

Tools Are Words

After a few decades of carpentry, one accumulates hundreds of tools, and a keen interest approaching fetishism. Everyone is different about this. Some are drawn to bigger & more clever power tools, or the latest advances in battery-driven tools. Others crave the antique hand tools & roam the garage sales and flea markets for hundred-year-old ogee-planes or an Atkins handsaw. I've had a little of each obsession... & a hang-up for clever small tools. When you do Finish Work, you run into situations every week that your existing tools can't solve. You need to make a saw-cut in a tiny aperture & by chance you see a tool in the Japanese kitchenware store that is in fact a very slender, toothed & pointed instrument. *PERFECT. If only I had had that two days ago. Well, I better buy it, it'll come up again..* What happens after many hundreds of such times is that you have all these tools for situations that don't come up again. I have a surgeon's small clamp, the kind that looks a bit like a scissors. I thought: *perfect for holding a tiny brad in a corner hard to get both hands into.* Still haven't used it fifteen years later... know where it is though. Then there are the ideas that *look* perfect but are superseded by a better tool. I had a little magnetic brad-holding 'punch' that I used once in a while until the pneumatic brad gun became *de rigeur*. Sometimes it *is* just mania, foolishness. I bought a hammerface cover made of weird acrylic that would "protect the wood from impact" Ridiculous, never used after the first time.

I also love old tools, especially if I can put them into use. I had a wonderfully patina'd small wooden level which I corrected for accuracy and used frequently, & a hundred-year old chisel with extremely hard steel that I still use all the time. Garage sale discoveries. Many of my oldest handtools are not really in use that much but I still like carrying them along & touching them occasionally, using them for the feel.

A few days ago it hit me with force that my tools form a vocabulary. I had just realized that instead of doing some crude, frustrated, reaming effort with a power drill to correct the tilt of a hole in a timber, I could get my large gouge chisel and neatly chisel down the errant side wall of the inside of the hole. A little Eureka experience. And a warm feeling for an old friend waiting patiently, what, fifteen years in my toolbox for this moment? At the same time I turned to my partner & wanted to say this was *serendipitous*. There it was. They merged. The old cherished word leaped to mind, serendipity. All the nice associations back to the ancient name for Ceylon, 'Serendib'. Which carries along what the old mariners might have felt upon striking land in that fabled place. *From out of the Blue.* The chisel too has ancient reverberations. How long back did they form a rounded chisel, a gouge? What struck me next was that the pleasure of seeing the moment to use the gouge was the same as that for remembering *serendipity*. Knowing in a flash that if I don't use it now I may not have another such chance for a few years. Or maybe using it now will bring it into play more in the future because I'll be looking for chances. Might even start overdoing it, forcing situations, gouging out things

that ought to be drilled. Saying a thing is *serendipitous* when it is merely a pleasant surprise.

There are carpenters who reject this toolery. They don't care about collecting & being fluent. They make a good living with the basic repertoire, wielding a hammer, saw, & drill with reliable craft. So too there are talkers who don't need or care about a big vocabulary. They swing with a tried & true kitbag of words & tell stories with great range of feeling. I've picked up this Way at work & in speech, but covertly I know myself to be a Collector. When I can trust my workmates not to raise eyebrows, I love to bring out the full spectrum of my tools, even showing off a little with calipers or vix-bits. And when I'm really on a roll, I discover that there isn't any tool like the one I'm longing for, and then a new one gets made. A jointed *uffoon* perhaps, or a *screeet*.

Of course, as in conversation, this can get tiresome. I have to check my pedantry in the craft. Digressions are a problem. Fooling around with six kinds of marking & measuring tools just to lay out a rafter pattern that never needed to be machine-shop accurate. Or simply using a big word to impress. There are tools that are only there to impress, like certain words. If I haul out a Swedish angle-translating contraption that looks futuristic, & requires much studying & explaining, it's like saying '*deliquescent*' instead of '*damp*'. Sure, I know, Damp can be from all manner of causes, while deliquescent says "absorbing water out of the air because of a particular chemistry" But it's true too that the Swedish tool is made to transfer an angle in a moulding to a compound miter saw in one move. It's just that we always managed to do it fine by relying on our intuitive artisan powers and antique bevel squares before that tool came out...and we know without explaining that sheetrock gets *damp* because it's a thirsty material.

Matrix is the key, in language & with craft. The knack of picking the truly apt phrase, or of having those words *pick you*, is a keen sense of what 'fits'. Knowing that a particular job needs to be done quickly and without high accuracy leads to hammers and pry bars, improvised braces, or, judging straightness by eye. Once I was part of a timber-framing crew at a new shopping mall. We were setting a series of round posts in an entry, & started puzzling about how to make them plumb. The usual methods of putting a long level on a post, or using a plumb bob nailed to the top, wouldn't necessarily be true because the log was not a regular cylinder shape. Finally an older guy who had farm experience just took over. He held a plumb bob in one hand as high & far away from himself as he could, then sighted past the line to the center of the post as we adjusted it. When he saw an average plumbness through the center, we secured it. Much better than any elaborate laser invention. Like a blues song lyric, right to the point & Perfect. '*Good enough for the gals we go with*'.

Is context 'everything'? No, there's free will & spirit in work itself. If I know I have to cut off a wooden plug flush with the timber, I will come up with a Way no matter what tools are at hand. Maybe just saw it off proud & then belt-sand it. If I know I have a flush-cutting thin-kerfed Japanese dowel saw, I'll have a little elation as I put it to

use because it does such a beautiful job so quickly & quietly. If I have elation over the tool, will it be any less if I realize (or don't realize) there is no precise word in English to convey that particular kind of happiness? Elation really isn't accurate. It's a slightly giddy feeling, an inspired feeling, a gloating feeling, a little feeling of "*everything's right now*", a sense of mastery & of being just on the curl of a wave riding confidently to a shore of execution.. Not so grand as "Eureka" or "revelation", not a love-swell like "happiness"

I felt *skiffed*, okay?

Now that I have this new word, will I feel skiffed more often? Maybe.....After a few times when I have felt skiffed when discovering that I was in exactly the mood which calls for that very pleasurable new word *skiffed*. Then I'll be hoping it comes up again so I can get properly skiffed. And now I'm already sick of it.

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