

With the Grain

Woodworking, Spirituality, and the Struggle for Justice

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Over the past few years John DeGruchy and I have joined the global circle of woodworkers. Our love for wood and its reshaping was planted in our youth but only the ebb of institutional obligation now enables us to return to this primordial craft. This is decidedly not an occupation for income. It is indeed a leisure activity, but it is really more than a hobby. It calls us forward as a way of being in the world, with a particular set of values and sensibilities that enlarge and revitalize us. Moreover, woodworking is no longer merely a male province, for increasing numbers of women are joining the circle. A common love of wood's endless variety and beauty, along with a shared delight in creating useful and beautiful objects with it, joins us together in a society of mutual education and encouragement.

Theologians, of course, are no strangers to wood. I will not pause here to argue whether Joseph, a *tekton*, worked with wood or not. Germany's Tilman Riemenschneider worked out an exquisite theology of passion through his wood carvings. George Champion, an American missionary to South Africa in the 1830s, taught King Dingane how to work a lathe. John and I have speculated that if he had given King Dingane that lathe, as the king requested, the whole course of South African history might have been changed!

As we have invested our lives (and our money!) more and more deeply in woodworking, we have paused to reflect on the values, indeed the spirituality, that informs this ancient enterprise. In particular, what does this involvement, which seems to be a turn away

from the public life of justice, have to do with our historic concerns for trying to shape a public life of justice and human wholeness?

While I had been building up my workshop for some years in anticipation of giving woodworking a larger place in my life, it was only when I made a communion table for the chapel at Andover Newton Theological School that I realized that this desire was a new way of expressing and struggling with the issues of ethics, spirituality, and worship that had preoccupied me academically for many years. At the same time it was a revolt against the abstraction, mental fragmentation, and petty posturing that befogs our schools and professions. It has offered a way toward the integration and unity of life that is a classic goal of the spiritual and ethical life. As John and I have made dust and splinters in his shop here and shared our keen interest in woodworking, we have begun to reflect on this turn in our lives. I begin with some comments on the nature of woodcraft and then dovetail those with an understanding of the values and spirituality fostered by this activity. I conclude with some observations on the significance of woodcraft for the struggle for justice and for a worship that can sustain and guide it.

Woodcraft

Woodcraft is first of all a relationship between the crafter and wood, mediated by a tool. This mediated relationship transforms the wood at the same time that it bends the crafter to an appropriate discipline of mind and body. Thus, the usual assumption that we are dealing with an unchanging maker and a malleable, lifeless object must yield to a dialogical understanding. Wood is always alive, breathing, and changing. It is like the lungs of the world, constantly expanding and contracting with changes in temperature and humidity, its color shifting subtly with the years and the play of light. In working

with it we must work with its grain, its structure and figure, its movement. We must constantly interrogate the space around it as we join pieces together, measuring this way and that, calculating the relationship of part to part, part to whole, the whole to its purpose and proper form.

Wood is also a living memory, even when we steam and bend it. And when we make a mistake, we cannot erase it, as an academic can do. We must find a way to integrate the mistake into its final form. In repairing we do not erase. We learn and we build on our past, integrating it into our present.

Last year this feature of woodworking was dramatically impressed upon me by Beth Hoffman, a seminarian in a workshop my wife and I led. I asked everyone to bring some wood that they wanted to work with. Beth, who had never worked with wood before, brought an old pair of wooden crutches she had used as a child. Years of medical treatment had been required to repair her legs, damaged from birth. She didn't need the crutches now, but she knew she wasn't through with them. In the course of the week she took them apart and reworked them into a beautiful cross. The parts still revealed their origin but with a transformed meaning that led people into a deeper level of understanding and worship. So it is with wood and with our lives.

Woodworking has historically implied certain social as well as personal patterns of action. It is a work rooted in our hands. Woodworking feeds hands starved by the meager diet of information transfer that occupies most urbanites today. Indeed, I have often observed that woodworking relies on the hands even more than the eye to enable me to detect the actual shape and condition of the wood. The hands can sense what the eye cannot see. Woodworking

revives our sense of touch in a world that increasingly is suspicious of it, perhaps because of its very power.

