They look up expectantly, hopefully, rising slightly and straightening their backs. I avoid eye contact and recognize a familiar, indecipherable discomfort rising in my stomach. I start to wonder, and then I stop myself. One does not learn to wonder, one only learns to forget. I pass on and they settle back and fade from my mirrors.

And then the density lets up a bit. The landscape, the land, reveals itself and I exhale fully as the tension of the city gives way to space. The tension returns in the form of suburbs and more suburbs, strip malls and stay-at-home-parents with SUV's and stick figure families stuck to the back windshield speeding to the nearest grocery store. A golf course lines the road to the left and that hazy, dizzying desert kind of heat ripples off the manicured greens. Business men swing and smile and point, colorful shirts pressing their proud stomachs and their sweaty, glowing faces squinting at the distance, but not too far. I'm reminded of the fields and woods of my childhood, and I wonder where the children of the farmers of this land have ended up.

This *all* must have been farmland at some point. It's an old road and I imagine hardworking farmers with their sons, possibly daughters too, bumping their way across rougher roads to Durham, golden tobacco laid across itself in tall, narrow trailers, their sweaty faces squinting towards the city about this time of year. It has probably been decades at least since this particular road carried tobacco to fill the warehouses in Durham. A few old tobacco drying barns still stand along this road, relics of those days.

Loblolly pine now flanks highway 98 in the margins between suburban developments and plazas. I cross the county line into Wake, the capital county. The houses grow bigger and signs promise more to come, acres and acres more. A turn of the century farmhouse on huge I-beams has been moved to the road with a sign that reads, “Fendel-Bevers farmhouse available for relocation.” The stand of oaks that once surrounded that great house are stacked like matchsticks in the background, and before it is a lit sign constructed of masonry and steel lettering reading, “Fendel-Farms - Executive Homes from the \$700’s” or some such. I wonder what inspired or demanded that the developers refrain from demolishing that old house, and where it could possibly end up.

My mind wanders to Honda Hill and those early days of conscious observation when, peering over the pines at the front lines of development, I got a sense of the newness of my environment and, by extension, the presence of history that the development had apparently displaced.

Walden

And then there is Coley Rd., that vestige of the once rural landscape and the street on which my old farm and house still exist. My stomach tenses a bit and my mind flashes to the sycamores in the bottom field, to memories of my late dog, Spencer, and to the house that so fully manifested my personal ideal of solitude and space. I can’t think about it too much now. Not about Spencer, especially. My life has grown richer since I left Coley Rd., but not without its losses. I don’t know that I’m prepared to fully bear those losses yet. When they were fresh, I thought they’d

never heal. As I drive past that life now, I can feel that my perspective has changed. There was a time when I'd have thought it indulgent to build myself a table. What then felt like simplicity to me now seems a little too austere, even dogmatic. I was only beginning to understand the active role I had in the landscape of my life, and maybe I had to strip it down to bare bones before I could begin rebuilding.

I'm reminded of Thoreau's Walden Pond. Reflecting on Thoreau some 12 years after I first read *Walden*, it strikes me that his form of solitude was not so different from my own. In a particularly scathing review of Thoreau in the *New Yorker*, writer Catherine Shulz describes Walden as an "unnavigable thicket of contradiction." On the one hand, I agree with the reviewer, but I also have a feeling that the genius and the beauty of Walden resides in those contradictions.

The value of Thoreau's solitude lies in the separation he created between himself and "society," and his subsequent ability to observe (and recount) his observations. Thoreau grew up in Concord, MA surrounded by lives that did not resonate with him, and nearby Walden Pond served as a retreat from that world. In his retreat, Thoreau engaged, or one could say he *indulged* in a dialog with himself that would serve as the foundation for a newly imagined life in contrast with that of Concord.

