Several months ago, EMGW member and prolific maker Dave McCormick sent along a few suggestions for future MTCO columns. Dave, this one really spoke to me: “Challenge Yourself.” Each of us came to woodworking in our own way, and each of us has followed a different path to our current state of proficiency. Whatever projects you have undertaken, whichever tools you prefer, whichever contemporary or historic woodworker you admire and emulate, your growth as a woodworker has probably happened when you took on a challenge.

Dave likes to challenge himself when he selects his next project, and I suspect many of us are similarly inclined. Sure, the next project often comes at the request of a family member or fills a need in the shop, but it is always appealing (as YouTuber and former EMGW presenter Rob Cosman says) “to take your woodworking to the next level.” The next level is different for each person at any given time. Maybe the challenge is using a species we’ve never touched or overcoming a longstanding reluctance to use a particular tool. Perhaps it is about making a familiar thing in an unfamiliar way, achieving a really satisfying finish, or building an heirloom project. Practice may make perfect, but we learn and grow when we venture out of our comfort zone and take up a new challenge.

Leaning into challenges is the stuff of self-help books and blogs. Famous artists, authors, athletes have expressed inspiring thoughts about the benefits of not merely accepting challenges, but of seeking them out. Search the web using the term “challenge yourself” and you’ll soon find motivational posters featuring magnificent photos of soaring eagles, solo mountain climbers, or iconic leaders. These posters have pithy quotations to bring home the message that the road to success often requires one to overcome challenges.

Few of these posters mention that tackling challenges involves risk, and woodworkers are attuned to minimizing risks of injury. On the other hand (no pun intended), a difficult project might lead to a lesser form of failure. In contemplating hazards like wasting expensive stock or ruining a joint, one would do well to consider one motivational poster of Winston Churchill saying that “Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.”

In the shop, perhaps that’s a familiar experience: we experience failure one day and then double down to return to the project enthusiastically the next day. So, here’s a challenge: take that lesson out of the shop and into other parts of our lives. Lately, I’ve been volunteering on a town committee that is producing a long report after nearly 18 months of work. When the chairperson suggested that we all pitch in and draft a portion of the report, one member said, “Hey, I’m a numbers guy, not a writer.” His comment made me think of a concept popularized by psychologist Carol Dweck of Stanford University in her 2006 book Mindset: The New Psychology of Success. Prof. Dweck describes two mindsets: a fixed mindset and a growth mindset.
My friend on the committee expressed a fixed mindset, viewing the skill of writing as almost inherent and stable, fixed at a young age. If he stepped back and approached the task with a growth mindset he might have said, “I have more practice with figures, but with time and a little help I can write one section of the report. I’ll figure it out.”

Dave’s eagerness for challenges is a clear example of choosing to adopt a growth mindset. We all have woodworking techniques that we have yet to attempt, just like we have life experiences that we’ve not yet pursued. The next time a co-worker, friend, or relative says “I’m no good at that” think about how they might exchange the fixed mindset for a growth mindset, even for a moment. Once we start thinking about growth opportunities, it’s remarkable how few things are truly fixed.

Do you have a favorite saying or woodworking maxim to suggest for a future MTCO article? Be like Dave and send it along!