

RISK

BY MARK LOVE



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I just messed up something, the back leg of a chair that I'm building. After working on it for about two and a half hours, I just ruined it. There's nothing to do but start over with a new piece of wood. And right now, no walk on earth is longer than the nine steps from my bench back to the lumber rack.

In woodworking, there are two kinds of mistakes—physical and mental. Mistakes of the hand fall into the first category. I jerk my chisel the wrong way and it creates a gash that can't be fixed. I angle my handsaw a half-degree off and the joint doesn't fit. These errors are unfortunate, but I've learned to tolerate them. My hands are my most loyal employees, so when they go slightly wrong, I forgive them.

Mental mistakes are harder to live with. I misread a dimension or mess up because I haven't completely thought through a process. I follow my plans (such as they are), and feel chuffed at my perfection when I've completed the task. But then I try to fit the piece and discover that I've made it backwards, or too small, or upside down.

Today's mistake is mental. After precisely cutting the crest rail mortise, I realized that I'd laid it out in the wrong place, and now that misplaced hole gapes at me as if it were laughing. I hate it.

On the other hand (and although this might sound strange), mistakes like this one keep me interested in working wood. They remind me (with a costly jolt) that this craft involves risk. Something is at stake. Always. And the stakes increase as work on a piece progresses. Ruining a leg blank ten minutes after pulling it down from the lumber rack isn't a crisis. But ruining a leg that's been shaped, sanded, and mortised means losing hours of work.

Every time I touch a furniture part with a tool it's like going all-in at a blackjack table. When I win, the value goes up. But I never really forget that it can all go bust in an instant. And it just did. And out comes my wallet, because yes, I'm addicted to this craft.

There are ways to build furniture that involve less risk. When I applied for my business license I had to declare a category. "Furniture Manufacturing" is what I told the government. But the words left a bad taste in my mouth, because manufacturing is all about eliminating risk. Not reducing it, but completely vanquishing it, removing any chance

that a worker might ruin something valuable. Expensive computers tell huge machines what to do, all of them mindlessly obeying the man sitting at the keyboard with a cup of coffee, his thoughts on the upcoming weekend, and almost none of his skin in the game. There will probably never come a time when he ruins a piece that will take him two and a half hours to remake.

But here I stand, errant chair part in hand, searching for workaround ideas. Can I patch it? Hide it? Can I fix this? Nope. Nope. Nope. Man up, Mark. Remake it. And this time, think.

Does it make any sense that this is one of the reasons why I love this job? Maybe. A skydiver wouldn't love jumping if there weren't at least some chance of a splatter. Challenging the risk of failure is part of each endeavor. It keeps me in the moment and it sweetens the accomplishment when I succeed. Risk is part of my craft. I guess I actually like it.

But there's another element of risk here

that runs quietly under the surface, one that I'm not normally conscious of. And these stakes are much higher, as they reach far deeper. It's the risk of how I perceive myself, the risk of my value as a craftsman. And this is probably what makes my heart beat faster every time I turn on my shop lights. I know that at any given moment I'm only as good as the thing I'm about to do. All the beautiful furniture that I've made only testifies to how good I was, not how good I am.

I usually listen to music while I work because it helps to occlude the voices that never stop asking, Can I pull this off? If I mess this up, can I still think of myself as talented? Am I actually any good at this? It's easy to believe I'm a great artist when I'm standing in the gallery next to a finished piece. But with a chisel in my hand and a new chair leg in my vise, I'm a little less certain. No matter how much success I've had in the past, if I don't get this one right...then what?