Read categorically or didactically, Thoreau's *Walden* is rife with irreconcilable flaws and immaturity. Read as a journal, it is as essentially human as the rest of us and no less or more flawed. The incoherence of *Walden* reflects the honest searching that Thoreau was engaged in, which, for him, involved, perhaps necessitated, a thorough stripping away of the examples he'd been exposed to. Thoreau was young, about the same age as I was when I lived in my house on

Coley Rd. He conceived of a perfect existence, separate and, he hoped, better than the existing models he'd seen. That vision precipitated his two year experiment in simple living at Walden Pond. Then he moved on.

Thoreau's retreat resonates with me. It is as close to the home I built on Coley as I have found, both in its specific structural similarities and in the aspects of those respective experiences connected to the house that seem significant to me now. Thoreau had a particularly off putting brand of evangelism, but in his fervent dismissal of "society," he pretty clearly was just searching for a different way of relating and belonging to it. In pointing out the wrong way to live, he was also exploring better ways. Thinking about my life on Coley Road, I realize that the "unnavigable thicket of contradiction" persisted in me even as I simplified the landscape of life. The simplicity gave me a clearer vantage from which to view my own contradictions, but it did not erase them, and I'm thankful for that.

Thinking of Walden begs the question of what I had to strip away. I was more fervent then, more full of protest and withdrawal than I am now. I grew up surrounded by a way of life that I couldn't make sense of or imagine myself a part of. The trajectory of the life I was exposed to involved, without exception, desks and windows and uniforms and a profound lack of being outside in the world, as my genuine self. I didn't know what any of that meant, or what to do with those feelings, but they persisted. Though there were some defiant, even deviant years, I mostly wasn't *opposed* to the way of life around me, I just knew it wasn't for me. After graduating college I took a corporate job. This brief experience served to solidify my feelings of alienation in that world, but provided no real alternatives. I left after six months without clear direction, but with enough savings in my bank account to float my searching for a while. It

wasn't until the farm, I think, that I was able to unpack the feelings of isolation and alienation. I needed to strip away the negativity I'd accumulated regarding the ways of living that I'd been surrounded by, and to reimagine what life could look like.

Without warning, my mind is suddenly stuck on Spencer. As I drive downhill past a large electrical transfer station, carrying unfathomable amounts of power to downtown Raleigh in a intricately fascinating and beautiful, concerning and dreadful maze of human engineering, I wonder how someone, how people, figured out this web of cables and conduit, transformers and countless other machines and components whose functions I can't fathom. The hum reverberates and somehow sustains an image of Spencer at the farm, the lives and losses of which are inextricable to me.

And then it's rural for a stretch. One of Falls Lake's spindly appendages appears on both sides of the road, an older man sitting on a john boat, rod in hand, cigarette in mouth. After the road begins to climb, enough to be noticeable in this flat land. It peaks near Wake Forest and I catch a glimpse of the larger lay of the land. There is a lot of it, enough to get a sense of what it must look like from above, from afar. The view provides a literal snapshot of the landscape in which my life has played out, my Concord, the cross section of society that has shaped me: poverty, pine trees, defunct farms, new developments, new wealth. Gentle hills, men fishing in reservoirs, heat.

I turn off of highway 98 onto Averette Rd. and soon turn left onto a gravel drive. My truck bounces and bumps past the mounds of mulch and gravel, up the potholed gravel drive toward the rising smoke. I enjoy the irony of the unmaintained road flanked with gravel and

Bobcats, like the dirty vacuum or flat tires on the air compressor at the shop. Jack Murdock is a mess of a good guy. He's taller than me, probably 6'1" or so, and pretty solid. He wears a bright orange "Murdock Building Company" shirt and cap, and his blue jeans are covered in muddy sawdust.

"The Mill" consists of about six acres of land, four band saw mills, and sundry other pieces of equipment large and small. Hundreds of tree trunks are piled in groups according to species, their bark gnarled and torn from handling. Thousands upon thousands of board feet of lumber are stickered and stacked with old roofing tin keeping them dry. Almost invariably, the lumber I'm looking for, in this case quarter sawn white oak, is beneath thousands of pounds of other lumber. Almost as often, I'm convinced to "make a deal," involving my purchasing some or all of the lumber that is piled atop what I'm there looking for.