In turning to wood we encounter once again the importance and the dignity of this handed, manual activity. There is, of course, a great difference between a desperate dependence on one's hands for a livelihood and a dependence on hands for a full life. It is easy to get romantic and nostalgic about woodworking, as with the Arts and Crafts movement in England, Europe, and America in the late nineteenth century. Though originating among cultured elites, it gave expression to the deep dis-ease wrought by the industrial revolution and unrestrained capitalism. Both John Ruskin and William Morris, chief architects of the arts and crafts movement, turned to socialism as a way of recapturing a life embedded in the values of craft.

Principal among them was the value of community, in which artisans had direct control over their production, engaged in face-to-face exchange with their customers, and were rewarded not only with money and items in exchange, but by personal recognition of themselves and their works. Moreover, the artisan's skills are usually transmitted in face-to-face encounter between parent and child, master and apprentice. John, for instance, has many tools and cabinets handed down to him by his father. The skills of woodworking are only part of an entire ethos embedded in a community cultivated over generations. This village artisan ethos constituted the human ethical core of socialist protest, including, I claim, Karl Marx's, against the impersonal industrial capitalism that reshaped the life of Europe and America in the past two centuries. This communal ethos persists in the associations of woodworkers, who are eager to exchange information, techniques, advice, and encouragement.

The craft ideal has continually re-surfaced wherever protest against factory and finance emerges, as in the 1960s and 1970s in America, or where alternative paths to human development are sought, as with the craft economies here in South Africa, whether at Montebello, Clarens, Clocolan, or Aberdeen.

There is a thin membrane between these personal and social practices and what the elites call "art." Both are a form of artifaction shaped by concepts of beauty. Both have, as John expresses it, a "public vocation." Their work is a way of "engaging with social reality [and I would add "material reality"] in the hope that somehow their contribution may make a difference to the world." [DeGruchy, 2002: 2.] The difference craft makes is first of all in its direct usefulness to ordinary people. Ruskin held that art must either state a true thing or adorn a serviceable one. "...it exists rightly only when it is the means of knowledge or the grace of agency for life." (Ruskin, 1970: 280)

Usefulness and beauty are inextricable in the craft vision. Ruskin argued, "...the moment we make anything useful thoroughly, it is a law of nature that we shall be pleased with ourselves, and with the thing we have made; and become desirous therefore to adorn or complete it, in some dainty way, with finer art expressive of our pleasure." (Ruskin, 1970:280)

In Morris's more practical words, redolent of the utilitarianism underlying most British socialism, "The Aim of Art is ... to make man's work happy and his rest fruitful." In trying to recover the pleasure in work that he saw in craft, Morris was protesting both the alienation of workers in their life of production and also the exhaustion that prevented them from a fullness of spirit in their meager off hours.

Woodcraft as Spiritual Activity

Wood, especially, has mediated this wider cultural and spiritual life for human beings since primordial times. The tree is a primary symbol for the union of heaven and earth. The Biblical story for Christians begins with a tree in the garden, reaches a turning point in the tree of the cross, and culminates in an apocalyptic vision of the tree whose leaves are for the healing of the nations (Rev. 22:2). Moreover, individual species have their local and even global religious meanings. Think only of the banyan tree of Buddha's enlightenment, the cedars of Lebanon, and the Easter symbolism of the American dogwood.

Woodworking has also shaped people's understanding of God. Sam Maloof, America's premier chair maker, speaks of God as a "Master Craftsman." Crafting wood is an effort to align one's life with the divine purpose and activity. However, this is not seen as an invitation to imperious domination. That is an image from the world of military annihilation. Rather, it is an invitation to participate in a wider process of creation. In working the wood we only remove what is necessary to bring out its inherent beauty. Imitation of the divine craftsmanship, embodied in natural processes, means that the task of the crafter is to let the inner beauty of the wood manifest itself, rather than for the crafter simply to impose an idea upon it.

