

Flow in the Shop Transcription
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Greetings. Welcome. This is Gary Rogowski for Splinters. Thank you for joining me once again. It's been a while. I must admit, but I've been busy. My apologies, but I've been busy with things. And then the ball gets rolling. And then, you know, it's what? It's May. No, it's July. I'm back with some thoughts.

I'm building a new shop for myself right now. Let me rephrase that. I am paying folks to build me a new shop right now. And these guys will make choices about lumber or nailing patterns or where to put the windows. And sometimes it just makes me grit my teeth. And my response to them is, that is fantastic. Always, that's what I say. That is fantastic. Anyway, my motto for carpentry really, though, is get 'er done. I've been waiting for this for so long. Too many issues. It's a huge thing to have a roof and walls up right now.

We got held up by COVID and then lumber prices that went through the roof. And then finding people to work at all out here was a challenge. It was a real challenge. So it's a big deal that we've got a wall and a roof on it and we got windows in and doors are coming and siding and paint and all that good stuff. So it's pretty great. And I suspect I'll hold some small classes out here maybe next spring. But for now, I'm going to continue this hate, love relationship with the web and keep holding classes online.

It is the most curious of situations for a hands-on worker like myself, a furniture maker, to hold these classes via the internet. I can't see a student's grip or correct their stance or feel how a drawer works, except in the most egregious examples. Still can't feel it. Yet the flip side to this remove is my opportunity now to wax, or does it wane, on about topics such as 'good' design versus Modernism or what lyricism can mean for our design work or discussing concepts like pattern and flow.

We all now have the largest library anywhere in time at our disposal. It's called the internet. So that calling up examples of design is amazing and so easy. And so our conversations have blossomed, I think, in this area. Perhaps it's that we're not face to face as well, but it really has opened up possibilities of discussions about design that didn't seem to happen with such regularity.

Now, the concept of flow that I just mentioned is one that I have found of particular interest. My thanks to OMP student from a couple of years back, Mike Lecky, for getting that book Flow in front of me. This is a book by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a psychologist. And basically the idea of it, his concept is that when we are doing work for its own sake, we can enter this realm where time will disappear, the challenge in front of us takes up all of our attention. It's not too easy, but it's not so hard that we're constantly failing. We're getting better. We're working at it. Each time we attempt it, we get a little bit better. And the rewards are personal. They're not external. It's not, oh, I made a million dollars on this. They are about satisfying some inner need we have to be challenged and to get better at this challenge.

The task is always a little bit beyond our reach. So the struggle to manage it, to try to maintain it causes us to concentrate fiercely. And it's a wonderful feeling. And if you've carved wood or rock climbed or cooked for a party of 20, you know the focus it entails. Nothing else gets in the way. It's called the Zone in sports, and it's magic when you're there. You can't just flip a switch and get there. Things have to add up. You have to prepare yourself. It's just like luck. You have to be ready for luck.

Just finished this book. It's been out, oh, eight years, six, eight years, a book called Deep Work by Cal Newport, which I thought was very interesting. It is focused a good deal on career advancement, I think,

rather than the Deep Work. He touches on some of these things. But it's more about really concentrating in order to further your career. That's my take on it. It's less about the flow that Csikszentmihalyi talks about as being an important part of, he is a clinician, but an important part of being alive. And understanding that he calls it an autotelic personalities, where you're doing something just for the sake of doing it.

I'm sure most of us have had this kind of sense, whether whatever it is, fly fishing or skydiving. I'm reading another book now about this skydiver. And he's being trained by these Russian paratroopers. And they run to the plane. And he says, 'Why are we running to the plane? Oh, because we get to jump out of it. It's so much fun.' But challenging. And an incredible focuser of one's attention.

And that clarity is something I strive for with my work at the bench. And some days it's there and some days I'm a bit scattered. I admit I'm a bit scattered. And Newport's book about this really talks about the ways that we allow ourselves to get scattered. This is a pretty interesting concept that he considers, you know, the constant chatter of the internet. Do you turn it on or can you shut it off and put it away for large chunks of the day? Can you leave your phone behind? Can you not check your email every half hour? Or if an email comes in, do you have to go look at it? It's very difficult to maintain our concentration when you allow things to intrude.

And the people he recognizes and references as doing deep work are disciplined about what they allow in. And I think that's a very important, it's a very important point. What will we allow into our concentration, our consciousness, perhaps, that we won't at other times? So if you're, you know, sending emails all day long, and there's lots of business references throughout this book, it's very difficult to get focused. And the more social media that we do, the less focus we can attain. I go to Facebook once every month or so. And when I do, I go, what's going on here? There's no continuity. Every time I go forward a page and then come back, it's something new. It's just a constant, I'll use the word titillation, just shiny. Here's a new shiny object. Here's another one. Here's another one. Here's another one. Here's another one.