The ensuing conversation is a sort of schizophrenic waltz in which each of us is sure we've got the leading foot. On the one hand, my business actually has a use for most of what is out here and can afford to invest in materials at a discount. These materials out on the yard are primarily orders that people never picked up, or lumber that is too inconsistent in character to interest commercial buyers. In other words, they are little more than wasted space and lost time to Jack at this point. On the other hand, Jack feels like he's getting "free money" when he sells these old stacks. I would not be surprised to learn that he stacks these piles intentionally, using the "deals" as an access fee for the more desirable lumber underneath.

I'm looking for what's called "eight quarter, quarter sawn white oak" today. Eight quarter refers to thickness in inches, so that means I want lumber that is two inches thick. Quarter sawn

refers to the way the log was oriented to the cutting blade. As opposed to “flat sawn” or “through and through”, quarter sawn orients the growth rings of the lumber perpendicular to the saw blade. This method yields the greatest stability, and in the case of white oak, pronounced rays of figuring along the faces of the boards. As it turns out, Jack does have what appears to be exactly what I’m looking for, though I can’t quite tell for the dozens of huge slabs of poplar piled atop it.

As a general rule, I tend not to leave the mill with exactly what I had hoped for and sometimes I leave without anything at all. On strictly economic terms I’d be much better off going to a commercial lumber supplier. Although the lumber here is less expensive, it is often not properly dried, has a higher waste factor due to large knots or other imperfections, and there is no way to know what he has without spending at least a few hours digging through the stacks. But something feels better about coming out here. In addition to the uniqueness of the lumber itself, I’ve developed interdependence with Jack. This relationship helps to define my identity as a craftsman, shaping the furniture that I produce and the way I think about making it.

I met Jack through Dean Reudrich, the sole proprietor of a historic restoration business specializing in house and monument restoration. I heard of Dean from an ex-girlfriend, and I cold-called him on a rainy November day at the Coley Road farm. An early frost knocked out the better part of my winter spinach, the income from which had sustained me through the previous two winters. Thinking back about Dean and about that time at the farm, I’m beginning to recognize my particular species of contradiction. I had moved to the farm with a distinct vision of the life I was looking for. But in the process of building my home there, my interest in carpentry eclipsed my interest in farming. The decision to build my house was made with equal parts necessity and naivety. I didn’t even know enough about carpentry to know that I was in

way over my head. As the form took shape, and as I grew more comfortable with the tools of construction, I realized that I was scratching the surface of a specific history and tradition of craftsmanship, and I wanted to dig in. I was reminded of the time I spent fixing old bicycles at Back Alley Bikes, and I welcomed the familiar feeling of tapping into the good work of past craftsmen.

The existing barn was built with a specific purpose in mind, it was a means to the specific goal of producing dry tobacco from green tobacco. I imagine the barn was used extensively for decades, only falling into disrepair in the last 20 years or so. JD, my neighbor on Coley Rd, described working in the barn when he was a kid. He'd tie green tobacco leaves to roughly hewn pine sticks of about 1" by 1", and climb up the horizontal tier posts in the barn. He'd hang the sticks from the tier posts and scramble down, fetching another stick full of tobacco leaves and head back up.

The act of construction, the process of converting the barn to a house, of breathing new life into an existing form, spoke directly to me. I was awakened to a new form of involvement with the physical world, and connected to a tradition of craftsmen who shaped it. JD's story put me in touch with the other lives surrounding that building, too, to a community whose landscape included the building that would become my home.

I met Dean at the Raleigh City Cemetery after calling him weekly until he finally agreed on a meeting. A huge tornado had touched down in Raleigh and ripped through the cemetery, uprooting dozens of ancient oaks and toppling granite and marble monuments that had stood for a century or more. They were strewn about like so many discarded chess pieces and Dean was in

the process of righting them all. I had certainly not considered monument work, but the job he offered me involved at least a couple months at the cemetery before his next big carpentry project. I was hesitant about the whole thing. I was hesitant each of the half dozen or so times I had called him, and I was hesitant as I confidently promoted myself as a carpenter capable of the tasks at hand. Though I was only signing on to a winter job, which I'd done before, I was conscious of the step I was taking away from the farm.