Moreover, as the woodworker participates in the wood and its divinely implanted purposes, he or she takes part in a temporal process rather than in the production of some pretended immortality of art. The Mexican Nobel Laureate Octavio Paz, reflecting on the perishability of craft work, observes that "The craftsman's handiwork teaches us to die and hence teaches us to live." (Paz, 1974: 24) That is, craft work teaches us to enter into the natural, living processes of

the world, which is a continual process of death and rebirth. It is as much an offering of oneself into this process as it is an assertion of our own unique purposes.

It is already clear that woodcraft, like its sisters in metal, stone, textiles, and clay, immediately leads us to a world of values deviating from those of insatiable economic growth, industrial domination of nature, and the reduction of relationships to finance. Indeed, we sense almost an anarchic tendency in these craft writings seemingly far from the contests for public justice. We are on the back side of the mountain, and to regain our customary position we need to pass through other scenery. To understand woodcraft as an ethical activity we need to see it in terms of the virtues it promotes.

Woodcraft as Ethics: The Virtues

Almost any woodworker's reflection cites patience as the most important virtue in his or her work. With patience, time is not a pre-existing box into which one pours one's work. Time is created by the interaction of crafter with wood. One must not rush the process, for one has to listen to the wood through hand and eye. Patience is not an effort to halt or slow time down, but an entry into a different form of time, in which one's actions are governed by the needs of the engagement with a specific material. In Paz's words, "Between the timeless time of the museum and the speeded up time of technology, craftsmanship is the heartbeat of human time." (Paz, 1974: 24) The mechanical time that abstractly coordinates human interaction around the globe yields to a time dictated by the values of use and beauty that the crafter seeks in the engagement with wood.

Patience is thus closely connected with the second virtue: Respect for the wood. Respect begins with the discovery of a particular piece of wood containing grain, color, figure, and other physical

properties appropriate to a particular purpose. Respect requires that we let the wood speak to us of its capacities and intrinsic beauty. It then means working with the wood in such a way as to let it express its inherent strengths as well as accommodate its limits.

On its aesthetic side, this respect yields a celebration of the wood. There is virtue in the capacity to be moved to pleasure and joy by wood that has emerged from the craft process into a new form of use and beauty. This aesthetic celebration, as Ruskin and Paz both observe, leads to a delight in gratuitous ornamentation, so widespread in popular craft.

Curbing our impulses to subordinate the wood to our will and idea means that woodworking requires humility, a classic religious as well as craft virtue. The crafter's focus is not on his or her own ego but on the work being produced. This is a far cry from the culture of celebrity and fame. The crafter is a channel of creativity, not its source. This is not merely a recognition that every engagement with wood brings with it mistakes and failures. It is a sense that working with wood is a kind of service, not only to the beauty inherent in the wood, but to the community that finds it useful as well as pleasing. It is a kind of ministry requiring disciplined, patient commitment.

This means that woodworking requires as well as fosters the virtue of care. Care is an intentional, conscious attention to the requirements emerging from the wood and its purposes. In one sense, care constitutes any action that enables the wood to be useful and beautiful. This public outcome also has a very private side – that the crafter provides care even to those parts of the wood that will never be seen. James Krenov puts it this way: "Look at the underside of this table; the fellow who made this really cared." (Krenov, 2000: 75) These are the parts that "only God sees." They are the sign of a

woodworker who cares. While care has direct public effects, its integrity, as Jesus taught concerning prayer, lies in its secret interiority.

Another way of expressing this congruence of the hidden and the manifest is with the virtue of honesty. Honest working of materials means that there is no difference between the surface and the inner reality. Indeed, the surface genuinely reveals the inner reality, whether this is manifested in a grain figure, a knot, a color, or a joint. We cannot underestimate the connection between the cultivation of the virtue of honesty in artisan culture and its impact on the contract making of early mercantile life. In the corporate world of mass societies we still pay lip service to honesty, but neglect its roots in the craft culture that made it real.

