

Failure and Learning

This weekend I spent some time cleaning my basement boat shop. It had been over a year since one could properly call the space a boat shop. It had become more of a basement since my boat was carried up the bulkhead steps. There was something about having an unfinished boat occupying most of the room that gave an aura to the place. The odor of white cedar shavings, the forced efficiency of tools hung on their proper nails, the warmth of the wood stove, and the exhaustion that comes with immersing oneself in such a novel learning experience all worked together to help define my boat shop.

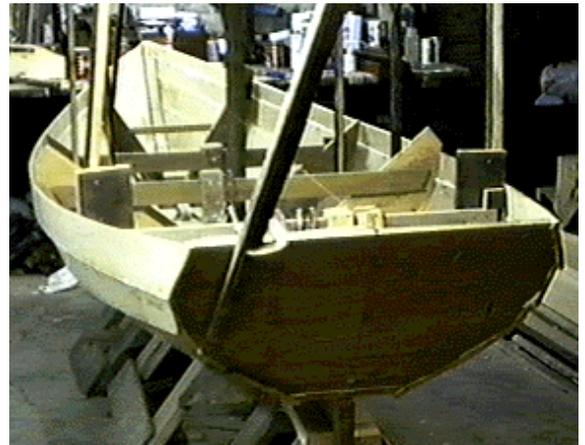
At one point in my cleaning, I stopped to rest, leaned on a workbench, and had a chew on the stem of my pipe. I noticed that the pleasant odors were gone, my tools have spread randomly across two benches, the wood stove has gone cold, and the intensity with which I immersed myself in boat building has diminished. My resting spot was where, over the years of construction, I had often stood critically eyeing the stern to stem line of my boat. There had been many such moments of eyeing lines and curves looking for sweetness (that perfect curve that one's eye sees as oh, so sweet.). There is something about one's own immersion that stimulates such stepping back and simply looking.

When one takes the time to simply look at one's own work, sweetness as well as imperfections come readily to the eye. There is often no need for another point of view. A young learner, if given the opportunity to step back and simply look, can also find his own sweetness and imperfections. Fear of reprisal, pressure to meet deadlines, and a lack of hope can get in the way of stepping back.

It becomes important that learners be given the opportunity to lean on the workbench and to look honestly at their work. Young learners need teachers to lean against the bench with them and offer educated opinions and knowledge. We do, however, live in a world of grades and deadlines. By providing opportunities for students to collaborate in their assessments, and to rework projects for a second look, we foster the hope that is needed to carry one through the trials of intense learning.

As I started back to cleaning, I came across a long, curved piece of white cedar. The piece was a misshapen plank for my boat. It was a mistake made late one evening when perhaps I should have been stepping back for my day's last look rather than attempting to get out one more plank. My mistake came after two days of shaping, scarfing, and sanding. The curve was cut backwards and the piece became nothing more than an untimely lesson. The learning taken from that mistake was that there was nothing left to do but to go on. I started a new plank the next day.

I have wondered at the ruined plank's meaning for school learning. What if I had received a failing grade for my error and been given no chance to start again? My boat would be unfinished today and the adventures I have had sailing it would never have happened. Interestingly, today I could not point to the plank on my boat that was redone. It is the misshapen plank that holds meaning for me. There is great learning in failure - as long as we do not let it stop there.



- E.J. Gaudet