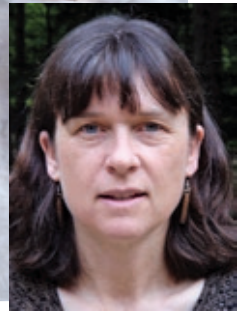


by Monica Raymond



On Becoming a Woodworker

I built myself a house many years ago. When I finally made the cabinets and a few pieces of furniture, I discovered that I liked woodworking much better than carpentry but hesitated to pursue it seriously because I was not very skilled. The doors on those rustic kitchen cabinets still won't close in the summer, and my first coffee table has fallen apart and been reglued countless times. The only joint I knew was the mortise and tenon, which I hacked out with chisels that I took to the hardware store for sharpening when they were too nicked to use.

A couple of years ago, while contemplating a jelly cupboard with an ill-fitting door which I had just completed, I thought with chagrin, "I don't know what the heck I'm doing!" Suddenly a light bulb went on in my head – my incompetence as a furniture maker was not due to stupidity or some inherent lack of ability. It was simply due to not knowing how! The solution was obvious – education.

I bought *Woodworking Basics: Mastering the Essentials of Craftsmanship*

by Peter Korn and read it cover to cover. I almost laughed out loud upon discovering the techniques that would solve my problems – using razor-sharp tools, starting with perfectly flat and square stock, and accurately measuring and marking cuts. It was clear, however, that learning these skills would take more than just a good book. With the blessings of my very supportive husband, I signed up for a two-week Basic Woodworking class at the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship in Rockport, Maine, taught by Peter Korn.

I arrived in Rockport on a rainy July day in 2007 and unpacked my bags at the home of a local family who rents rooms in their sprawling historic home near the waterfront. Over the next two weeks, I hardly saw my hosts since virtually all my time was spent either at the school or on forays to Lie Nielson Toolworks or Liberty Tool.

There were eleven other students from a wide variety of backgrounds in the class. Two teenage brothers were hoping to become professional woodworkers. A retired college professor was starting a new hobby. A stained-glass artist wanted to incorporate wood into his work. In the next classroom woodcarvers were expanding their skills. In the other buildings on campus students in the nine-month comprehensive course and fellowships were working on a variety of projects. Each of the three workshop





buildings has a machine shop with state-of-the-art equipment, maple workbenches, and every hand tool a woodworker needs. The only thing I had to supply was a good set of chisels.

Peter Korn is a consummate teacher and teaches with compassion and humor. I learned how to flatten and sharpen my chisels, mill stock flat and square, hand cut mortise and tenon joints, hand cut dovetails including half-blind dovetails, hand plane a board flat, and glue up a piece. I also attended lectures about wood movement and finishing. I had expected to learn all of these things and was not disappointed. What I did not expect was to engage in discussions about art, creativity, and even philosophy. Peter talked about the day he realized that the qualities he aimed for in his furniture – grace and simplicity – were actually qualities he wished to develop in himself. I spoke about my goal of developing patience and concentration through working

with wood. Laura Mays, our Irish co-teacher and a superior woodworker, questioned the fairness of charging people money for pursuing one's own personal development. The conclusion of this very interesting discussion was the idea that if woodworking is in part an exercise in personal development, then it is worthwhile because it makes the woodworker a better person and thereby a better citizen of the world.

In addition to philosophizing and attending lectures, every day we worked on our projects – a variation of a simple bench with dovetails and mortise and tenon joints. It was a joy to see each student develop his or her vision and put it into action. Some people sailed through their practice dovetails while others struggled along. Everyone got close attention from the teachers and improved their skills immensely, and all finished with a beautiful bench or stool to take home.

I am the kind of person who is always rushing and always thinking of the next task or the next adventure. I have trouble staying in the present moment. But for those two weeks in woodworking school, sitting at my workbench with a razor-sharp chisel in my hand seeing a cherry footstool take shape, I thought "there is no place I'd rather be right now." Leaving was sad, but arriving home was very exciting, as the very next week we broke ground on a new workshop.

When my husband, Todd, and I bought a house in Alexandria, NH we

decided we needed an outbuilding to serve as a woodworking shop for me and someday a boat-building shop for him, as well as a space for storing bicycles and skis. After getting an estimate from a local builder for a 24' x 36 one and one half story building that was so expensive it made our jaws drop, we scaled the project down to about half that size and decided to build it ourselves. This also required us to narrow it down from an all-purpose building to a dedicated woodworking shop. Todd was a bit unhappy about this, but when I promised he could use the shop to build a boat and we incorporated an attached shed for a small boat, he became more enthusiastic. I feel incredibly lucky to be able to design and build my own shop and deeply appreciate my husband's support.

The problem I faced was that, as a beginning woodworker, I knew nothing about how to design and set up a shop. I read Sandor Nagyszalanczy's book *Setting Up Shop*, which was extremely helpful. But I still felt unsure about where to put machines and benches and where to plan storage for sheet goods and lumber. I needed to plan these things in order to determine the placement of doors and windows as well as wiring. Peter Korn of the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship advised me to visit some local woodworkers' shops and get their advice.