Honesty and integrity are matched virtues, the first attending to the congruence between public expression and inner reality, the second to the congruence within the work and between the crafter and the wood. It is this integrity that enables us to say "Yes, that must be a piece by George Nakashima." The virtue of integrity implies a consistency that usually drives the crafter to the value of simplicity. Pursuit of simplicity avoids the impulsive flair of facile adornment. It emphasizes the usefulness of an object over its gratuitous beauty. William Morris claimed that "Simplicity is the foundation of all worthy art." (Meier, 1978: 435) The Shakers are remembered as the exemplars of simplicity, holding that "'Fancy articles of any kind, or articles which are superfluously finished, trimmed or ornamented, are not suitable for believers, and may not be used or purchased.'" (*Millennial Laws of 1845.*) At this point we can see that there is indeed a range of opinion between those who delight in superfluous ornamentation – Paz and Ruskin – and those who eliminate it for the

sake of the wood's own properties and purpose. This is a tension arising within the very dialogue between crafter and wood.

The craft ethos generates virtues of patience, respect, humility, care, honesty, and integrity that then shape a way of life. Communal and utopian experiments of all kinds tend to revolve around such an artisan ethos and, more widely, shape a critical ethic that stands over against the shoddy mass production of an economy that seeks to dominate the earth as well as people's lives.

Woodcraft and Justice

Virtues shape persons and thereby establish some of the values by which to judge the effects of institutions and policies on persons. This connection implies that craft virtues can be seen as part of a larger ethos that can fill out a distinctive vision of social justice. The virtues peculiar to craft work tend to imply a particular way of approaching the meaning of justice.

The first thing that strikes us is that a craft ethic emphasizes beauty, goodness, and fitness. It causes us to look at how things fit together in a way that is beautiful and good for humans and their natural ecology. Woodcraft entertains ideals of integrity and honesty intrinsic to truthfulness. John, in talking about art generally, puts it this way:

"... without the recovery of aesthetics as an integral element in doing theology, we will continually fall prey to rationalism and moralism, and fail to discover the multifaceted character and beauty of God's revelation and life in the Spirit. After all, it can surely be argued that the disclosure of God's strange redemptive beauty amidst the ugliness of human alienation is the substance of theological reflection, providing access to truth and calling forth goodness." (DeGruchy, 2002: 1)

Unlike most rights talk in social justice, woodcraft, especially joinery, sees the question of "rights" in terms of how all the pieces fit

together to create a whole. It assumes, but does not absolutize, the integrity of each piece, but always in the context of a more comprehensive beauty and goodness. While there are plans in the crafter's mind – perhaps the rationalism John speaks of – they are always worked out in dialogue with the materials and the overall goodness of the whole. Thus “rights,” in a vision of social justice, must be understood within a wider cultural context, even if that is an emerging global culture.

A craft ethos, as I mentioned earlier, can then become a vision for proper relations among humans, nature, and larger communities. As the American sociologist C. Wright Mills put it in the 1950s, “Human society...ought to be built around craftsmanship as the central experience of the unalienated human being and the very root of free human development.” (Boris, 1986: 192) Indeed, the very theory of alienation is rooted in the positive memory of artisan integrity, honesty, and respect for materials. The humanistic artisan ideal of unalienated life stands over against a mass technology that creates uniformity rather than vibrant social interaction. (Paz, 1974: 22)

The criterion for social justice thus shifts from being one simply of satisfying rights claims to one that emphasizes the broader good of “useful beauty.” As Paz observes, “Handcrafts belong to a world antedating the separation of the useful and the beautiful.” A craft ethos seeks to overcome the separation of “art” in museums and galleries from usefulness, with its spare functionality. In a world of concrete, steel, and glass, wood – and along with it natural clay and textile materials – gives people an immediate sense of being at home in the world, engaged in dialogue with it, and related to it as life to life.

