



ADAPTING TO AGING

Nobody likes the prospect of getting older, but it sure beats the alternative. Like everyone else, woodworkers have to adjust to the inevitable ravages of time, which affects everything from our energy level to the kind of work we are able to do. Curious to hear how others cope with this challenge, I recently asked our visitors, "How has your woodworking changed as you've gotten older?" Here's a sampling of what they told me...

"I now have ringing in my ears, I can't see, I have multiple pairs of glasses, and because my knees ache, I stand on anti-fatigue mats. Because of carpal tunnel and arthritis, I have trouble doing finicky detail stuff. Because I am running out of room, I make smaller stuff, and I wonder how I ever got along without the Internet."

"When I started, I thought I'd mainly work with hand tools, but I've come to appreciate how nice power tools really are. I'm also more interested in doing things efficiently, without sacrificing quality."

"I don't strain to lift anything—I get help. Lighting is important to older eyes. And while I used to be a power tool junkie, I'm getting increasing satisfaction using hand tools."

"My attitude has changed. I have developed more patience. I also appreciate better woods now, and as my tolerance for noise and dust has decreased, I look for ways to make the joint with hand tools, instead of with machines. I still have my idealism, but need to temper it occasionally with pragmatism."

"As my eyesight faded, my girth increased. This created a strange situation: I need to be closer to the work to see it, but I can't because my waistline won't allow it. I'll probably throw my back out as I twist myself into a working position."

"It's been satisfying for me in a way: I've reached the point when experience is really beginning to show its effects. My ability to be critical of my own work, without becoming impatient. It is much better."

"When I started, I made things that were purely functional, using plywood. Now, my designs are more sophisticated and complex, and the aesthetics of the finished piece are more important to me. I'm still learning new things on each project. And most importantly, I can keep the cars in the garage, since I now have a dedicated shop."

"Time has eroded my capabilities in health-related ways, and the effect on woodworking has been frustrating. Projects wait until one of my sons is available to lift or shift it, and my eyes won't permit intricate work. I have begun to take whatever time is necessary to do an acceptable job, and I learned to not split hairs over small mistakes. My completed projects seem better crafted, thanks to experience and knowledge of shortcomings, as well as help from my family."

"The distance to the bathroom has become an important parameter. Comfortable shoes are at the top of my tool priority list. My arms are not long enough to read plans anymore. Receiving the latest woodworking magazine can be better than sex. I collect special pieces of wood and treat them as fine art. Norm is no longer my hero, but I still think he has a cool job."

"Age, experience, slothfulness, and cunning get me the same results that youth, enthusiasm, ignorance, and lots of hard work used to achieve. Or is it just a case of the older I get, the better I think I used to be?"

"Many years ago, my sights were trained on the finished product; but now the destination matters much less—it's the trip that counts. And when a customer pays me, he assumes he's paying me for the finished product, but I know he's really paying me for my trip."

"My early focus was on acquiring the right machines. In the end I sold or replaced tools and machines that were taking up too large a footprint or not used at all. I realized that skill is critically more important than tools. The biggest change has been my ability to 'see.' I have learned to see the details that make a piece more interesting."

"I blew out my right knee kneeling on the concrete floor while putting my bandsaw together. I blew out my left knee the next year. I started wearing glasses and using hearing protection. I still make large furniture projects, but now have to lurk outside my garage to trap unsuspecting neighbors into helping me carry them into the house."

"Eight hours is now a long day for me. I avoid large projects. Dust bothers me more than before, though my eyesight is good and my mind is still sharp. I have accumulated enough tools and machinery that I can now look at catalogs or go into Woodcraft stores without wanting this, that, and everything else. Woodworking keeps me off the shuffleboard courts."

"I now have to wear tri-focal glasses. I injured my back years ago, so can't twist around as I used to. Too much weight adds to the stress of working. That said, I am more patient and have come to enjoy more intricate work."

"I think about my goal to make a few really good pieces before I die. I'm wondering if I have time to learn turning, and I'm trying to develop more discipline. In younger days, I bought everything that sparkled at woodworking shows. Now, I ask whether this cool new tool is really worth the shop space, learning curve, maintenance, etc."

"I have far more machine tools than I had 30 years ago. I no longer make any piece for sale, only for family or myself. Although I know how to do dovetails by hand, I no longer have the manual dexterity to make them easily, and I actively enjoy setting machines up to do a job."

News and Views from

WoodCentral.com

by Ellis Valentine

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