Working with Dean was the financial and practical bridge that allowed me to stop farming. I eventually worked nearly full time with him, traveling to cemeteries and old buildings all over the state. We rebuilt the door surrounds on the Tryon Palace and built entire structures in the style of antebellum carpenters. We spent the better part of a year on a house built in 1772, called the Barker house for the family who owned it and the road that led to it. We hand cut cedar shingles and milled timbers on site to rebuild the back section of the house. We wandered around the woods looking for artifacts. I marveled at the palpable Quality of our hand work, and the conversation we entered into with the craftsmen who built this site before us. We were constantly considering what tools and materials and methods to use in order to replicate the appearance and intentions of the craftsmen of centuries past.

That conversation, both the literal one Dean and I had on a daily basis and the metaphorical conversations with the forms and characters of the property, exposed me to the personal and temporal nature of Quality. Nowadays, a house can be built sturdily without any personal investment on the part of the builders who actually wield the hammers and saws, and certainly without any investment in aesthetic value. The time I spent working with Dean called that divide into question for me. My perspective may suffer from selection bias, as the 18th

century structures still standing are, by definition, the well built ones. But the methods themselves and even the notes left by the carpenters that preceded us, seem to demonstrate a marriage of form and function. The embellished numerals coupling mortises to tenons, the intentionality of board placement — such as the wide, quarter sawn oak board at the threshold — or the dates and names of the craftsmen etched into the underside of a heart pine floor board, all seem to convey a different attitude, a different relationship with manual work than the one many of us experience today.

I realize the risk in romanticizing. Who knows what those craftsman would have done with the plethora of cheap power tools, commercially dimensioned lumber, and the relatively expensive cost labor of today. In the years since I left the Barker house, my memory doesn't dwell on a reverence for the craftsmen of the past so much as it recalls the evolution of my relationship with Quality in the presence of their work.

Dean, having spent decades with these houses, reinforced, even demanded this relationship. He projected, in his words and attitude, a particular sort of didactic condescension that challenged my impulses to hurry, cut corners, or cover up errors. On the positive side, he drove home the idea that the right way is often the hardest way. He was quick to remind me that we had it a whole lot easier than the carpenters who originally built the house. We had a bobcat on site and a shipping container filled with tools and equipment. He would take the time to think about, and to explain, the different approaches to a particular challenge, and the approach he settled on often involved a drastic slowing down, whereas my own default was to (attempt to) power through as quickly as possible.

Thinking about that time working for Dean, I'm reminded of my broader tendency to conjure simple solutions and to idealize a perceived ease in a particular approach, when a more laborious one is appropriate. The condescending aspect of Dean's personality delivered that message with a sarcasm that grated on the nerves of my entrepreneurial spirit. "Be a shame if that looked good," he'd say if a joist pocket was an $\frac{1}{8}$ " too big. "You wanted to make sure they knew it was *your* work, huh?" Or, "you shoulda stuck to playing in the dirt" if I dropped my hammer off the roof.

The work we did, regardless of our approach to it, took *forever* compared to standard construction methods. It probably took a month to frame the floor and walls of a 600 square foot back section of the Barker house, a project that modern stick builders would frame in a few days. Most of that work took place on the ground, laying out and cutting mortises and tenons, pockets, braces, scarfs, and various other connecting points, mapping out and constructing the puzzle pieces. The actual assembly was relatively quick, and is an absolute blast when things go as planned.

That back section of the house mostly went well, but the holes we drilled for the draw-bore pins were larger than the dowels we had. The dowels go through both pieces of wood being joined together, through tenon and both sides of the mortise, holding them together. The dowels are dry, which means they won't shrink nearly as much as the beams they are joining, so as the beams dry they tighten around the pin, locking things in place. I don't remember how or why, but the holes were too big for the dowels by a $\frac{1}{16}$ th of an inch or so. They would have worked, particularly if we applied some wood glue. But Dean wasn't satisfied.