This is what William Morris meant by aesthetic socialism. It is a society in which every human being is a kind of artist in the midst of the utilitarian pursuits of everyday life. Jyoti Sahi, one of India's foremost religious artists, tells us that Yogananda has said "An artist is not a special kind of person but every person is a special kind of artist." This is definitely not the kind of socialism that arose out of state bureaucracies in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe. At a Commencement address at Emory University in the early 1990s I remember vividly hearing former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze decry the ugliness produced under Soviet socialism, describing it as the first evidence of its injustice. The separation of justice from beauty, he lamented, meant at the same time a radical attack on the dignity and integrity of each person in a society. The separation of beauty and usefulness is the first step in dehumanization.

This connection between social justice and craft aesthetic also shapes how we connect conceptions of human justice to ecological justice. In working directly with wood and natural, sustainable materials, people know immediately that their work of fabrication is a part of natural life. The crafter is not above nature but within it. George Nakashima, whose Japanese Buddhist heritage deeply shaped his American practicality, put it this way: "When trees mature, it is fair and moral that they are cut for man's use, as they would soon decay and return to the earth. Trees have a yearning to live again, perhaps to provide the beauty, strength and utility to serve man, even to become an object of great artistic worth." (Nakashima, 1988: 93). As with our own lives, the wood pauses in durable form, beauty, and usefulness before it too returns to the earth to nourish new growth.

As with Ruskin and Morris, a craft ethos, with its focus on small, sustainable communities of artisan production and exchange, has a deep utopian bent. This is not merely because the artisan social ideal is so contrary to mass industrial society, but also because craft virtues shape the way people approach social problems. They seek to resolve social issues as wood to be shaped and joinery to be repaired, rather than dramatic games of unceasing power struggles. In the end, as with Ruskin, they prefer architecture and design to political contest, with its commitment to appearance and immediate effect over honesty and durable form. (Meier, II, 1978:397).

While crafting remains deeply dialogical in the relation of crafter and material, artisans generally prefer total control over their work process as the pure expression of unalienated work, rather than the specialization and organizational coordination of factory technologies. This leads them to prefer a Platonic social vision that springs from the mind of a good philosopher king – the master craftsman in society – rather than from compromises among political representatives.

Thus, there are limits to the craft ethos as a political ethic, especially in a world of alienated, self-interested human beings who have only partial and distorted understandings of beauty and goodness. President Jimmy Carter was criticized for trying to micro-manage the government. This tendency only evidenced the craft ethos that led him back to woodworking after his election defeat and then to his time of renewal building houses with Habitat for Humanity. The crafter's values, virtues, and visions stand somewhat apart from power politics as testimony to an ideal by which to judge the ongoing power struggles of ordinary life. This may be why retired people gravitate to woodworking circles. In the Hindu understanding of life, they have entered the *Vanaprasthasrama*, the "forest dwelling discipline." They

have graduated from the ordinary cares of householding and jobs in order to begin their return to the earth by talking once again to the trees and the wood.

Woodworking as Worship

Utopian ideals cannot be translated directly into politics. They stand as transcendent ideals for judging political life. In order to be transmitted among us, they must be realized in small-scale fashion in committed communities or expressed symbolically in regular rituals. Their worth must be upheld publicly in cultic, symbolic action. Thus, it is no surprise that woodworkers like John and me turn to worship as the cornerstone of ethics, for it is in worship that utopian ethical visions are fed and promulgated. It is the way they can be celebrated in a world of unceasing struggles for power and partial victories for justice.

On Ruskin's and Morris's terms craft work is a kind of liturgy offering up free and pleasurable work on behalf of a world that must live in terms of immediate monetary gain and a crippling alienation among humans and the earth. It is a kind of praying for the world by those who have entered the cloisters of retirement from it. In John's words, "Artistic creativity, we may say, is a sacramental act that moves both heart and mind." (DeGruchy, 2001: 241) Inasmuch as woodworking can be approached as a kind of meditative offering, we can see it as a sacramental action that brings the creative power of God into tangible form as a protest against our alienation and an earnest of the joyful creation yet to come. As Ruskin said, it is "a grace of agency for life."

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