I went online and found the NH Furniture Masters Association. I was

Machines I have in the shop —

- 6" Delta jointer
- 15" Makita planer (found this through Brad Purmort)
- 16" Walker Turner bandsaw (found this through *The Old Saw*)
- Delta table saw (contractor saw)
- Delta hollow chisel mortiser (found this through Brad Purmort)
- Delta bench top drill press
- Baldor slow speed grinder (found this through Brad Purmort)
- Several routers
- Dewalt mitre saw
- I hope someday to replace the table saw, drill press, and jointer with better quality machines.

— Brad Purmort Woodworking Company in Newport, NH

pleased to find biographies and addresses of the members. I emailed Terry Moore and David Lamb, asking if I could visit them. Both immediately agreed.

When I arrived at Terry Moore's shop, his puppy ran out to greet me with barking and tail-wagging. Inside, Terry welcomed me just as warmly, albeit with a bit more reserve. I was impressed with how much he had in his medium-sized shop. I furiously took notes as he showed me around, advised me about tools, and gave me resources to track down. Soaking in as much as I could, I did not feel at all looked down upon as a beginner. Terry seemed to genuinely want to help me get started and even said "you need to get good fast because we need more women in the Furniture Masters." Although I doubt I will ever be good enough to join this distinguished group of artists, his comment made me feel welcomed into the community of woodworkers. Terry's most ardent piece of advice was to join the Guild of NH Woodworkers. He said that it would be the best \$30 I would ever spend. I have since discovered he was correct. He also offered to help me get tools from a local high school that had discontinued its woodshop program.

While I was at Terry's shop, Brad Purmot, another local woodworker, stopped by, and he invited me to see his shop which was closer in size to the one I was building. We went to Brad's shop, and there I was impressed by how he fit all his tools and a small workbench into a very small space. I began to realize that the size of my shop, though small, was perfectly acceptable.

A few weeks later I visited David Lamb in his shop in Canterbury. He and his wife, Janet, took time out of their busy

day to patiently show me their shop and answer all of my questions. David echoed Terry's comments regarding joining the Guild. He gave me excellent advice about the business aspects of making furniture, such as to record the time it takes me to make each component of a piece in order to begin estimating prices, and to have professional photographs taken of each completed piece in creating my portfolio. I also tremendously enjoyed seeing his shop, in particular the row of antique bandsaws powered by a common driveshaft, which David has lovingly restored and uses in his work.

Since meeting Terry, Brad, and David, all three have helped me by either hooking me up with folks who were selling used tools or answering questions that arise from time to time. And of course, I immediately joined the Guild, which has allowed me to meet many other folks who have been equally as generous with their time and advice.

Regarding my shop design, I finally realized that every space and every woodworker is so different that there is no cookie-cutter approach. All I could do was take all the advice and ideas I'd read and received and do my best to come up with a plan. Inevitably there will mistakes and regrets, but that's part of the process of becoming a woodworker.

My husband Todd, our good friend Mike McGraw, my father-in-law Don Smith, and I spent ten days in August, 2007 framing and roofing the workshop. Although the days were long and the work challenging, the camaraderie was great and we had a fantastic time. I spent the year since then installing the windows, siding, wiring, insulation, heating, flooring, and inside walls. The shop has a 16' x 20' main room and 10'

Shop Features —

- I have two 220 volt circuits - one for the bandsaw and one for a dust collector (to be installed in the future).
- I have quite a few windows - a few for ventilation and five horizontal windows are high on the walls to let light in without blocking wall space.
- The lighting is several rows of fluorescents, plus incandescent task lighting.
- There is a loft for wood storage, but this is inconvenient for day-to-day use since I access it via ladder.
- Doors are two large 4'x8' doors (total opening 8'x8') - like barn doors.
- The floor is plywood on top of 2x4s over concrete.
- Heating: propane direct vent heater.
- Jet air filtration unit on the ceiling.
- I built a workbench from a plan in *Fine Woodworking*, out of ¾" birch plywood (you can see it in one of the photos).
- The bandsaw and planer are on wheels so I can move them out of the way.
- Future plans: dust collector, lumber racks, sheet goods rack.

x 10' finishing room. It is 90% finished, but I simply cannot wait any longer to start making furniture! I am starting to design the first piece I will build in the new shop - a cherry blanket chest which will be a gift for Mike McGraw. ■

Ask This Old Saw! – continued

and heavy maple cauls that I use for big tops. I attach them to my horses and make sure they are parallel by shimming the feet of the horses - check in the same way you would use winding sticks. I wax the edges of the cauls to avoid glue sticking and lay my top boards on perpendicular to the cauls. Check the joints. If the edges are square and the set

can be drawn up dry with light clamp pressure, I'm ready to glue.

When placing the clamps, I work "west to east" alternating one on top and one on bottom. I try to center the bar clamp screw in the center of the edge rather than put the bar right on the boards. Excessive clamp pressure can cause distortion in the top. If the top is

laying flat on the cauls when I'm done tightening the clamps, then it is flat.

Another thing I do routinely when building a project that has a substantial top is after I'm done making the top (and it is flat) I'll screw some temporary heavy cauls to the bottom to maintain "flat" while I work on other parts of the project. ■