“How do you think they made the dowels for this house?” He asked. I figured they turned them on a lathe but I was sure they wouldn’t have had a lathe on site, and I had no idea how they would make them otherwise. He went into the tool trailer and came back with a piece of ¼” steel bar and told me to set up the table saw. My reaction was about 25% curiosity and 75% feeling annoyance that we couldn’t just get on with the frame assembly. Like watching Ken build his farm table, I thought of all the other things we could be getting accomplished instead of “fussing around.” We gathered pieces of oak, and spent the afternoon ripping them down to octagonal cylinders of about 2 ¼” diameter until we had about 25 feet of them altogether. He instructed me to drill a 2” hole in the steel, which took about twenty minutes unto itself, and he cut the cylinders up in eight inch intervals. He called it a day then, and I rode my motorcycle home, the better part of intrigued as I reversed this present day journey on highway 98, past Jack’s and onto Coley Rd. The next morning we pounded the octagons through the hole in the steel, shearing the points of the octagon and yielding surprisingly clean oak dowels.

Jack had cut the majority of the beams for the Barker house, as he had done for Dean countless times before. I haven’t spoken to Dean in a couple of years. Our parting was not altogether peaceful, and as I think of it now I translate his frustration with me into a sense of my failure of *really* internalizing the lessons he tried to teach me. His message seemed to be: if these guys built houses like this over 200 years ago, without power tools, air conditioning, etc., then why can’t you? And it really was an open-ended question, one that has stuck with me since. The answer, as far as I can tell, is that my own tendency is to overlook the Quality in the banal, in favor of some potential future Quality. I sabotaged my employment by dreaming up, and eventually pursuing the business I have now at the expense of focusing attention on my work

with Dean. Ironically, with Dean I had found interesting and fulfilling work as a carpenter, just as I'd envisioned at the end of my farming experience, and now, once again, I was placing a foot out the door.

My desire to forego the right way of assembling the framing, with the right sized dowels, was symptomatic of my broader tendency to attempt to skip the experience of Quality in an attempt to hasten the realization of a Quality end. The implications of this are several fold, and almost all bad. Coupling my disinterest in completed pieces with the hastiness with which I've known myself to build them, I'm robbing myself twice. In the case of the Barker house, if left to my own devices, I would have foregone the opportunity to (learn to) cut the correct dowels and I would have completed the frame with less Quality and more known flaws than I knew I could have. In the case of my employment, Dean observed me as I pursued the life of a craftsman at the expense of a great opportunity to *be* one. And while I've managed the desired outcome anyway, I sacrificed a caliber of teacher, and projects, that I'll likely never find again.

The project that consumed my energy and attention at the end of my employment with Dean was the first table I'd ever built. I bought a heart pine beam that had been salvaged from a textile mill outside of Oxford into true 2' x 12's. I rebuilt the carburetor of Dean's small sawmill and cut the beam into 2" slabs. I set up a makeshift shop in an outbuilding at the farm, and basically guessed my way through the process with advice from Dean. Getting out of the truck at Jack's with my new dining table in mind, my approach to building is much more seasoned, almost a little bit bored, but I'm glad to see Jack for the most part.

I leave the mill with the white oak I need for the table, and about a dozen poplar and white oak slabs for future commissioned pieces. I head into the shop on a rainy Saturday morning to begin building the table without the distraction of employees or customer phone calls. The shop feels cavernous on these empty weekends. We clean it thoroughly on Friday afternoons, and it has a “just so” tidiness that feels calming, but vacant. I bought enough white oak for the table top, five boards ranging from 7” to 9” in width, but nothing for the legs, skirt boards, or supports. I’ve been holding onto a 3.5” by 3.5” by 12’ long piece of white oak from a large slab bench we made for a restaurant a few years ago. I haven’t checked the rack yet, but I feel certain that we have enough white oak left over to piece together the skirts and supports.

