

## Sweep the Floor

Measure Twice, Cut Once – June 2022

Rob Carver

The Guild field trip to Old Sturbridge Village (OSV) was a delightful experience. The weather was ideal if a bit hot, and there was plenty to see and learn. In the new cabinet shop, our host and guide Chris Nassise explained the work and lifestyle of a cabinet maker in 1830's New England. Working exclusively with hand tools and a massive treadle lathe, a shop could produce anything from rustic farm implements to elegant fine furniture and a cabinet maker could enjoy a middle class lifestyle.

In keeping with OSV's mission as "a museum and learning resource of New England life," Chris and his apprentices are active makers. We observed tables and chairs in process, as well as substantial piles of wood shavings below the workbench and shaving horses. Chris commented that he needed to clean up the mess, no doubt using a corn broom that he had also fashioned.

Later in the day, a few of us dropped by the cooper's shop where, unfortunately, there was no one working. We did see several buckets, barrels, staves, and hoops – and more piles of wood chips and shavings on the floor. Evidently the cooper had not swept up before quitting the day before.

Whenever I've had the good fortune to take a woodworking class, the instructor invariably announces the end of a work session by calling out "Time to sweep up!" and out come the brooms and dustpans. Even when there is shop-wide dust collection in operation, time in the shop yields small off cuts, shavings, sawdust, bits of blue tape, and who-knows-what-else on the floor. Some woodworkers strive to clean as they go, while others wait for a break in the action. Regardless of our preferences, sooner or later we must sweep the floor.

Working in a littered space can be treacherous: one can twist an ankle stepping on an offcut, and sawdust is slippery. Airborne dust is a health hazard, and some woods are skin irritants. Drop a nut, a screw, or a drill bit in a mass of shavings and good luck finding it. For those with home shops, walking through woodworking detritus can leave a trail into living spaces, and that is never welcome. It does not pay to let the mess accumulate and sit unattended.

In woodworking as in other crafts, the process of creation is often a matter of separating the desirable from the waste: debris, dross, scrap, dregs, effluent, rubbish, filings, and so on. To create our finished product, we create waste. Some waste is precious and can be recycled or reused, and some is just good for nothing. In either case, it's important to deal with it by salvaging valuable byproducts and by taking time to dispose of the rest properly.

In a similar way, we can produce unintended effects in other creative activities. Stable, healthy relationships at home, at work, and in the community require care and attention. Along the way, we sometimes make a mess, and it's unwise to leave a mess unacknowledged for any length of time. As difficult as it might be, it really is best to clean as you go. Own the mess, salvage what's valuable, and don't track the detritus into the future. *Sweep the floor.*

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An invitation: when I began this series nearly a year ago, I sketched out a list of a dozen or so topics including sayings and ideas relevant to woodworking. I'm approaching the end of that

initial list and wonder if you have an item of shop wisdom that applies in other areas of life. If you do, please send it my way! Just email [robert.carver@comcast.net](mailto:robert.carver@comcast.net).