It's always fascinating to watch television from outside of someone's house. You know, just walking down the street and you'll see a television on. Of course, now it's a giant screen. But you see the rate at which images pass by us. It is so rare to have a three second shot, a five, 10 second shot. I mean, you do in news programs, but any kind of movie or television show is fast, fast, fast. It's just bombarding us with image after image. And that, in and of itself, is fine. I watch movies all the time. But being able to get to the bench and do our work, and to get into that state of flow, becomes more difficult. The more we allow all of that information to jangle our senses.

So different from a forest walk, right? To go forest bathing.

Are you familiar with this concept? Japanese concept, I believe, of taking a walk in the forest and what that does to us to be amongst nature, to be in the trees, listen to it, to feel it, to look at the light, the shadows. That's a very different thing than checking out our social media content. And I think the more we can do that quiet work, the better our work will be at the bench.

I know that the lack of Flow in my shop space is a very distracting thing for me, which is why I'm building a new shop so I can get my tools and my woods out of these bedrooms here and into a shop space. It's hard to stay focused when I'm tripping over my tools that I've stacked and then restacked and then moved them into a new spot where I trip over them, where I have to move something again that's in the way again and I move it. The bench is cluttered with the tools from the last little job and all these little things get in the way of Flow.

It's not just walking through the space, which can get quite constricted by the things I pile up in the way. But also the way that you work at the bench. Can you find your tools? Oh, can you find everything? Are your machines tuned up? Are your hand tools sharp? These are the things that get in the way of Flow. These are the rocks. These are the things that, the trees, that have fallen in our path. And organization of our space is critical.

It is one of the central themes of my video series this fall called Setting Up Shop. I ran it last year with 20 folks, and it was great and illuminating, I think, for us all. For the students, they learned how simple things can change their space. For me, I learned that the best teacher again is experience.

I just finished up a job in the shop, a plywood drawer. And it has been on my list for, well, we'll just say decades, more specific than that. And it just took a few hours. I mean, it was a couple of days of joining and gluing and glued in sections. It was a little complicated, big drawer. And then finishing in, scraping it to fit, getting this drawer to fit into the cabinet. And it was done. After all this time, it was done. And there it is. It's holding things. It's removing clutter. Another box of odds and ends that have been floating around on the floor has disappeared. And it makes such a huge difference in my tiny shop space now.

And that's what Flow is about. Learning how to organize your space for your own benefit so that you feel better and are more able to do work. And that's one of the central themes, as I mentioned, in the Setting Up Shop series. Flow. Get rid of the clutter.

I was just at Highland Woodworking in Atlanta, Georgia to give a workshop. It was great fun. And you walk into that space and there is a sense of Flow in that. It's a store. And they sell all sorts of tools and books and the Wood Slicer bandsaw blade, great stuff. But there is a real sense, of peace. You walk in there and you go, 'oh, this feels good.' I'm thinking about my shop space. It's not the same.

And I do have to return to this idea. I'm hesitant to do so, but it's, Who the biggest obstacle or what the biggest obstacle is that I face. And it's always me. It's not the tools or the wood splitting. Yeah, the plywood blew up on me when I was making a cut for this drawer. And okay, that wasn't supposed to happen. I thought I'd made amendments to the router fence for that, but it blew out anyway. Okay, well, an opportunity. I got a new patch in. That's great. How I handle these problems is always the key. And I just did not let it bother me. I just said, 'Okay, here's a patch. And I'll fix it.'

If you remember that quote from Robert Pirsig's book, the great "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance". He's talking about working on his motorcycle and reading the manual that has been translated not well from the Japanese, but it says, "Assembly of Japanese bicycle require great peace of mind."

So true.

And it's just as true when working at the bench. If you're not fully there, flow will not occur. If you're thinking about a dozen other things, it's very difficult to stay focused. And so all I can say is look at your space, eliminate the clutter, see how you move through it. Make this smoother and easier. That's what Feng shui is all about. It's like the movement of water. What are the obstacles in the way? What are the things that I put in my path to obstruct me?

Because it's always me. And it will help you find that other sense of flow. The ones where, well, that sense of flow is where you're challenged and you're aware, but you're also performing an action. There's real clarity and immediate feedback. And this concentration, this focus allows you to lose self consciousness. You're just in the moment. And time disappears. And it's a great place to be. And that's

what I'm always after, how to reach that flow state.

Anyway, check out our website for more information on classes coming up. I'm doing some traveling and teaching back east. So check that out at the Wendell Castle Workshop in upstate New York. And check out our Online Mastery Program page in the gallery of work.

Got a critique later today for the latest group online mastery students showing their Signature Pieces today. Pretty exciting. Thanks, Big J for the kick in the butt. Get me back here ruminating on things. Thanks for that. And thanks to all of you who support me on Kofi.com. I appreciate the support. Do good work. Take care. Stay cool. Adios.