

It's Never Too late to Make a Big Mistake

Measure Twice, Cut Once – March 2022

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When I began this monthly series, I sketched out a list of twelve monthly topics on “life lessons from the shop.” The working title for this entry was “It’s never too late to wreck a project.” After a recent mishap in my shop, I decided to soften the title.

For over a year, I’ve been building a wardrobe based on a Thomas Moser design. The primary woods are ash and walnut, and sides and doors are frame and panel construction. The door panels are book-matched ¼” materials resawn from a board that came from a neighbor’s tree. The project is very nearly completed. All parts have been varnished, and I was starting to rub out finish with steel wool and paste wax. I had hung the doors to get them off the workbench in my crowded shop. While rotating the piece to access the rear interior portions, I managed to tip it over! In the crash, one walnut door panel shattered. After some choice expletives, I heard a quiet but persistent voice in my head saying, “Step away and do not make it worse.”



This was one dramatic instance of the general phenomenon. In the earliest phases of a project, most serious errors are easily recoverable. As parts are fashioned, joinery is cut, subassemblies glued up, and so on, it’s increasingly time-consuming and challenging to rebound from a serious error. We all have tips and tricks that we rely on, but a big “oops” can have bigger and bigger implications as a project nears completion.

Careful planning, attention to safety, and good habits can minimize mistakes, but a momentary lapse or an unanticipated distraction can occur at any time. The more nearly complete the piece, the more discouraging and complicated it can be to repair the damage. These episodes can feel like bypassing a highway exit when the next one is half an hour away or striking out with the bases loaded in the bottom of the ninth. But they don’t have to be the end of the story.

So where’s the wisdom, where’s the life lesson? Woodworking calls for a special blend of confidence and humility, resilience and realism. Mistakes can summon our creativity. Sometimes we pause from our cursing and self-castigation, wait until our bellowing emotional brain has expressed itself fully, and then enlist our quiet, rational, problem-solving brain to join the conversation. In my case, I recalled other shop mishaps that required first aid or a run to Urgent Care. This time around, there were no injuries. It could have been much worse.

Guild members can turn to one another for ideas about next steps. We can all search for books and articles about repairing broken furniture. I also posted some sad photos on Facebook, which elicited almost 90 comments. Most were sympathetic, some were comical, and a few were practical suggestions for snatching victory from the jaws of defeat. One captured my

interest because I had no idea what it meant. A non-woodworker friend wrote “Japanese kintsugi for inspiration.”

Back to Google. This brief description comes from My Modern Met (<https://mymodernmet.com/kintsugi-kintsukuroi/>):



Poetically translated to “golden joinery,” Kintsugi, or Kintsukuroi, is the centuries-old Japanese art of fixing broken pottery. Rather than rejoin ceramic pieces with a camouflaged adhesive, the Kintsugi technique employs a special tree sap lacquer dusted with powdered gold, silver, or platinum. Once completed, beautiful seams of gold glint in the conspicuous cracks of ceramic wares, giving a one-of-a-kind appearance to each “repaired” piece.

This unique method celebrates each artifact's unique history by emphasizing its fractures and breaks instead of hiding or disguising them. In fact, Kintsugi often makes the repaired piece even more beautiful than the original, revitalizing it with a new look and giving it a second life.

My gut instinct is to go for camouflage all the way, to cover my tracks and effect a repair so perfect that no one would ever suspect that I could be so stupid and reckless as to break a panel I had spent hours hand-planing, scraping, sanding, and finishing. I want to hide the mistake and its consequences. But what if this episode becomes a time to learn, to adopt a new perspective, and to commemorate this experience? A May 2021 article in Psychology Today offers “5 Lessons from Kintsugi, the Art of Embracing Brokenness.”¹ Three of the lessons are these:

- Listen to your inner thoughts; cultivate optimism.... Your inner dialogue should be compassionate toward yourself...
- Treat this time as an opportunity to grow and change.
- Accept the challenge, but don’t take unnecessary risks.

Kintsugi for furniture? This does not seem to be an ancient Japanese tradition, but who knows? I don’t usually go for mixed-media creations, but this idea sure has me thinking. Whether or not I add gold to the glue, Kintsugi is an inspiring alternative to contemplate.

Post-script to last month:

Last month’s article on lubricants solicited your examples of social and shop lubricants. The response was not overwhelming in scale. Dave McCormick is also in frequent need of hand lotion. Ken Zoller wrote to say “‘**Ice breakers**’ at the beginning of a meeting where people don't know each other. I get an image of ice cubes starting to melt and slide around.” Bob McKee

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/communications-matter/202105/5-lessons-kintsugi-the-art-embracing-brokenness>

took a different tack. “**Vintage Port Wine** is a great lubricant because simply serving it creates an occasion. For one thing many people have seldom or never enjoyed a good Port. Secondly, it’s accessible: sweet, easy to drink, and tasty. Finally, it’s fortified and packs a pleasurable punch.” As a shop lubricant, Bob nominated “**Titebond II Extend Wood Glue**. How can an adhesive be a lubricant? It isn’t exactly, but since it doubles your working time when doing a complex glue up, it sure makes things go smoother.”

Things to think about. Thanks, Dave, Ken, and Bob! Maybe when meetings resume in person, we can start with an ice breaker and a nice vintage Port?