I walk through the shop out to the back lot of the building. An brick exhaust tower stands eighty or so feet above the ground, “G B M CO” in fading white, vertical letters mark the history of this old building. Golden Belt Manufacturing Company. I fetch the 12’ long leg stock and head back in. The tapered legs will give me an excuse to use some of my most cherished hand tools; a Number 6 Lee Valley Bench Plane for cleaning up the tapers, and an old Number 7 Stanley Joints Plane for dimensioning the stock before tapering.

Using those tools brings those relationships to mind like songs to memories. My father has dabbled in woodworking in the past. He is the over-engineering type who, by his own admission, you “wouldn’t want to pay by the hour”. He spent all of his time in his garage shop buying tools and building cabinets and cases for the tools. No finished pieces ever left his shop, to my knowledge, but he was always thrilled to spend time out there sharpening chisels and researching the latest in, say, router table technology. The plane he got me is state of the art, with

interchangeable frogs and a custom walnut handle. The tool is a modern beauty, I think of him as I sharpen the flat knife, and as it cuts effortlessly across the straight grain of oak.

The Number 7 Stanley is a timeless beauty. The blade angle is fixed by a frog that is integrated into the body. The throat plate slides, and the blade depth is adjustable, but otherwise the large plane is set as is. The simplicity, and the sheer size, of this 2' long tool manifests a confidence on the part of the plane. Errors or an inability to cut are invariably the result of user error. If the knife is dull, if I move too quickly, or disregard the grain direction, the work piece will gouge. The plane will stop dead in its tracks, abruptly confronting me with my own hastiness. Like riding a motorcycle, my presence must be active and careful. The handle is well worn, and "H.B.M." is etched into the steel body for the craftsman who clearly cared for this tool for some or all of the half century or so since it was made. After a quick conversation about old Stanley Planes, Margaret, a friend, employed her incredible patience and skill at finding vintage gems, and presented me with the gift after I finished a big building project for her. The plane reminds me of her patience, and how I'll need to cultivate that foreign trait to effectively employ the plane to dimension these legs.

The table top is glued up in a matter of a couple of hours. I think about the shape of the legs and their relationship to the skirt and top as I feed the five large boards through the old green Powermatic planer. I remind myself to pay attention as I rip the boards to just over 6" on the table saw, leaving enough room to fine tune the glue-edges with the jointer plane. All of this dimensioning on machines is a blur. I listen to Cormac McCarthy's "Child of God" on headphones, his laborious descriptions calming my usually restless mind.

I decide to cut a long bevel on the underside of the top. I wanted 8/4 material to ensure the table had a substantial feel, but I don't want the top to seem too visually heavy. I leave a half inch reveal, and cut a 4" shallow bevel with a huge shaper head. The tool is scary, and the massive bit sounds like a helicopter when it starts up. The result pleases me, reducing the visual impact of the top and providing a comfortable and interesting element for the hands. The underside of the table top is an important, and oft-overlooked feature of a table. Hands unconsciously find themselves there, presenting an opportunity to heighten the impact of a piece without flaunting visual details.

I use that 4" bevel as a guide for the skirts, cutting the leftover stock to 4" widths. The legs cleaned up to about 3 3/8" at the largest point in the taper. I scribe an angle on the skirt material from the full 4" down to the 3 3/8" dimension. The 4" width provides ample surface for the mortise and tenon joint with the legs. The taper down to 3 3/8" increases leg room while softening the otherwise long, harsh straightness of the skirt. The related dimensions aren't specifically noticeable, but I have to imagine they contribute to the overall coherence of a well made piece of furniture.

I assemble the table in few hours, and apply a soap finish. I typically use oil based finishes, but the oil ambers, diminishing the subtle, matte, almost iridescent quality of quarter sawn white oak. The time spent assembling the table was mostly spent thinking about a frustrating client, and an elusive water leak in my bathroom. I'm pleased with the table, anxious to get home, and generally ready to move on to something else.

