

YARN

Life lessons from woodwork classes

by Michael Lai

I started taking woodwork classes in early September of this year.

Originally I wanted to make educational toys by hand, or at least by using hand tools instead of laser cutters and CNC machines (this is a story for another time). With some luck and good fortune I found a master of the craft who was generous in imparting not only his years of knowledge and skills but also some important life lessons.

As an aside, if you ever see his artwork displayed in a gallery or at the workshop, I can guarantee that you'll think very differently about what a [wooden bowl](#) is and can be.

For someone who spends more than enough time in front of a computer screen typing on a keyboard, there is something fulfilling about working with your hands (for more on this see Doug Stowe's website [The Wisdom of Our Hands](#)). Woodworkers often describe this excitement and the sensation derived from the sharp blade of a carving knife effortlessly whittling away slivers of wood, or the

satisfaction of applying the finishing to the surface of the wood at the end of a project. These were not memories or experiences I can recall when I last picked up a woodworking tool in high school.

It takes years of practice (and a relentless pursuit for perfection) to produce the quality of work that my teacher is capable of, but even for a novice like me, it took only a few attempts of trying to carve simple shapes and figures to learn some very basic lessons about life. The concepts and techniques used in woodwork embody so many tangible lessons that one can apply to life, one of which I will describe, but I think is best learnt by carving some wood yourself.

Cutting with the grain or going with the flow

For many people the feeling of being in the ‘flow’ or ‘going with the flow’ is difficult to describe. A very perceptible way to experience this can be achieved by cutting with the grain of the wood. Some may say that it is the distinctly different amount of effort required to cut against the grain of the wood that makes this quite obvious. It brings to mind the great quote from Dumas in *The Count of Monte Cristo*:

“There is neither happiness nor unhappiness in this world; there is only the comparison of one state with another. Only a man who has felt ultimate despair is capable of feeling ultimate bliss.”

If you have only ever cut wood with the grain, it might be difficult for you to fully appreciate the difficulty of going against the grain. In life we relate going with the flow with what we feel as being the easiest or most effortless thing to do. It is most likely the path that most of us take given a choice.

Whether it is necessarily the best option to take or not is another consideration altogether.

Cutting against the grain or going against the flow

To cut against the grain of the wood, in the light of what we have discussed previously, seems to defy logic and common sense (although this might differ to how you want to cut meat). For softer wood you can probably overcome the resistance through brute force and sheer stubbornness (or will power).

However, it can still leave tear outs, which is when wood fibers are pulled or broken away, leaving a rough and uneven surface instead of a clean cut.

And for harder wood it literally feels like hitting your knife against a brick wall.

The fact is, sometimes the woodworker is given wood with less regular and more complex grain patterns to work with (less avoidable in real life situations). And unless you are satisfied with only making the most basic of shapes and models out of wood, you will find yourself having to cut against the grain of the wood more often than you would like.

In life we seldom venture down the road less travelled (at least usually not voluntarily). It is probably the path that most of us avoid given a choice. But because we are typically very resistant to this very idea, most of us are unwilling and unprepared to handle these types of situations when it is necessary or even preferable. Many people, including the famous Japanese writer Haruki Murakami, have come to the realization that while pain is inevitable, suffering is optional.

Just because you ventured down the more difficult/arduous/dangerous route, it doesn't mean that you can't enjoy the challenges that are presented to you along the journey.

Navigating through the flow

Often it is too idealistic to imagine going with the flow to be like a person swimming in a river. In that simplistic scenario, how can it not be safer/easier to go with the flow of the water, and more dangerous/difficult to go against the flow?

Perhaps a better analogy is to imagine a person in a canoe being propelled by the current through the rapids, where the watercourse isn't always straight and wide, but occasionally interrupted by passages of narrow and winding sections. For this scenario, going with the flow without paddling judiciously can steer you straight into the rocks, if the treacherous currents don't overturn the craft first.

So don't just go with the flow, even if it seems like the easiest or obvious thing to do. Navigate through the flow and be prepared for the whitewater that inevitably appears throughout your journey.

The woodworker's wisdom

When working with wood, you will find yourself constantly being asked to make choices between cutting with or against the grain. The experienced woodworker, with years of knowledge and hours of

practice, can still find it difficult to read the grain of the wood.

But the wisdom of the woodworker is to know not to make critical decisions too early, and to work your way around the problem patiently and diligently until the solution emerges.

I have also come to appreciate some of the finer details relating to the sharpening of knives, as well as the techniques of cutting towards and away from yourself. But that's a lesson for another time.

Michael is a sporadic creator (who doesn't write a lot these days). The SOUL (Science, Origami, Ux Design, Linguistics) of his existence can be found in the intersection of art and science, and at [his LinkTree](#).