

Keep Your Tools Sharp

Measure Twice, Cut Once – October 2021

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Woodworkers know that there's nothing like a sharp tool. Marking knives, drill bits, chisels, plane irons, saws, gouges all produce optimal results when they are freshly sharpened or honed. We also know that dull tools are dangerous and slow down the process. At the same time, some of us (like me) have sometimes viewed sharpening as an inconvenient interruption in my workflow, only to create a ragged edge or take a longer break for first aid.

To add insult to injury, procrastination also means that sharpening will take longer. The duller the edge, the more work needed to restore it. It pays to keep our tools sharp, and to adopt a sharpening method that we will use reliably and effectively. There's good reason that apprentices would learn to sharpen early in their training before working wood.

The importance and commercial value of sharpening might be reflected in the number of articles and YouTube videos on the subject. One might think that the subject has been so thoroughly covered that there's no further need for new entries, but they just keep coming. My guess is that our shops contain an impressive assortment of natural and artificial oil and water stones, diamond plates, ceramic blocks, gray, white, pink, or CBN wheels, and other fool proof media for creating the perfect edge. Over time, some of these see frequent use and others have been exiled to a drawer or box somewhere.

Throughout history, and outside of the shop, sharp edges have been prized from the battlefield to the kitchen. The ancient Chinese philosopher Mozi (or Mo Tzu or Mo Di, c. 470-391 BCE) noted that "The value of its knife is in its sharpness." When he wasn't busy splitting rails or preserving the Union, Abe Lincoln (may) have said "Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe."

Julia Child, in reference to boning a chicken, remarked that "Without a sharp knife, you can't do nuthin.¹ Although she may not have had chicken in mind, Katherine Hepburn once said that "a sharp knife cuts the quickest and hurts the least."

Leaving the realm of literal knives, tools, and weapons and shifting into philosophy, and business self-help, we find other quotes. The eighteenth-century statesman, economist and philosopher observed "He that struggles with us strengthens our nerves, and sharpens our skill. Our antagonist is our helper."

Going beyond the idea of sharpening our political or other worldly skills, financier and presidential advisor Barnard Baruch offered this: "Only as you do know yourself can your brain serve you as a sharp and efficient tool. Know your own failings, passions, and prejudices so you can separate them from what you see."

¹ At least, that's the way I remember it. I can't find an exact quote online.

Stephen R. Covey, highly successful author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* lists habit #7 as “Sharpen the Saw: We must never become too busy sawing to take time to sharpen the saw.” Successful folks take breaks from working to stay current, refresh their skills, and renew their energy.