Chapter 6: Finishing

It just so happened that the construction of this table coincided with the completion of a project my business partner and I have been involved in. We partnered with an old friend of mine, Sam Kirkpatrick, who has been one of those steady, paralleling presences in my life for the last 15 years or so. Sam opened a bakery with two other guys in the South side of downtown Raleigh. He secured a lease on the building next door to the bakery and together we built a vision around the parameters set by the city zoning. The outcome is a part art gallery, part retail space that we're calling Holder Goods and Crafts. Alongside found objects, photographs, dead flowers, and taxidermy are a handful of furniture pieces made by my business, Arrowhead. We built out the space itself, and then installed a number of benches and small tables. The center of the space was clearly lacking something, and I impulsively offered to bring over the table — yes, *that* table — I'd just completed.

I've mentioned my relative lack of interest in finished pieces, and I blame my history of exclusively building furniture for other people for my resistance to attaching myself to this piece. But the impulse to bring it to Holder contains an element of excitement, too. I'm interested in the general reaction to the table on the opening night of Holder. When I tell Erin about it that night, the news is received with a familiar, specific rolling of the eyes, one of many specific eye rolls in what has become its own language. There is the "you just bought another motorcycle" eye-roll, "you're going to work *now*" eye roll, "you're complaining about the house" eye roll, and so many more. This particular version is related to the "going to work now" response and I realize,

for the first time, really, that I shouldn't have done it, and, more significantly, that my decision implicated her in way that should give me pause.

I set out to write about how building a table is like building a life. In doing so, I've written about and, frankly, thought about my life more deeply and thoroughly than I have in a long time. My conceptions of simplicity and finality, of the table, of my old house, my business, hell, everything, never really arrive at a place that make me want to stop searching. The lesson I *want* this table to teach me is that some things are worth holding on to.

My interest in Quality has long been connected to, perhaps inherent in, my interest in curating the landscape of my life. I can't say that I subscribe to the symbolic significance of the dining table as a source of meaning for this essay, but as I venture in my mind's eye, to envision my future with Erin, I'm heartened by the enduring presence of our table in that vision. The table I've built will outlive us. I'm confident of that. And thus the table connects Erin and me to a future of countless moments lived in and around the center of our home.

This table is significant to our shared history and outlook, being referential to Erin's table that preceded it and representative of our collective understanding of Quality. While I tend not to give in to nostalgia, I believe in documentation, and, in a very real sense, the table is just that. It encapsulates a specific time in my identity as a craftsman and in my life with Erin. I wouldn't build the table the same a year from now. I wouldn't even build the table the same if I were to start over tomorrow. Having pursued, realized, and departed from so many fleeting ideals and visions of Quality, I'm warming up to the thought of something sticking around, and of sticking

around myself. The failure of my vision of simplicity and solitude was that I always changed the course when it became banal. I never dug in.

If now the days and weeks and months run together in a banal, blurry hum, as I wrote months ago, then that is what occupies the majority of my time. It would stand to reason, then, that the banal should be a primary focus in my desire to affect Quality in my surroundings. Every morning I can remember, and all of the mornings I can foresee in my future, involve the image of Erin drinking her coffee at the table. I wake up early and I don't sit down before work. As I'm gathering my things – an apple, a cup of coffee and a thermos for later, Erin is settling in at the table, enjoying the morning. This new table won't change that experience in any definable way. And the vision of Erin is not something that I've thought about much, really. But the intentionality of that table *has to* contribute somehow to the pleasure of the commonplace, to the beauty in the banal.

This morning, though, I think I will pause, take my seat at the table on the side opposite Erin and the east wall of our house. But as I do, as soon as I sit, my momentarily relaxed attention focuses — past the table, past Erin, and directly out the window where I'm been envisioning a deck to connect the living and dining rooms to the yard. Erin, meanwhile, inspects the table, the smoothness and coloration of the white oak, the solidity of its surface, her mind resting on the Quality in front of her. I imagine the post placement and angle of the deck as it relates to the pear tree.

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