

## Read the Grain

Measure Twice, Cut Once – January 2022

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In August 2019 I treated myself to a weeklong carving class at Phil Lowe's school in Beverly, taught by Mary May, a skilled teacher and highly accomplished carver. Our first hands-on exercise involved carving a donut – a simple relief carving on a piece of butternut. The objective was to observe and feel the way a gouge interacts with the grain as we worked our way around the inner and outer curves of the donut. The angle at which the tool encounters the grain changes continuously and consequentially throughout the circuit. One must make frequent adjustments to achieve crisp, clean edges and burnished surfaces. When in doubt about the grain, tiny test cuts are informative before aggressively digging in too deep. Mary's mantra to us throughout the week was "Respect the donut!"

We carved butternut, basswood, mahogany, and walnut, each species with its own distinctive grain characteristics. The soft, straight grain of basswood was far less challenging than the harder, more unruly walnut, but the sheen of cleanly sliced walnut surpassed anything achievable with the basswood.

Whether selecting stock, jointing, planing, planning glue-ups, sanding, or carving, learning to read and exploit the grain is a vital skill. Anticipating wood movement is driven in part by grain direction, as is avoiding tearout. Green woodworking brings one face-to-face with the internal structure and stresses of logs, and the growth habits of different species – all of which eventually play out in the grain of wood.

Whenever Jethro Gibbs, Mark Harmon's character on *NCIS*, allows someone to assist him with one of his wooden boat projects in his basement shop, he typically hands them a sanding block with the instruction "*with the grain.*" Good advice, much of the time, but not always. To remove a lot of stock quickly, working across the grain may be the better way to go. Prior to final sanding, it's a good idea to raise the grain with water and do as Gibbs instructs.

In the long and varied history of my own woodworking blunders, many of them have arisen from insufficient attention to grain. To be sure, my inattention takes many forms, but respecting the grain is often part of the story. Over time, I like to think that reading and attending to grain has become habitual. When I reach for a gouge or chisel, I now hear Mary May's voice saying, "respect the donut."

Mary's mantra applies, at least metaphorically, in other areas of life. Skillful golfers (not I) check the lie of their ball before choosing a club; the length, texture, and direction of the grass, and the way the ball is nestled or perched inform optimal club selection and shot options. Similarly, good golfers should consider the direction and intensity of the prevailing wind and use the wind to advantage.

As in golf, it is valuable to know which way the wind blows at work and in social relationships. Before taking action to solve a problem or stepping into a delicate situation, a wise person assesses the lay of the land, becoming acquainted with the relevant facts, the key stakeholders, and the history or context of the matter. Think about the new green manager who strides into a situation without doing so. Even when we're familiar with the players and context of a controversy, whether at a work meeting or public forum, how often does a speaker lose ground for failing to read the room?

Effective members of work teams (or relatives at holiday gatherings) know how to read the room and then decide when to forge ahead and when to probe carefully, when to argue and when to listen. Such people respect the donut.